Ways of Being Modern:
 Tradition and Innovation in the Poetry of Six Women Poets
 1910s-1930s

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This thesis is presented for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Western Australia

School of Humanities
(English and Cultural Studies)

2015
ABSTRACT

This thesis studies six women poets of the period 1910s-1930s. In literary history, this period has been examined and re-examined almost entirely through the lens of Modernism, so that non-Modernist poets, especially non-Modernist women poets, have been considerably marginalized. Contemporary Modernism-oriented scholars have successfully created the impression that Modernism was the dominant force of the period and the only poetics that mattered so that non-Modernist poets have become footnotes in the evolution of Modernism. The hegemony of Modernism in literary studies can find its origin in New Criticism which, during the period 1940s-1960s, dominated literary criticism in academies and canonised Modernism in the English-speaking world. However, the Modernist version of literary history of the period is far from being the historical fact. As far as the reading public was concerned, it is non-Modernist poetry, rather than Modernist poetry, that was the dominant writing mode. Accordingly, poets such as Thomas Hardy, W. B. Yeats, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Robert Frost and Edna St. Vincent Millay, rather than T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, Williams Carlos Williams and Marianne Moore, were the dominant figures of the period.

On the whole, Modernist poets and critics of the period such as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound ignored women poets, which substantially resulted in the marginalisation of women poets in literary history and gave rise to the feminist endeavour to restore “ignored” women poets and elevate their status in literary history. Feminist studies of women poets, intrinsically political, epitomise the prevalence of cultural studies in the 1980s and 1990s, studies which virtually transformed the nature of literary studies from aesthetics to various types of ideology. In my view, aesthetics and literary quality lie at the centre of literary studies and my assessment of the period in general and of women poets in particular is a literary one. As a literary movement, the impact of Modernism was felt in many other countries. Due to limitations of time and space, I selected for discussion two women poets from each of three English-speaking countries, namely, the United States of America, Britain and Australia. In each selection one poet is generally
regarded as distinctively Modernist, the other distinctively modern but not Modernist. In the three countries of the period 1910s-1930s, Modernism coexisted with other poetic forces and its influence, which was strongly felt and also strongly resisted, was limited to a small group of poets and critics. Later poets such as Philip Larkin lashed out against Modernist poetry for isolating poetry from common readers, criticising the elitist view of Modernist poets and arousing discussions about the relationship between tradition and innovation, poetry and the reading public.

In Modernist criticism of non-Modernist poetry, scholars have often over-emphasised the differences between non-Modernist and Modernist poetry. Hallmarks of Modernist poetics such as difficulty, impersonality, intellectuality and formal experimentation are employed as parameters to assess and then to dismiss non-Modernist poetry. I will argue that poets of the early decades of the twentieth century had various ways of expressing their sense of modern living; Modernist poetics were just one way but by no means the only way to express modernity. To use Modernist poetics to assess poets who are either indifferent to or negative about Modernist poetics is to deny the complicated nature of literary activity. Under scrutiny, non-Modernist and Modernist poets actually have much in common especially in terms of language and form. Non-Modernist poets such as Edna St. Vincent Millay and Anna Wickham not only wrote in free verse but were rather daring in subject matter. By contrast, the claimed Modernist Marianne Moore was rather conservative in terms of her concern about “obscene” topics. The vocabulary employed by non-Modernist women poets is no less modern, sometimes even more modern, than that of Modernist poets. In particular, colloquialism is a feature shared by the majority of poets, Modernist or otherwise, of the period. My discussion of the six women poets aims to highlight the modernity of non-Modernist poetry, to shed light on the similarities between seemingly opposing forces. The aim of my thesis is to display a fuller sense of the variety of the period by presenting these previously “obscured” poets alongside Modernist poets, to give a critical reading of the period without necessarily favouring one over the other and ultimately to produce a more plausible version of the historical past.
Candidate’s Declaration:

This thesis does not contain work that I have published, nor work under review for publication.
Acknowledgements

This thesis is dedicated to

QiQi, for love

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My supervisor, Dennis Haskell, for everything
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This thesis is a study of the work of six women poets in the period 1910s-1930s when literary Modernism emerged and co-existed with other poetic forces. The poets are drawn from three major English language poetries: Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950) and Marianne Moore (1887-1972) from the United States of America, Edith Sitwell (1887-1964) and Anna Wickham (1884-1947) from Britain, and Zora Cross (1890-1964) and Lesbia Harford (1891-1927) from Australia. Modernism, as Julian Symons comments, “is a word often used but rarely defined.”\(^1\) In *The Concept of Modernism*, Astradur Eysteinsson comments that although the concept “modernism” may seem “intolerably vague, it has come to serve a crucial function in criticism and literary history, as well as in theoretical debates about literature.”\(^2\) However, for Anglo-American scholars, “the term modernism has acquired a somewhat firmer denotation.”\(^3\) In English literature, the term Modernism “refers primarily to the tendency of experimental literature of the early twentieth century to break away from traditional verse forms, narrative techniques, and generic conventions in order to seek new methods of representation appropriate to life in urban, industrial, mass-oriented age.”\(^4\) Modernism has proven to be one of the most influential forces in twentieth-century English poetry. In poetry most forcefully driven by two Americans, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot in London, Modernism, almost from the outset was inborn with an international personality. Modernism sought to revolutionise poetic practice, running against the tenets of Romanticism; it sought to speak through imagery and symbols rather than through the personal voice; it presented multiple shifts in subject matter in order to represent the variousness of modernity; it is a poetics marked by formal experiment, so free verse came to the fore. The use of free verse, which avoids traditional metre and rhyme, was an important aspect of most experimental poetry of the period. Some of the more radical attempts to break with poetic tradition involved the inclusion in poems of overheard speech, allusions to or direct quotations from other

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poetry, and even the random juxtaposition of words. These and other striking features of Modernism generate complexity in poetry. The shifts in subject matter and focus often occurred abruptly; sudden transitions created discontinuities and a sense of fragmentation, ---“these fragments I have shored against my ruins”, as Eliot put it in *The Waste Land* --- reflecting the uncertainties and general alienation felt by many at the time. Uncertainty about any objective reality, under the influence of Einstein and Freud, encouraged an interest in interiority and a subjective conceptualization of time. Most conspicuously, the impersonal nature of urban existence, which could be both exciting and threatening, became a major theme of Modernist literature. Hence T. S. Eliot’s poetry and criticism, with their valuing of “extinction of personality”, to a considerable extent reshaped the landscape of modern poetry, as David Perkins points out in *A History of Modern Poetry*:

Eliot’s *The Waste Land* was the paramount example of the ‘modern’ in poetry and preoccupied the attention of poets. They might cry it up or down, emulate it or not, but they could not put it out of mind easily ... he formed the tastes and opinions of any number of young literary men and women.\(^5\)

Modernism, with Pound’s famous claim to “make it new”,\(^6\) has no doubt exerted a profound impact on twentieth-century English poetry.

However, it is much less well known that Modernism was by no means the only or the most influential poetic force bursting on the scene, nor was Eliot a greater poet than Thomas Hardy, W. B. Yeats or Robert Frost in the twentieth century. With the exception of Yeats who incorporated some elements of Modernist poetics into his work, Hardy and Frost were largely immune to Modernism. This boils down to the fact that one did not have to be a Modernist to be modern, nor did one have to be a Modernist to be a good writer. In the early decades of the twentieth century, various poetic forces sought to voice their sense of modern existence; Modernism was just one way of expressing modernity. Compared with other poetic forces, Modernism was a minor element in the period 1910s-1930s in terms of public influence. Despite the fact that the prime time of Modernist poetry was focused on the 1910s and 1920s, the impact of


Modernism on English poetry was more strongly assimilated by future generations in the period 1940s-1960s. This is a subject I will return to in following chapters. Due to the fact that New Criticism dominated literary criticism in academies and canonised Modernism in English-speaking countries in the period 1940s-1960s, and that Modernist poets and critics initially ignored women poets as a whole in the period, literary history of the period has been written and rewritten almost entirely through the lens of Modernism so that other modern poets, especially women poets, have been considerably marginalised. In The Cambridge Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Poetry, Christopher Beach comments approvingly on Modernist poetry in apparent disfavor of non-Modernist poetry:

The poetry of Robinson and Frost suggested one possible direction for American poets in the twentieth century: a reworking of traditional lyric forms that would require no radical break from nineteenth-century poetic convention. In the eyes of some modern poets, however, the work of Frost and Robinson did not go far enough in the direction of a stylistic, formal, or conceptual breakthrough. Poets who participated in the poetic avant-garde of the 1910s and early 1920s, such as Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, T.S. Eliot, and Marianne Moore, saw the poetry of Robinson and Frost as merely continuing an outworn tradition of verse. For these self-declared “modernists,” poetry needed to undergo the same kind of transformative process that was taking place in the other arts ... Further, poetry had to reflect the reality of a rapidly changing modern world, a world which the works of Frost and Robinson in large part ignored.7

This statement needs qualification. In the 1910s, Pound actually praised and promoted Frost’s poetry by writing strong reviews of A Boy’s Will (1913) and North of Boston (1914), “casting Frost in a positive light with a range of literary camps including the Imagists, and other such writers as H. D. and Williams Carlos Williams.”8 The abrupt and tragic ending of Robinson’s well-known “Richard Cory” is enough to give a taste of what modern reality was like. It is more often the critics and scholars rather than the poets themselves who tended to overemphasise the differences between Modernist and non-Modernist poetry. Even in the twenty-first century, Beach still assesses non-Modernist poets according to Modernist poetics when poets such as Hardy, Yeats, Robinson and Frost, rather than Eliot and Pound were actually the dominant figures of

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the period. Writing from a Modernist perspective, Beach and other critics such as Edward Hirsch and Maren Tova Linett almost create the impression that twentieth-century American poetry is identical to American Modernist poetry.

In the period 1910s-1930s, with the exceptions of Marianne Moore and H. D., women’s poetry was largely ignored by Modernist poets. In November 1922, in a letter to Pound, Eliot wrote that, “there are only a half dozen men of letters (and no women) worth printing.”⁹ In saying so, Eliot dismissed women poets wholesale including Moore and H. D. who were by then published poets. Even in the 1930s, women’s poetry sometimes suffered from overt sexist criticism. One of the then budding New Critics, John Crowe Ransom was notorious for his overtly sexist view on women poets; he commented on Millay in 1937:

Less pliant, safer as a biological organism, she remains fixed in her famous attitudes, and is indifferent to intellectuality ... I used a conventional symbol, which I hope was not objectionable, when I phrased this lack of hers: deficiency in masculinity. It is true that some male poets are about as deficient; not necessarily that they are undeveloped intellectually, but that they conceived poetry as a sentimental or feminine exercise. Intellect is masculine. Sentimentality and femininity are interchangeable.¹⁰

As such, women poets were more easily caught up in a disadvantageous situation than their male contemporaries and, without serious critical scrutiny, the value of their poetry has often fallen victim to academic prejudice and negligence. Accordingly the inadequate recognition of their position in literary history has been prolonged. This is one basis for this study of women poets of the period. I wish to explore the work of both Modernist and non-Modernist women poets who have been obscured by a Modernism-oriented criticism.

Although the reputation of some major figures such as Hardy, Robinson, and Frost was slighted by Modernist critics and scholars, they actually fared better than women poets writing in the same period. Edna St. Vincent Millay and Robert Frost provide a good example. In A History of Modern Poetry, David Perkins considers

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Millay “essentially traditionalist”\textsuperscript{11} while he praises Frost as “an anti-Romantic within the Romantic tradition”.\textsuperscript{12} In doing so Perkins ignores Millay’s adoption of free verse as well as Frost’s public dismissal of free verse. In \textit{A Profile of Twentieth-Century American Poetry}, Roger Mitchell warns the reader not to take Frost’s rejection of free verse as a sign that “his poetry had nothing to do with Modernism.”\textsuperscript{13} In a different chapter of the same book, Edward Hirsch dismisses the poetry of women poets such as Elinor Wylie, Sara Teasdale and Edna St. Vincent Millay as “essentially Romantic in its procedures, its rhetoric, and its attitude” and argues that their work “repudiated free verse and generally observed the conventions of the traditional nineteenth-century short poem.”\textsuperscript{14} This comment needs qualification. While Teasdale’s diction and sentiment may be similar to that of Christina Rossetti, the attitude of Millay and Wylie in their poetry was strikingly modern especially in terms of their stance on love. Wylie’s famous “Let No Charitable Hope” reveals a distinctively modern sensibility:

\begin{quote}
In the masks outrageous and austere  
The years go by in single file;  
But none has merited my fear;  
And none has quite escaped my smile.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

The fact that Millay actually wrote a great number of free verse poems is enough to dismiss Hirsch’s imprudent remark that the poetry of these women poets “stands apart from the stylistic revolution in American poetry in the twentieth century.”\textsuperscript{16} This at least indicates that women’s poetry deserves more serious critical attention than previously granted. From the late 1970s onward, feminist scholars have been trying to restore those ignored women poets to critical attention. But my thesis is by no means a feminist study of women’s poetry. And I must emphasise that my approach to this study is a literary one. One often gets the impression that Feminist study of women’s poetry has little to do with literary quality largely due to the fact that its purpose is political. To employ a \textit{political} approach that often ignores aesthetics, to argue for women’s position

\textsuperscript{11} Perkins, \textit{A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode}, p. 369.
\textsuperscript{12} P. 229.
\textsuperscript{13} Jack Myers & David Wojahn (eds.) \textit{A Profile of Twentieth-Century American Poetry} (Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991) p. 35.
\textsuperscript{14} P. 78.
\textsuperscript{16} Myers & Wojahn, p. 78.
in literary history seems to me highly problematic.

**Feminist criticism of Women poets**

One needs to bear in mind that a Modernist version of poetic history of the period often intends to obscure non-Modernist poets, male and female, and the way literary historians treat non-Modernist poets differs more in degree than in kind. The reputation of Georgian poets, for instance, suffered no less than that of non-Modernist women poets. However, from the late 1970s onward, feminist critics in America, England and Australia have successfully created the impression that only women poets have suffered obscurity in literary history. Michèle Barrett points out the political nature of feminist studies:

Feminism has politicized everyday life – culture in the anthropological sense of the lived practices of a society – to an unparalleled degree. Feminism has also politicized the various forms of artistic and imaginative expression that are more popularly known as culture, reassessing and transforming film, literature, art, the theatre and so on.  

Although feminist scholars share the common purpose to elevate women’s status in literary history, the strategies they have adopted differ variously. In America, one group of feminist critics have sought to construct a woman’s tradition but their attitudes towards Modernism contradict one another. Cheryl Walker, for instance, holds an entirely negative view of Modernism. She includes non-Modernist women poets such as Edna St. Vincent Millay, Sara Teasdale and Enlinor Wylie in her version of woman’s tradition but excludes Marianne Moore for the reason that Moore is too Modernist to be a “Nightingale”. By contrast, Suzanne Juhasz is more sympathetic to Modernism and includes Moore in her version of woman’s tradition as the most representative of twentieth-century women poets. Walker’s nightingale tradition is based on “the conflicts women have encountered in trying to reconcile their lives with their art”. Similarly, Juhasz’s woman’s tradition is based on “the strain of the double bind” in which

women struggled as both women and poets. The fact that the aim of these two critical schools is similar while the selection of women poets is contradictory, suggests that this construction or creation of a “woman’s tradition” is somewhat arbitrary and contentious. Another group of feminist critics, not surprisingly, also reads the period from a Modernist perspective. They dismiss non-Modernist women poets in no less degree than Modernist critics. In *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Women Writers*, Maren Tova Linett not only lauds Pound’s “make it new”, but declares that women Modernists “joined their male counterparts in working toward this goal.”20 Understandably, poets such as Marianne Moore and H.D. are chosen as case studies while poets such as Edna St. Vincent Millay and Elinor Wylie are simply ignored. Linett represents those feminist critics who read the period entirely through the lens of Modernism and whose version of poetic history is no different from that of Modernist critics.

A strange phenomenon in Feminist criticism of women’s poetry lies in the fact that some feminist critics condemned Modernist critics for ignoring women poets while they did not hesitate to employ the term “Modernist” to label women poets who were usually non-Modernist. Moreover, they adopted the term “Modernist” but ignored Modernist poetics. Arguably they just used the term to tag women poets because the term “Modernist” itself provides a high status in literary history. British scholar Jane Dowson and Australian scholar Ann Vickery are representatives of this group of feminist critics. Jane Dowson, for instance, coined terms such as “Avant-garde Modernist”, “Rear-garde Modernist”, and “Female Modernist”, to label various women poets. In Dowson’s *Women, Modernism and British Women Poetry, 1910-1939*, non-Modernist women poets such as Edna St. Vincent Millay and Anna Wickham, are classified as Modernist poets. Similarly, Ann Vickery labelled both Lesbia Harford and Zora Cross as Modernist poets without even mentioning Harford’s free verse experimentation, colloquial speech, and modern vocabulary. Had Vickery concerned herself with literary quality even in a limited sense, she would have noticed that Zora Cross was largely a conventional poet in manner and expression. However, Cross’s

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poetical language and conventional vocabulary and Harford’s colloquial speech and modern vocabulary seem to matter very little to Vickery. According to her argument on the one hand, if women poets wrote in traditional forms such as the sonnet, they would be subversive enough to make the form their own for the reason that the sonnet was a male form. On the other hand, if women poets wrote in free verse, they would gain more freedom in the sense that women had been victims in a patriarchal society. Poetic form has been considerably politicised in the hands of Feminist scholars.

Admittedly, feminist critics have done a lot to bring long-buried women poets to critical attention. As Marjorie Perloff comments that, “there can be no doubt that, thanks to the feminist movement, more women poets than ever are getting published.” However, it is hard to say that their effort has actually helped to elevate women poets’ position in literary history given the fact that this feminist restoration project concerns itself little with literary aesthetics and much more with politics. As Cheryl Walker explicitly declares, “My desire to tell the story in the way I do is political.” It is worth noting that Feminist critics in America, England and Australia, were inspired, in various degrees, by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s feminist classic Mad Woman in the Attic. David Perkins points out in Is Literary History Possible? that the psychological paradigm employed by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar was deliberately constructed and imposed on texts by force:

*The Madwoman in the Attic* reveals something that is generally true, mutatis mutandis, of all contextual literary histories. The contextualizing is, in a sense, bogus. The ideas by which the literary works are explained and interpreted are not derived from the contexts or the texts so much as they are imposed upon them. They are formed from other sources, in other experiences (for example, the experience of reading Harold Bloom), and applied to construct the contexts and read the texts. The ideas that Gilbert and Gubar apply in performing these constructions concern the psychic responses of women writers to social circumstances. This set of assumptions constitutes the critical machine that is created prior to reading the texts and is then driven over the texts and the context too.

Such interpretation of literary history is hardly reliable. Michèle Barrett, as a Feminist scholar, is no less critical than Perkins of the political craze in feminist studies:

22 Walker, p. 9.  
I began by asking whether, as far as feminist cultural politics is concerned, there is a difference between a work of art and an advertising hoarding. It is often assumed that works of art are like other media or representation in that they are ideological. I have argued that there are dangers in a too extensive politicizing of art as ideology: that we should not ignore the fictional, imaginative, aesthetic dimensions of works of art. In short, there are aspects of art that are not reducible to our analytic boxes of ideologies.24

However Modernist scholars and critics ignored non-Modernist women poets, they did so at least out of aesthetic concerns. It is understandable that they attacked and dismissed those who wrote in a different mode. By contrast, feminist scholars prioritise politics over aesthetics.

Viewed in a larger context, feminist criticism of literature is closely connected with a social-cultural-political approach to literature which appeared around the 1970s and dominated literary criticism in the following two decades and, to a certain extent, even to the present day, partly as a counter-movement to the New Criticism which dominated literary criticism in the 1940s-1960s. In the introduction to Aesthetics and Ideology, George Levine reacts strongly against “the radical transformation of literary study that has taken place over the last decade” and asks the question: “Can, in fact, a category, literature, be meaningfully constituted? If so, once constituted, is it worth much attention? Is not, after all, the real subject of literary study ideology, the real purpose political transformation?”25 Levine’s description of this transformation is so much to the point that I quote at length:

This change, in the hands of too many practitioners, has led to a reductive assimilation of literature to ideology or to a resistant sense that the literary and the political should have nothing to do with each other. While these reductivist views are far from universally accepted, they have grown out of or with several phenomena with which humanistic study has become recently comfortable, but which need to be challenged or heavily qualified: first, a shift in emphasis from interpretation to theory ... from questions about what texts might “mean” to questions about the systems that contain them, about material conditions, hermeneutics, mediation, discourse, all of which tend to a new emphasis on self-reflexivity; second, a resistance to (or demystification of ) the idea of literary value, particularly of literary greatness; third, an increasing emphasis on the necessity for interdisciplinary study, fourth, a virtually total rejection of, even contempt for, “formalism”; fifth, a determination that all things are political and hence that the function of literature and of literary study is

24 Barrett, p. 110.
primarily political; sixth, a view that the study of literature is not an adequately serious or important vocation – not only because literature divorced from its sociopolitical context serves in culture only as ornament or mystification, but because it is really indistinguishable from other forms of language ... and merely another part of the culture; and finally, the movement to replace literary study with cultural studies. 26

The terms “aesthetic” and “value” lie at the centre of literary studies which have been considerably marginalised by the prevalence of cultural studies. My concern with aesthetics naturally avoids an uncritical rejection of the “formalism” of New Criticism and makes close reading an effective means to evaluate aesthetic qualities. Nevertheless, like Levine, I do not necessarily “disagree” with scholars of cultural studies for the reason that their approach to literature “is a rich and illuminating criticism that makes literature more, not less interesting.”27 In a critical atmosphere where aesthetics are on the verge of being “lost in the byways of cultural studies”, 28 I seek to highlight the status of literature and the significance of aesthetics.

**Thesis Structure**

Against the fact that the period 1910s-1930s has been written almost entirely through the lens of Modernism, I aim to read the period critically in terms of Modernist poetics as well as other poetics in order to present a more inclusive view of the period. In the early decades of the twentieth-century, the sense of modernity was felt and expressed by many poets in various ways. John Timberman Newcomb asserts that early twentieth-century poets such as Edna St. Vincent Millay, Amy Lowell, Harriet Monroe “are fully as modern” as Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot and Marianne Moore. However, “To claim all these poets are equally modern does not imply that their ‘modern-ities’ are all necessarily of the same type, or their poetry of the same quality or value. These are questions that must be pursued case by case.”29 It is therefore reasonable to read the period as one in which poets, Modernist or otherwise, strove to express their sense of modernity in their individual ways. Various ways of being modern should be

26 Levine, pp. 1-2.
27 P. 3.
28 P. 16.
highlighted. Therefore, in my thesis, I am seeking to discuss the poetic activities of the period in terms of the transitional nature of poetic practice. I am trying to demonstrate that elements of tradition and innovation are entwined in the poetry of individual poets, Modernist or otherwise so that the classification of poets of the period as “Modernist” or “non-Modernist” is much more intricate and complex than is generally allowed. Poets with a Modernist reputation can sometimes be conservative about subject matter, as in the case of Marianne Moore; poets with a “Traditionalist” reputation can sometimes be radical in both subject matter and form, as in the case of Millay. Unlike previous scholarship on poets of the period, similarities, rather than differences, between Modern and Modernist poets are underlined. Harry Blamires is well aware of the overlapping of seemingly opposing poetics of the period:

It will not do to oversimplify the changes brought by our century in terms of the collapse of a settled, traditional order, political and social, moral and cultural. The fashionable myth of escalating emancipation from traditional forms and disciplines will not survive serious study of our age’s literature. In the work of the Moderns what looks at first sight like a disintegration of form very often turns out on closer inspection to be an extension of the range of perception and representation according to a logic inherent in traditional modes of expression.30

This leads to a questioning about the rationality of critical terms such as “Modernist” or “Traditionalist” which can be convenient but can more easily be controversial and limiting. Regarding Modernist poetics as just one way of voicing modernity, this thesis explores women’s various ways of being modern.

The accurate depiction of literary activities of any historical period, let alone a period as dynamic as that of the 1910s-1930s, is anything but clear-cut. That period is like a savoury boiling hot pot in which all kinds of ingredients are contributing to a unique flavour; the flavour of one ingredient may be very similar to or entirely the opposite of another. It therefore makes more sense to present the period as one in which various poetic forces are at work, clashing, dialoguing, changing and evolving. It is poetry forever in motion, tension and question that characterises and fulfills the overall achievement of the period. Tradition and innovation are like two poles of the modern

period in which each individual poet travels back and forth in between and navigates his or her sense of being in the present. It is seldom the case that the development of each individual poet’s career is linear. More often than not, one notices the multi-dimensional character of their work. It is exciting to capture the interactive dynamics between tradition and innovation in an individual poet; the pull of tradition and the pull of innovation create a poetry that assimilates, challenges and transforms both the past and the present.

Out of a concern to present the dynamics of the period 1910s-1930s, which varied in each country studied, the thesis prefaced the study of the individual poets with a general picture of the literary scene of the period. In each introduction, I will first discuss various poetic forces and their characteristics which may be roughly identified as conventional, modern, Modernist or somewhere in between. I will invite the reader to consider the differences as well as similarities of various poetic forces. Differences justify critical terms such as “conventional”, “modern”, or “Modernist” while similarities repel the limitations of the terms. A poet may appear conventional in some work, but modern and even Modernist in other work. Even a single poem may contain archaism, modern vocabulary and Modernist techniques. I will then move to discuss and identify the dominant writing mode of the period in terms of the reading public. I aim to clarify the false impression created by contemporary Modernist scholars that Modernist poetry was the dominant writing mode of the period at issue. I will evidence the historical fact that among existing poetic forces, it is non-Modernist poets who dominated the period. This is the topic I will return to in my conclusion in which I will further the discussion concerning the relationship between popularity and literary quality, poetry and the reading public. But in a general sense, the introduction serves as both the background to and guideline for my detailed analysis of two women poets in each country.

In my analysis of six women poets, I am deliberately choosing two women poets from each country, one generally regarded as distinctively Modernist, the other distinctively modern but not Modernist. I aim to find out whether the modern poet who
is often dismissed by contemporary Modernism-oriented scholars and critics as “old-fashioned” or “traditionalist” is less modern than the claimed Modernist and whether the Modernist poet is less modern than the modern poet in some respects. This leads to a questioning of the rationality of critical terminologies such as “Modernist” and “traditionalist” and reveals the limitations of such terms. In my discussion of the two poets, I strive to capture the dynamics of differences and similarities, radicalism and conservatism, innovation and tradition in their work. I follow a basic pattern of discussing their form, language, subject matter, the evolution of their poetics and their reputation. The complexities of each topic evidence the transitional character of their creativity. In particular, the evolution of their poetics which is more often spiral than linear suggests that poetry in motion is often more subtle and intricate than the critical terminologies are able to locate. In a similar sense, the general pattern of my analysis is subject to variations in terms of the poetics of each individual poet.

Chapter two concerns two American poets, Marianne Moore and Edna St. Vincent Millay. I will discuss Moore’s formal innovation in terms of Modernist poetics as well as the conservatism of her work in the light of the modernity of the period. The evolution of Moore’s poetics both verifies and challenges Modernist poetics and indicates that her poetry in her late years had much in common with modern poets. In previous scholarship, the sonnet has almost become Millay’s trademark. I will highlight Millay’s free verse and other liberations of verse form. I will also discuss the radicalism of Millay’s love poetry which shows marked differences from women’s poetry in the nineteenth century especially in terms of her modern attitude. Chapter three deals with two British women poets: Edith Sitwell and Anna Wickham. In my discussion of Edith Sitwell, I will demonstrate that despite her early phase of formal experimentation, Sitwell was rather conventional in terms of her language and diction. Although she earned a Modernist reputation partly by attacking Georgian poets, I will evidence that her poetry actually had something in common with Georgian poetry. As for Wickham, I will discuss her early experimentation with free verse and her immediate return to rhyme. As for her language, it was largely colloquial with only occasional archaism. I
will then discuss the radicalism of Wickham’s love poetry and the reasons behind her international reputation. Chapter four deals with two Australian women poets: Lesbia Harford and Zora Cross. As a more modern type of poet in the period, Harford employed both free verse and traditional form and her colloquialism was apparent. The modernity of Harford’s poetry also lies in her adoption of elements of modern art and French Symbolist poetry especially in terms of its musicality. The radicalism of Harford’s poetry finds evidences in her poetry about love and the working class. In recent decades, some critics and scholars tend to categorise Cross as a Modernist especially in terms of her love and anti-war poetry. I will demonstrate that she is a rather conventional poet especially in relation to her conventional language. Cross’s popularity was sensational in her lifetime which was envied by her contemporaries. I will discuss the reasons for her popularity and the reason for the failure of her following collection. In the conclusion, I will give a general analysis of six women poets in terms of their form, language and subject matter. I will discuss the problems with contemporary poetic criticism of the period caused by the hegemony of Modernism. I will then approach the issue of poetry and the reading public and accordingly of popularity and quality. My thesis was conceived first and foremost out of a concern to present a more plausible version of literary history. I will reiterate my argument that the period 1910s-1930s was dominated by non-Modernist poets rather than Modernist poets.

**Parameters**

One of the initiatives of my thesis is to demonstrate the complexities of literary activities by analyzing various poetic forces of the so-called Modernist period. Although it is impossible to trace the exact dates of literary Modernism, a large number of critics agree that 1910 is useful to mark the beginning of Modernism; for Virginia Woolf, “in or about December 1910, human character changed”\(^{31}\) and “all human relations … 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.”  

Another indicator is that Imagism was promoted as a movement by Pound in 1912 which is the most recognisable initial phase of Modernism. In his introduction to *Modernism in Poetry*, Rainer Emig comments on Modernism, “It is common knowledge that it summarises artistic tendencies from roughly the turn of the century until the Second World War.”  

Also, in his *Twentieth-Century English Literature*, Harry Blamires comments that, “Most of the revolutionary works of Modernism belong to the second and third decades of the century.”  

The Modernist period has been considered by some to “begin in the last third of the nineteenth century, peaking between 1900 and 1930, and continuing to about World War II or shortly thereafter.”  

The literary critic, Peter Faulkner, in his study *Modernism*, notes in a similar way that, “Any ascription of dates to cultural movements is bound to be arbitrary, but there can be little doubt that the two decades 1910-1930 constitute an intelligible unity as the era of Modernism.”  

Christopher Beach also remarks that, “World War II represented another watershed in the development of American poetry, marking a definitive historical and generational break with modernism.”  

Therefore, the dates 1910s-1930s should be a reasonable parameter. However, my discussion of six women poets is not necessarily restricted to the Modernist period. The career of three women poets Anna Wickham, Lesbia Harford and Zora Cross fall into the period 1910s-1930. Edna St. Vincent Millay’s career stretches to 1940s while the career of Marianne Moore and Edith Sitwell stretches to the 1960s. In order to trace the evolution of an individual poet’s poetics, my discussion of each poet covers the range of their whole career, but each poet first began publishing in the two decades from the 1910s.

The international character of poetic Modernism in English was almost
inevitable. It was started by two Americans in London and its impact was more strongly felt in America and England, the two major English language literatures. However, the impact of Modernism was also felt in other countries of the same period such as France, Australia, Canada and China. In China for instance, the New Cultural Movement (1912-1923) initiated by a group of writers and cultural scholars such as Lu Xun and Hu Shi was greatly influenced by Imagism especially in terms of Chinese poetry. Imagism was also formally introduced to Australia by Australian poet Frank Wilmot who then corresponded with Modernist poets such as Williams Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore. As one of the poetic forces on the literary scene, Modernism in American and England was a minor force in the period 1910s-1930s in terms of its public following. In China and Australia, Modernism was met with more resistance than in America and Britain. Because of space limitations the thesis covers only three countries America, Britain and Australia; the choice of Australia is mainly due to the fact that this study is undertaken in Australia.

The thesis aims to restore awareness of the variety and complexity of poetic activities in the period 1910s-1930s, which requires inclusion of poets who are recognisably Modernist or otherwise. Therefore, the choice of poets in each country includes one who is generally seen to belong with the Modernist circle and one who generally is not. It would have been possible to include more poets from each poetic group. For example, I could have included at least H. D. and Mina Loy alongside Marianne Moore and, Amy Lowell and Elinor Wylie alongside Edna St. Vincent Millay. But given limited space and the need to examine each poet’s work in some detail, I decided to choose the most influential poet from each group, influential in the sense that each has been given the highest degree of recognition by contemporaries who shared their poetics. Moore was highly regarded by Eliot whose 1935 introduction to Moore’s Selected Poems almost cemented once and for all Moore’s reputation as a distinguished American poet.

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38 Hu Shi (1891-1962), a famous Chinese cultural figure, studied in America from 1910-1917 and received his PhD from the University of Columbia. He visited America and England again during 1926-1927. During the new cultural movement, as one of the initiators, he introduced Imagism to China which substantially modernized Chinese poetry.

39 Mina Loy (1882-1966) was born in London, England. She spent her adulthood overseas, sometimes in France, but mostly in America. She became a naturalised citizen of the United States in 1946. Her literary influence was more felt and recognized by her American contemporaries such as Eliot and Pound. I then feel it proper to regard her as an American poet.
Modernist. Compared with Moore, H. D. was only widely known as a representative Imagist; the later withdrawal from Imagism by prominent figures such as Ezra Pound, Richard Aldington and H. D. substantially limited her claim as a Modernist. Mina Loy also had a Modernist reputation as she went to New York “with imposing avant-garde credentials, for she had known Marinetti in Milan and Apollinaire in Paris” and she was even considered “a serious rival to Marianne Moore.”\footnote{Perkins, \textit{A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode}, p. 532.} But compared with Moore and H. D., Loy’s reputation as a Modernist in America is less impressive. Gertrude Stein, though a well-known member of the avant-garde, is too idiosyncratic to be comprehended even by her contemporaries so readers “must go into training to catch up with her.”\footnote{Bonnie Kime Scott (ed.) \textit{The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) p. 236.}

Edna St. Vincent Millay was undoubtedly the most influential woman poet of the period. Her achievement was lauded by major poets, editors and critics such as Thomas Hardy, A. E. Houseman, Harriet Monroe and Edmund Wilson. She won the Pulitzer Prize in 1923 and dominated the American reading public from the late 1910s to the end of the 1930s. Therefore, I believe Moore and Millay are the best candidates in America. Amy Lowell, though mostly famous for her role in the Imagist movement, was not considered a Modernist by Eliot and Pound and their confreres. Lowell wrote in free verse but mostly in traditional rhymes. She had more affinities with Millay and Wylie rather than with Moore and H.D. in terms of her poetics. Although Sara Teasdale has been frequently mentioned alongside Millay and Wylie in poetic history, her sensibility and writing mode resemble those of Christina Rossetti. Compared with the conspicuously modern stance employed by Millay and Wylie in their work, Teasdale was a more traditional rather than modern poet.

In Britain, Edith Sitwell was no doubt the most prominent woman poet who had a Modernist reputation. My choice of Anna Wickham is due to the fact that in her time Wickham had an international reputation unimagined by contemporaries such as Moore and Sitwell. The modernity of her poetry, especially her experiment with free
verse and adoption of a conversational tone, which she employed even before Imagism was officially started by Pound in 1912, makes her stand out as a uniquely modern poet and was enthusiastically promoted by Harold Monro in England and by Louis Untermeyer in America. Nancy Cunard (1896-1965) figured significantly in Sitwell’s *Wheels*. Despite her association with Sitwell and the Modernist circle, she was not actually considered a Modernist. Charlotte Mew (1869-1928) was highly regarded by Thomas Hardy and Harold Monro and she “lived half her life in the Victorian period, and in form and subject her poems describe the struggles of transition from Victorianism to modernity.” Compared with Mew, the modernity of Wickham’s poetry is more impressive. Francis Cornford (1886-1960) was Wickham’s immediate contemporary who wrote in a similar mode. However, as far as literary reputation is concerned, Wickham was more recognised for her modern voice.

In Australia, the parameter I employed in my choice of two American and British poets no longer applies mainly for the reason that Modernism was slow to reach Australia and when it did, it was met with more indifference, doubts and resistance by the majority of Australian poets. Therefore, the assimilation of Modernism in Australia during the period was much more limited than in America and Britain, which means that the majority of Australian poets voiced their sense of modernity in a way which is not usually identified as Modernist. In Australian literary history, Zora Cross and Lesbia Harford are often mentioned side by side as the two most representative poets of the period. The popularity of Cross, mostly due to her erotic sonnets, in the late 1910s was unrivaled by any Australia woman poet of the period. In recent decades, she has even been considered a Modernist by some scholars. As for Harford, although she published little in her lifetime and was almost unknown as a poet, the modernity of her poetry is striking. In recent decades, her reputation as the most important woman poet of the period has been increasingly on the rise. Other women poets writing in the same period included Mary Gilmore (1865-1962) and Nettie Palmer (1885-1964). Although Gilmore enjoyed a prominent reputation as a woman poet, her poetry was marred by its obvious

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Victorianism. Palmer resembles Harford in both sentiment and writing mode, but compared with her friend Harford, Palmer’s poetic achievement was less impressive and she is remembered for her work in other genres. In my choice of two Australian poets, it is almost a choice between the more modern type represented by Harford and Palmer and the more traditional type represented by Gilmore and Cross.

In the choice of six women poet, apart from my concern with different poetics and literary reputations, I also have their birth dates at the back of my mind. I tend to focus on those who were born between the 1880s-1890s and who published and figured importantly between the 1910s and 1930s when the clash between old and new, tradition and innovation were vigorously at play. The result of my choice, however, engenders certain limitations. I could have covered more poets whose poetry is relevant to the topic but at the cost of examining their poetry only sketchily.

In his seminal *Is Literary History Possible?* David Perkins expresses the view that literary history, however necessary, is ultimately impossible, mostly due to its hypothetical nature:

> At the moment, theorists are virtually unanimous in regarding literary histories as, at best, merely hypothetical representations. They are provisional statements in our ongoing dialogue with the past and with each other about the past. Or they are heuristic constructions and help us to see some things more clearly by obscuring others.⁴³

Although under any circumstances literary history is inevitably a subjective construction, it could be heuristic to help the reader see some things clearly without necessarily obscuring others. That the period at issue has been tirelessly read through a Modernist perspective perhaps is due to the fact that a large number of Modernist scholars and historians are trying to make us see Modernism more clearly by obscuring other poetic forces and that Modernism was the most exciting and dramatic literary development of the period. The aim of my thesis is to display a fuller sense of the variety of the period by presenting the previously “obscured” poets alongside Modernist poets, to give a critical reading of the period without necessarily favouring one over the

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other because of adherence to a Modernist poetics and to produce a more plausible version of the historical past.
CHAPTER TWO: AMERICAN POETRY

2.1 American Literary Scene: 1910s-1930s

2.11 Two poetic forces

2.111 Modern Poets

In *A History of Modern Poetry*, David Perkins remarks that, “The transition from Romantic and Victorian to ‘modern’ modes of poetry is one of the fundamental shifts in the history of the art.”\(^1\) As far as the modern modes of poetry are concerned, there were at least two prominent poetic forces in America. One group was made up of poets such as Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869-1935), Robert Frost (1874-1963), Carl Sandburg (1878-1967), Robinson Jeffers (1887-1962), Elinor Wylie (1885-1928) and Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950). The characteristics of this poetic group are several: they wrote mainly in traditional form and metre; they adopted a largely colloquial speech; they addressed subject matter representative of modern life; they prized personality, simplicity and accessibility. Poets within this group differ more in degree than in kind. According to Roger Mitchell, Robinson’s most significant contribution to twentieth-century poetry is that “he used the language of everyday speech.”\(^2\) What is unusual about this lies in the fact that he adopted colloquial speech as early as the 1890s, long before the Imagist movement popularized vernacular language. Frost also took care to avoid literary words as he declared, “I would never use a word or combination of words that I hadn’t heard used in running speech.”\(^3\) On the other hand, Frost insisted on traditional form and metre and openly attacked free verse:

> It may come to the notice of posterity (and then again it may not) that this our age ran wild in the quest of new ways to be new. The one old way to be new no longer served ….

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\(^1\) Perkins, *A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode*, p. 293.

\(^2\) Myers & Wojahn, p. 34.

Those tried were largely by subtraction – elimination. Poetry, for example, was tried without punctuation. It was tried without capital letters. It was tried without metric frame on which to measure the rhythm. It was tried without any images but those to the eye, and a loud general intoning had to be kept up to cover the total loss of specific images to the ear …. It was tried without content under the trade name of poesie pure. It was tried without phrase, epigram, coherence, logic and consistency. It was tried without ability …. It was tried premature like the delicacy of unborn calf in Asia. It was tried without feeling or sentiment like murder for small pay in the underworld.4

As one of the most important poets of the twentieth century, Frost’s poetic stance epitomized the clash between non-Modernist and Modernist poetry. Similarly to Frost, Millay wrote mainly in traditional form and metre, but she was not against free verse. In effect, she wrote consistently, though not frequently, in free verse throughout her career. Millay and Wylie represented those women poets whose personality and temperament were fundamentally transformed by Feminism and the First World War. The nineteenth century women poets such as Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Browning were largely idealists and sentimentalists; their love was usually beautiful, faithful, sacred and eternal. Millay and Wylie were basically realists and satirists; love in their poetry could be ugly, deceptive, vulgar and momentary.

This group of poets who had a sweeping influence upon the American reading public in the 1910s-1930s, together with their English contemporaries, became the victims of the New Critical canonisation of Modernism during the 1940s-1960s, as Colin Falck remarks:

Victims of the process included in varying degrees Thomas Hardy, A. E. Houseman, Rudyard Kipling (until Eliot’s part-resurrection of him), W. B. Yeats in certain of his moods, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, Edward Thomas, all of the First World War poets, all of the ‘Georgian’ poets, D. H. Lawrence in his more traditional aspects, Robinson Jeffers, and Edna St. Vincent Millay. (If Philip Larkin had been writing in the 1930s he would certainly have been ruthlessly marginalized, as for example W. H. Auden was in such highbrow organs as F. R. Leavis’s Scrutiny – a price he was probably made to pay less for his cliquishness or posturing than because of his topicality, rationality, and fashionable success.) Many of these poets already had well-established readerships among educated people who knew or cared little about

Falck’s comment is important: he points out that the popularity of these poets in 1910s-1930s had everything to do with the quality of their work. It was a quality appreciated by an educated reading public and recognised by important poets, critics and editors. For example, Millay’s sensational book sales indicated her popularity with the reading public while the quality of her poetry was endorsed by praise from Thomas Hardy, A. E. Houseman, Edmund Wilson, and Harriet Monroe, to name just the most representative. The New Critical denigration of poets such as Robinson, Frost and Millay is a multi-faceted issue. For one thing, the New Critics were trying to establish the Modernist cannon; for another, they could draw more attention to their canonisation by attacking those who had dominated the reading public for decades. Here lies the nature of literary politics which is a war on paper.

2.112 Modernist poets

Imagism

The other group is made up of Modernist poets such as Ezra Pound (1885-1972), T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), Williams Carlos Williams (1883-1963), Wallace Stevens (1879-1955), H. D. (1886-1961) and Marianne Moore (1887-1972). Poetic Modernism started with Imagism which was initiated as a movement by Ezra Pound in 1912 in London. Pound, Richard Aldington and Amy Lowell all offered their versions of Imagist tenets of which the most widely assimilated by twentieth century poets are: (1) to “use the language of common speech”; (2) to “create new rhythms” (with emphasis on free verse); (3) to “allow absolute freedom in the choice of subject”; (4) to “present an image” so as to “render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities”; (5) to “produce poetry that is hard and clear”; (6) to believe that

“concentration is of the very essence of poetry”. 6 Undoubtedly, Imagism has exerted a profound impact on twentieth century poetry. Most conspicuously, it popularised free verse which has become the most popular form in twentieth century. David Perkins comments that, “Thanks mainly to Miss Lowell, free verse and Imagism made up the notion of modern poetry in the public mind. Controversy spread the news of free verse and enhanced its allure, so that more and more poets were tempted to try it.” 7 Moreover, due to Lowell’s effort, “the Imagists were more widely heard of than any movement since.” 8 The Imagist movement was short-lived. From 1914 to 1917, four anthologies were issued but there were no more afterwards. Pound officially receded from the movement in 1915 because of disagreements with Lowell. Later, other Imagists such as H. D. and Aldington gradually abandoned the mode. Aldington wrote to Herbert Read in 1924 that, “I say that is the narrow path that leadeth to sterility ... Pound, Flint, both went down on that; I saw them go; and I shall live to see you and Tom [Eliot] go the same way.” 9 Most conspicuously, Imagism made popular free verse which became the predominant verse form in the twentieth century.

**Eliot’s theory of Impersonality**

Apart from Imagism, Eliot’s theory of Impersonality was central to Modernist poetics. In the pivotal “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, Eliot explicates his theory: “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.” 10 He aims to make art approach the condition of science through depersonalization. Hence the justification of modern poetry being “difficult” as he points out that:

We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this

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8 P. 332.
9 P. 339.
variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language to his meaning.\textsuperscript{11}

In this sense, formal experiment, impersonality, intellectuality and difficulty became the fundamentals of Modernist poetics. Pound and Moore both championed Impersonality, which became an indisputable principle in the heyday of Modernism. Among Modernist poets, Moore was perhaps the only one who strictly adopted the theory of Impersonality in the 1920s and 1930s. On the other hand, Pound commented on Marianne Moore and Mina Loy in terms of Impersonality that, “In the verse of Marianne Moore I detect traces of emotion; in that of Mina Loy I detect no emotion whatever.”\textsuperscript{12} However, not all the members of the Modernist club agreed with Eliot. Stevens, for instance, detected the personal aspect of Eliot’s poetry as he commented on \textit{The Waste Land} that, “if it is a supreme cry of despair it is Eliot’s and not his generation’s.”\textsuperscript{13} As for Williams, he was perhaps the most receptive to Pound’s Imagist instructions, but also perhaps was the most dismissive of Eliot’s poetics otherwise as he famously put in his \textit{Autobiography} about the years before the publication of \textit{The Waste Land}:

These were the years just before the great catastrophe to our letters – the appearance of T. S. Eliot’s \textit{The Waste Land}. There was heat in us, a core and a drive that was gathering headway upon the theme of a rediscovery of a primary impetus, the elementary principle of all art, in the local conditions. Our work staggered to a halt for a moment under the blast of Eliot’s genius which gave the poem back to the academics. We did not know how to answer him.\textsuperscript{14}

Williams was critical of the intellectualism of Eliot’s poetry. Apart from the differing voices within the Modernist circle, younger generations such as the confessional poets also reacted against Eliot’s impersonal poetics. In his \textit{Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry}, Charles Altieri interpreted Robert Lowell’s dismissal of Eliot’s theory of Impersonality that, “Consequently Impersonality cannot be a ‘cure’ because

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{14} William Carlos Williams, \textit{The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams} (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1968) p. 146.
\end{itemize}
Impersonality is impossible: the putatively impersonal is simply an imaginary or rhetorical shifting to a different level of the personal.”¹⁵ Later in his years, John Berryman sometimes agreed with Robert Lowell’s sense of the limitations of Eliot’s Modernism, and he expressed this about the structure of Homage to Mistress Bradstreet: “let’s have narrative, and at least one dominant personality, and no fragmentation! In short, let us have something spectacularly NOT The Waste Land.” Like Lowell, Adrienne Rich also realized that “the poetics of impersonality had gone tragically wrong.”¹⁶ Robert Bly called Modernist poetry “a wrong turning in American poetry” and commented that, “a young poet cannot take Pound, Eliot, or Moore for a master without severe distortion of his own personality. They whirléd about so far out that anyone who follows them will freeze to death.”¹⁷ Similarly, Randall Jarrell questioned the very spirit of “Tradition and the Individual Talent”:

Won’t the future say to us in helpless astonishment: “But did you actually believe that all those things about objective correlatives, classicism, the tradition, applied to his poetry? Surely you must have seen that he was one of the most subjective and daemonic poets who ever lived, the victim and helpless beneficiary of his own inexorable compulsions, obsessions? From a psychoanalytical point of view he was far and away the most interesting poet of your century. But for you, of course, after the first few years, his poetry existed undersea, thousands of feet below that deluge of exegesis, explication, source listing, scholarship, and criticism that overwhelmed it.”¹⁸

### 2.12 Similarities between Modern and Modernist poets

In twentieth century literary studies, differences between Modern and Modernist poets were much emphasised and, to a certain extent, even exaggerated. Nevertheless, the border between modern and Modernist poets is never clear-cut. If differences are obvious to detect, so are similarities. If modern and Modernist poets are metaphorically two circles partially overlapped, the overlapping area has largely been

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¹⁶ Altieri, p. 172.
ignored. Discussing the similarities between two seemingly opposing poetic forces is valuable in that it invites contemporary scholars to consider more the connections and interactions between poetic tradition and innovation, to see the evolution of twentieth century American poetry more as a transition than a destination, to interrogate the nature of literary politics and the construction of literary histories, and eventually to understand the complexities of literary activities which keep defying and challenging the limitations and confinements of literary terms.

In the context of twentieth century poetry, to use colloquial language, rather than poetical language, became common practice shared by both modern and Modernist poets. In terms of the literary scene of the 1910s which featured Ezra Pound’s *Canzoni* and *Ripostes* (1912), Robert Frost’s *North of Boston* (1914), Amy Lowell’s *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed* (1914), The first anthology of *The Imagists* (1914), Edgar Lee Masters’ *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), Edwin Arlington Robinson’s *The Man against the Sky* (1916), Carl Sandburg’s *Chicago Poems* (1916), etc., Louis Untermeyer commented on the reaction of common readers in terms of the language of American new poetry:

> They discovered that for the enjoyment of poetry it was no longer necessary to have their elbows a dictionary of rare words and classical references; they were not required to be acquainted with Latin legendry and the minor love-affairs of the Green divinities. Life was their glossary, not literature. The new book spoke to them in their own language.\(^\text{19}\)

Untermeyer made it very clear that early twentieth-century poets, Modernist or otherwise, shared a common understanding of language in modern poetry. Similarly, Frederick R. Karl claims in *Modern and Modernism: The Sovereignty of the Artist 1885-1925*:

> The critic must spread his net wide to express what the Modern movement was and is, just as in the past it was difficult to catch the sense of romanticism, realism, naturalism, symbolism. But we can make one broad assumption that holds true through its development: Modern, and Modernism, are characterized by their languages. In literature, whether poetry or fiction, there is the sense of new words and voices, fresh narratives devices that are the story-telling equivalent of new languages. … The common thread for

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anyone who yearns to be Modern, whatever the medium, is the ability to refurbish the language of his art, whether through disruption and new formations, or through colors, tones, sound sequences, visual effects, neologisms.  

Poetical language which was typified by its decorative adjectives and conventional imagery was usually considered a salient feature of nineteenth-century Romanticism and was therefore avoided in varying degrees by both modern and Modernist poets. Robinson, as previously mentioned, was perhaps the earliest to adopt colloquial speech as in his well-known “Richard Cory”. Frost, Sandburg, Jeffers, Millay and Wylie also employed common speech. On the other hand, although Imagism was gradually abandoned by its advocates, its emphasis on common speech was widely assimilated by Modernist poets.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that adopting a largely colloquial language does not necessarily mean that there is not a trace of archaism in both forces. Even Pound confessed to Harriet Monroe about his own archaism when he complained to her about some of the poets she published in *Poetry*:

> Good God! Isn’t there one of them that can write natural speech without copying clichés out of every Eighteenth Century poet still in the public libraries? God knows I wallowed in archaisms in myvealish years, but these imbeciles don’t even take the trouble to get an archaism, which might be silly and picturesque, but they get phrases out of just the stupidest and worst-dressed periods.

Apart from his early work, archaism was also seen in his *Cantos* as Tessa Joseph Nicholas pointed out in her dissertation “Imagining Community: Individual Influence and Group Cohesion in American Avant-garde Poetry and Poetics”:

> The *Cantos*’ vision of history and influence incorporates found language and archaism alongside visual techniques and self-consciously alienating language, low colloquialisms beside the loftiest archaic and Whitmanian diction, archaisms, allusions, and references in the high-modernist style.

> Take, for example, these lines from Canto XXXVI: “Where memory liveth, / it takes its state / Formed like a diaphan from light on shade / Which shadow cometh of Mars and remaineth / Created, having a name sensate, / Custom of the soul, / Will from the heart; /

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Cometh from a seen form which being understood / Taketh locus…” (Pound, Cantos 27)

As for the modern group, Millay sometimes was criticised for her archaism. For example, her earliest sonnet starts with “Thou art not lovelier than lilacs, - no,,” but the word “thou” was immediately dropped in her following sonnets. Millay’s archaism was only occasional in her early years while Pound’s was conscious in his mature work like the Cantos. However, it was Millay rather than Pound who was often criticised for archaism. The archaism of Pound and Millay indicates that archaism was prevalent in the majority of early twentieth century poets, modern or Modernists. This also points out the transitional nature of the evolution of modern poetry.

Although Modernist poetics features difficulty as in the work of Eliot and Moore, some Modernist poets such as Williams have more in common with modern poets in terms of accessibility. As Perkins commented on Williams:

... in some essential respects the appeal of his poetry resembles that of the Georgians and Robert Frost. Common sources of appeal may be suggested by noting that Williams, Frost, and the Georgians were all accessible and entertaining; they possessed or cultivated poetic personalities that have much charm; and they discovered “poetry” in the familiar circumstances of contemporary life.

Accessibility is often closely connected with personality. In this sense, Williams could be as personal as Millay. In the 1920s and 1930s, Moore’s poetry was highly impersonal and impenetrable; change came from the 1940s when a more personal and accessible style was adopted. Randall Jarrell welcomed the change and called it “a real change in the poet”. Unfortunately, the evolution of Moore’s style was largely ignored. Compared with the overall impersonal style of Modernist poets, modern poets may seem strikingly personal. However, modern poets could be impersonal at different phases of their career. The changes in Millay’s style are also obvious. From 1934, Millay could appear rather impersonal, especially in her sonnet sequence “Epitaph for

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the Race of Man” included in her 1934 collection Wine from These Grapes. Peter Monro Jack commented on Millay’s 1937 collection Conversation at Midnight in the New York Times Book Review that this new collection would surprise “the admirers of Miss Millay’s early ‘personality’ poems”26 for the reason that it “has brought a privateness of feeling into a world of thought.”27 However, Moore did not abandon her impersonal style completely even when she was adopting a more personal tone; also, Millay’s personal tone could be as strong as her impersonal tone. It is more appropriate to respect the evolution and variety of such poets’ styles rather than define them by a restrictive term such as “impersonal” or “personal”. Furthermore, it is hard to draw the line between “impersonal” and “personal”. The theory of “Impersonality” as a technique that serves a similar purpose as dramatic monologue could expose as much personality as it escapes. The fact that Stevens could detect the personal anguish behind the mask Eliot wore in The Waste Land may evidence that escaping “Impersonality” can be just another way of expressing “personality”.

Furthermore, similarities are also apparent in expressions of liberated aspects of American culture. Millay and Cummings, for example, had much in common. Roger Mitchell remarked that in “the Jazz Age, an era of flappers and flaming youth, changing sexual mores and moral standards, a new bohemianism”, Millay and Cummings “were the poets who seemed to express this bohemian aspect of the era most effectively and representatively in their work.” Despite their different poetic modes, they “were writing in revolt against social and sexual Puritanism, an outdated moral code” and their work “reflected a new ethic.”28 In the context of early twentieth-century poetry, poets had various, sometimes subtle, ways of expressing modernity; being Modernist is just one way of being modern.

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27 Jack, p. 75.
28 Myers & Wojahn, p. 57.
2.13 Poetry & The reading public

In the period 1910s-1930s, it was non-Modernist poets such as Robinson, Frost and Millay who had a huge public following. The Pulitzer Prize, then as now, was an important indicator of public reception. It is significant to note that Sara Teasdale was the first American poet to win the prize, in 1918; Robinson won the prize three times, in 1922, 1925 and 1928; Carl Sandburg won the prize in 1919 and 1951; Millay won the prize in 1923; Frost won the prize four times, in 1924, 1931, 1937 and 1943 respectively. In A History of Modern Poetry, although David Perkins dismissed Millay as “essentially traditionalist”, he did not deny her influence on and popularity with the reading public:

For approximately fifteen years, 1917-1932, Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950) had a wide, enthusiastic following. Some critics ranked her among the best living American poets, and a great many readers formed their idea of the contemporary or modern poet from her example.\(^{30}\)

There is still a considerable amount of conservatism in Perkins’ statement. In effect, Millay’s popularity with the public lasted throughout the 1930s. In 1936, Williams complained to Pound in a letter that he went to the National Book Fair\(^ {31}\) and learned that “there has been only one MAJOR American poet since the turn of the century (it turned all right) and that is Edna St Vincent Millay.”\(^ {32}\) Despite the fact that Eliot was also among the authors featured by the Book Fair, his popularity could not compete with Millay’s in the 1930s. Also, Perkins commented on the general reception of Eliot’s poetry:

But with critics, editors, academic students of literature, and general readers the story is more complicated. Few persons older than Eliot were able to appreciate his poetry. The record is full of experienced readers – H. L. Mencken, Harriet Monroe, Van Vyck Brooks, Louis Untermeyer, Amy Lowell, Harold Monro, W. B.Yeats – who never understood why

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\(^{29}\) In 1918 and 1919, the award was granted by The Poetry Society; from 1922 it was officially called the Pulitzer Prize for poetry.

\(^{30}\) Perkins, A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode, p. 372.

\(^{31}\) The National Book Fair was sponsored jointly by the National Association of Book Publishers and the New York Times and was held November 5-19 in the International Building on Fifth Avenue. 74 publishers were represented, and 30 authors’ programs were scheduled. None of them included William Carlos Williams.

Eliot’s poetry was so much admired, though some of them paid lip service.\textsuperscript{33}

Although the Pulitzer Prize ignored Modernist poets in the 1920s and 1930s, the \textit{Dial} Award was dominated by Modernist poets. Eliot was awarded the prize in 1922, Moore in 1924, E. E. Cummings in 1925, Williams in 1926 and Pound in 1927. \textit{The Dial} magazine mainly featured Modernist poets. When Moore was editor of \textit{The Dial}, she accepted contributions from both Pound and Williams and “saw to it that they received The Dial’s annual $2,000 prize in consecutive years.”\textsuperscript{34}

Apart from the list of winners of the Pulitzer Prize for poetry, other sources also offered information about the reception of non-Modernist poets and Modernist poets:

In 1949 UNESCO asked a group of American professors of English to name the twenty best American books. Their list included Robinson and Frost but not Eliot. Perhaps Eliot was viewed as English, but “The Best Books of Our Time,” a list compiled from publications of library associations and other “expert” sources, affirmed in 1948 that the best poets were, in order of rank, Frost, Auden, and Sandburg, with Eliot in fourteenth place. In the same year \textit{New Colophon: A Book Collector’s Quarterly} asked its readers to name living American writers most likely to be regarded as classics in A. D. 2000. The poets on this list were Frost, Sandburg, Eliot, and Millay, in third, fifth, seventh, and tenth place respectively ... With general readers and the professoriat, in other words, Eliot’s reputation reached its height only after the Second World War, just when it was rapidly eroding among poets.\textsuperscript{35}

The reason that Eliot’s reputation reached its height after the Second World War has everything to do with the New Critics, especially, Allen Tate, R. P. Warren, John Crowe Ransom, I. A. Richards, Rene Wellek, R. P. Blackmur, and Cleanth Brooks who, regardless of their individual voices and preoccupations, “shared a sense that they were establishing in prose the significance of the modernist revolution in poetry.” The reason that they had great success was “primarily because the expansion of the American universities after World War II changed the conditions of literary instruction.”\textsuperscript{36} After Eliot’s authority was eventually fortified in the late 1940s, it was


\textsuperscript{34} Witemeyer, \textit{The Future of Modernism}, p. 50.


\textsuperscript{36} Altieri, p.158.
not surprising that his Modernist contemporaries also enjoyed considerable public attention. The Pulitzer Prize for poetry, for example, was awarded to Moore in 1952, Stevens in 1955 and Williams in 1963. I will argue that the period 1910s-1930s was dominated by modern, rather than Modernist poets, in terms of the impact of poetry on the reading public.
2.2 Marianne Moore

2.21 Moore and Her Critics

In the 1920s and 1930s, Marianne Moore’s critics, like Millay’s, were divided into two groups. One group was made up of those who were very sympathetic to poetic tradition; the other group was made up of a small circle of poets and critics who were trying to promote Modernist poetics. A representative figure of the former group is Harriet Monroe who published “A Symposium on Marianne Moore” in 1922. Monroe meant to lay out two contrasting groups of opinions without prejudice in order to invite readers to judge the poems for themselves. As Moore’s biographer Charles Molesworth indicates, this article is important in that it “makes for an illuminating look at the literary politics of the time.”37 Though Monroe, as editor and founder of Poetry, was open-minded about poetic trends, she was basically critical of Moore’s poetry. Considering the fact that Monroe thought highly of Millay’s poetry, Monroe’s attitude towards Moore is not surprising.

On the other hand, Moore’s promoters were unanimously Modernist poets such as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, and H.D. In the 1920s and 1930s, Moore was largely read within the small circle of Modernist poets and critics while it was poets such as Frost and Millay who satisfied the reading public. From the 1940s to the 1960s, with the New Critics dominating the academies, Modernist poets began to receive more public recognition. However, writing later, Charles Tomlinson saw little value in the majority of the critical writings about Moore’s work:

Critical writings about the work of Miss Moore fall into two sharp divisions: clear-minded essays – Eliot and Kenner are cases in point – when an exact perception of what she is about eschews all floridity; and, on the other hand, a host of “tributes” in which the poet is reduced to the status of a kind of national pet and where the intellectual stamina finds no answering attitude in the appreciator but calls forth instead sentimental rhapsodizing. One of the more depressing thoughts to cross the mind of anybody who has

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read such criticism in bulk is to wonder whether Marianne Moore has not suffered more from lax adulation than almost any other significant poet of our century.\textsuperscript{38}

Written in the late 1960s when Moore had become a national celebrity, Tomlinson’s comment was rather penetrating. Moore’s position in literary history has not changed since the 1920s. In the 1960s when Millay was condemned and buried by the New Critics, Moore went on to harvest honours and publicity.

\textbf{2.22 Moore’s Form:}

\textbf{2.221 Moore’s Syllabic Grid}

Moore’s reputation as a high Modernist is primarily due to her formal innovation, in particular her use of syllabic verse. Generally speaking, syllabic verse is a poetic form having a fixed or constrained number of syllables per line, while stress, quantity, or tone play a distinctly secondary role – or no role at all – in the verse structure. It is a common practice in languages that are syllable-timed, such as Japanese or modern French – as opposed to stress-timed languages such as English, in which accentual verse and accentual-syllabic verse are more common. Simply put, syllabic verse refers to the kind of poetry whose metre is determined by the total number of syllables per line, rather than the number of stresses. Historically, syllabic verse in English is largely the invention of poets in the twentieth century. Compared with some poets, such as Dylan Thomas, Louis Zukofsky, Kenneth Rexroth, Thom Gunn, Elizabeth Daryush and Robert Bridges, who wrote syllabic verse to a small extent, Moore is a major practitioner who wrote consistently in this form for decades.

In \textit{A History of Modern Poetry}, Perkins has a detailed description of Moore’s syllabic verse:

\par By syllabic verse is meant simply that the line is measured by counting not the number of accents but the number of syllables. It is the ordinary scansion of French poetry. What is novel in Marianne Moore, however, is that the line may have any number of syllables from one to twenty, and caesuras fall where they may. As a result, there is no way of knowing that it is a meter until the same number of syllables are counted in

\textsuperscript{38} Tomlinson, p. 12.
corresponding lines of each stanza. This compels, as one reads, a primary attention to the prose rhythm. Other rhythms are going at the same time of course, created by the division into lines and the occasional counterpointing of syllabic with accentual meter, but syllabic verse does not create a rhythm of its own. Its function in English seems primarily to negate accentual scansion and allow the prose rhythm to move forward and receive first emphasis. For the poet, syllabic meter may serve more personal needs. One easily learns to think in blank verse, for example, and to a lesser degree in other traditional meters also. Thus, for most poets the metrical aspect is partly unconscious. But syllabic meter can never become habitual. The syllabic line presents itself to the poet as an external form that must be filled consciously. 39

Perkins is quite sympathetic to Moore when he explains that Moore’s syllabic verse might be out of a concern with prose rhythm which, put in another way, means the rhythm of common speech. However, Moore does not necessarily follow the rhythm of common speech. Take “The Steeple-Jack” for example. This poem is composed of 13 stanzas and the number of syllables in the lines of every stanza is: 11-10-14-8-8-3:

Dürer would have seen a reason for living
    in a town like this, with eight stranded whales
to look at; with the sweet sea air coming into your house
on a fine day, from water etched
    with waves as formal as the scales
on a fish.

One by one in two’s and three’s, the seagulls keep
    flying back and forth over the town clock,
or sailing around the lighthouse without moving their wings –
rising steadily with a slight
    quiver of the body – or flock
mewing where

a sea the purple of the peacock’s neck is
    paled to greenish azure as Dürer changed
the pine green of the Tyrol to peacock blue and guinea
gray. You can see a twenty-five-
pound lobster; and fish nets arranged
to dry. The

whirlwind fife-and-drum of the storm bends the salt
    marsh grass, disturbs stars in the sky and the
star on the steeple; it is a privilege to see so
much confusion. Disguised by what

might seem the opposite, the sea-
side flowers and ⁴⁰ ...

In the first stanza, Moore does seem to create a smooth speech rhythm. However, in
the second stanza, the last line “mewing where” does not sound as natural a phrase as
“on a fish” in the first stanza. Moreover, in the third stanza, the conversational tone
apparent in the first two stanzas is nowhere to be found perhaps due to the fact that the
imagery Moore created here is about art. Besides, there are quite a few unusual
arrangements: the phrase “guinea gray” has to be separated into different lines;
“twenty-five-pound lobster” also has to be cut off into “twenty-five-” and “pound
lobster” and put in different lines; the word “The” in the last line apparently belongs
with the next stanza. In the fourth stanza, Moore goes even further to take a word apart.
For example, “seaside” is divided into “sea” and “side”. Once again, the last line “side
flowers and” is as forced as “mewing where” and “to dry. The” in the second and third
stanzas. One wonders why the first stanza manages to maintain common speech
rhythm while the following three stanzas fail to do so. It appears to me that Moore
employs a perfectly conversational tone in the first stanza so as to set the number of
syllables for the rest of the stanzas and makes it a rule to follow through. Moore, in a
letter to Pound, considered it a matter of expediency which was achieved not without
pains:

Any verse that I have written, has been an arrangement of stanzas, each stanza being an
exact duplicate of every other stanza. I have occasionally been at pains to make an
arrangement of lines and rhymes that I liked, repeat itself, but the form of the original
stanza of anything I have written has been a matter of expediency, hit upon as being
approximately suitable to the subject.⁴¹

However, what suits the first stanza does not necessarily suit the rest. In Moore’s own
words, “Spontaneous initial originality – say, impetus – seems difficult to reproduce
consciously later.”⁴² Moore forces herself to break words and phrases into pieces in
order to keep her poem in a certain syllabic pattern, but the syllabic pattern is achieved
at the cost of breaking the prose rhythm. Nevertheless, what Moore does is common

enough now so she was pointing a way forward, at least to some poets. The conversational opening tone invites the reader in and the poem can then afford to become more poetic, as it does with its image making. Also, much of the metre is iambic, even if the lines are of irregular length.

In the above poem, the word “seaside” which Moore breaks into parts is a compound. Even if she takes it apart, the breaking is still within reason. However, Moore sometimes simply breaks a word into pieces even if it is not a compound. In the last two stanzas of “The Fish” for instance:

ac-
  cident – lack
    of cornice, dynamite grooves, burns, and
    hatchet strokes, these things stand
    out on it; the chasm-side is
dead.
Repeated
Evidence has proved that it can live
On what can not revive
  its youth. The sea grows old in it.  

This poem has eight stanzas altogether which follows a syllabic pattern of 1-3-9-6-8. In order to carry out this strict principle, the word “accident” is taken apart. This is quite unusual in English poetry. In the 1922 “A Symposium on Marianne Moore”, Marion Strobel, then associate editor of Poetry, found Moore’s poetry hard to tolerate:

Even a gymnast should have grace. If we find ourselves one of an audience in a side-show we prefer to see the well-muscled lady in tights stand on her head smilingly, with a certain nonchalance, rather than grit her teeth, perspire, and make us conscious of her neck muscles. Still, we would rather not see her at all.  

Harriet Monroe, though quite open-minded about and sympathetic to Modernist poetics, finds it hard to accept Moore’s formal radicalism:

When Miss Moore uses the first syllable of accident as a whole line to rhyme with lack, or the article a as a line to rhyme with the end of Persia; when she ends a stanza in a split infinitive, or in the middle of the swift word very—indeed, anywhere in the middle of

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43 Moore, Complete Poems, pp. 32-33.
words or sentences, she is forcing her pattern upon materials which naturally reject it, she is giving a wry twist even though her aim is grotesque; and when her aim is more serious, such verbal whimsicalities strike at once the intensely false note of affectation.  

Both Monroe and Perkins sense the note of affectation in Moore’s syllabic design. Moreover, syllabic poetry does not have to run the risk of breaking words into parts. Dylan Thomas, for instance, also wrote a syllabic poem titled “In My Craft or Sullen Art”:

In my craft or sullen art  
Exercised in the still night  
When only the moon rages  
And the lovers lie abed  
With all their griefs in their arms,  
I labour by singing light  
Not for ambition or bread  
Or the strut and trade of charms  
On the ivory stages  
But for the common wages  
Of their most secret heart.

This poem maintains seven syllables in every line. Apparently Dylan Thomas is not interested in dividing phrases into different lines, not to mention breaking words into parts. The uninterrupted speech rhythm ensures the musicality of the poem. In contrast, Moore’s syllabic grid is apparently self-imposed and upsets the speech rhythm by taking words and phrases apart, which kills the musicality of the poem. Pound believed that poets should adopt common speech rhythm to write poetry rather than follow a metronome but Moore created her own syllabic metronome. Furthermore, this syllabic pattern, in Perkins’ words, “may be intellectually recognized but is not much felt in reading.” If Moore’s deliberate design helps add to the meaning of the poem it is not a flaw. However, “these arbitrary forms make the meaning more difficult to grasp and so rouse attention. They also contribute to the air of eccentricity and self-imposed

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45 Monroe, p. 214.  
difficulty that pervades her verse, ‘the love of doing hard things.’”

It is worth noticing that Moore breaks words into pieces more frequently when poems contain more stanzas. On the other hand, she manages to maintain the syllabic pattern without taking words apart when poems consist of only a few lines and stanzas as in “An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish”:

Here we have thirst
and patience, from the first,
    and art, as in a wave held up for us to see
    in its essential perpendicularity;

not brittle but
intense – the spectrum, that
spectacular and nimble animal the fish,
    whose scales turn aside the sun’s sword by their polish.

The syllabic pattern of this poem is 4-6-12-12. The reader does not necessarily sense the note of affectation as he or she does in Moore’s lengthy poems. However, it should be noted that these short syllabic poems make up only a very small percentage of her overall syllabic poetry.

2.222 Moore’s free verse

Although Moore is mostly known for her syllabic poetry, she also wrote frequently in free verse. Compared with the rigidity of her syllabic grid, Moore’s free verse poems are more relaxed. “To a Snail” is a free verse poem first published in 1924:

If “compression is the first grace of style,”
you have it. Contractility is a virtue
    as modesty is a virtue.
It is not the acquisition of any one thing
    that is able to adorn,
or the incidental quality that occurs

47 Perkins, A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode, p. 559.
48 P. 83.
as a concomitant of something well said,
that we value in style,
but the principle that is hid:
in the absence of feet, “a method of conclusions”;
“a knowledge of principles,”
in the curious phenomenon of your occipital horn.\(^{49}\)

This poem maintains the speech rhythm perfectly well without abruptly dividing phrases or words that are supposed to stay together. This poem is basically a discourse on poetics. The phrase “absence of feet” reads like a pun. Literally, it refers to the snail’s lack of feet; aesthetically, it argues against traditional form which is dependent on metrical feet. Also, “the curious phenomenon of your occipital horn” seems to indicate in particular Moore’s own idiosyncratic syllabic grid which follows its own principles and serves its own purpose. The whole poem moves steadily forward with grace and humility which gives us the impression that the image of the snail is almost a portrait of Moore herself. If “To a Snail” appears distinctively impersonal, “Silence”, a poem about growth and maturity, strikes a seemingly personal note at first glance:

My father used to say,
“Superior people never make long visits,
have to be shown Longfellow’s grave
or the glass flowers at Harvard.
Self-reliant like the cat –
that takes its prey to privacy,
the mouse’s limp tail hanging like a shoelace from its mouth –
they sometimes enjoy solitude,
and can be robbed of speech
by speech which has delighted them.
The deepest feeling always shows itself in silence;
not in silence, but restraint.”
Nor was he insincere in saying, “Make my house your inn.”
Inns are not residences.\(^{50}\)

Apparently, Moore herself invented the father’s remarks in the poem given the fact that Moore’s mother abandoned her father before Moore was born. Although this poem adopts a conversational tone, the fabricated father-daughter dialogue makes the poem sound largely impersonal.

\(^{49}\) P. 85.
\(^{50}\) P. 91.
2.23 Moore’s quotations

The use of quotations is a common practice among Modernist poets, and together with Moore’s syllabic verse, makes her work accord with the spirit of Modernist poetics: formal experiment, impersonality, intellectuality and difficulty are frequent. In an interview with Donald Hall, Moore explained her use of quotations as follows:

I was just trying to be honorable and not to steal things. I’ve always felt that if a thing has been said in the very best way, how can you say it better? If I wanted to say something and somebody had said it ideally, then I’d take it but give the person credit for it. That’s all there is to that. If you are charmed by an author, I think it’s a very strange and invalid imagination that doesn’t love to share it.\(^{51}\)

Moore’s explanation seems honest and plausible. However, Moore did not always quote an author because his or her way of saying things was the best, but because Moore herself simply lacked knowledge in certain areas. In “An Octopus”, for instance, she quoted many details about the ancient Greeks:

The Greeks liked smoothness, distrusting what was back
of what could not be clearly seen,
resolving with benevolent conclusiveness,
“complexities which still will be complexities
as long as the world lasts”;
ascripting what we clumsily call happiness,
to “an accident or a quality,
a spiritual substance or the soul itself,
an act, a disposition, or a habit,
or a habit infused, to which the soul has been persuaded,
or something distinct from a habit, a power” –
such power as Adam had and we are still devoid of.\(^{52}\)

There are 12 lines in this piece in which 7 lines are quotations. If we remove all the quotations from this piece, there is little left. Besides, Moore’s overuse of quotations makes this poem largely prose, not poetry. The whole poem consists of over 190 lines in which 84 lines are quotations. The use of quotation is the verbal application of Modernist collage. Moore generally drew her materials from books rather than from

\(^{51}\) Moore & Hall, p. 30.

\(^{52}\) Moore, Complete Poems, pp. 75-6.
daily life. Perhaps Moore knew best when she said, “Everything I have written is the result of reading or of interest in people, I’m sure of that.”53 Apart from “The Octopus”, “Marriage” is another well-known poem which is “built largely on quotations.”54 Randall Jarrell commented that Moore’s use of quotation was a result of her application of precision, “the poet has tried to strip or boil everything down to this point of hard, objective, absolute precision. But the most extreme precision leads inevitably to quotation.”55 David Perkins, although quite positive about Modernist poetics, finds Moore’s quotations annoying; he remarks in A History of Modern Poetry:

The quotations from various sources, such as the National Geographic Magazine or the sports pages, are a further oddity. They are not usually memorable in themselves. Miss Moore explains them as simple integrity: if you use someone else’s words, it is right to acknowledge the borrowing. But, then, why use someone else’s words? Moreover, some of the quotations she seems to have invented herself, and quotations are used with a frequency that gives some readers the impression of a nervous tic. Her quotation marks function generally in two ways: they call attention to the words and they give them an ironic cast. Quotation may be a way of disowning the words she uses, of refusing to take full responsibility for them. It is a mode of armor, of hiding from the reader. Her book reviews are frequently mosaics of quotation.56

To be fair, if frequent usage of quotation is an oddity, it is so also with Eliot’s and Pound’s poetry. Moore once wrote in a review of a draft of XXX by Pound, “Great poets, Mr. Pound says, seldom make bricks without straw. They pile up all the excellences they can beg, borrow or steal from their predecessors or contemporaries and then set their own inimitable light atop the mountain.”57 Moore’s comment accords with collage, a technique widely assimilated by Modernist poets. In a way, we can even call this a group influence. Nevertheless, Moore’s frequency of using quotations is remarkable among her Modernist peers. Eliot’s use of quotations is largely displayed in The Waste Land and his later poems such as The Four Quartets do not seem affected by this technique. Moore conveyed to Donald Hall in 1963 that, “Oh,
I never knew anyone who had a passion for words who had as much difficulty in saying things as I do. I very seldom say them in a manner I like.” This might partly answer Perkins’s question “why use someone else’s words”. Moore’s ideal of precision leads to quotation, quotation leads to difficulty, Jarrell was simply overwhelmed by Moore’s effort: “How much she cares for useless pains, difficulties undertaken for their own sake! Difficulty is the chief technical principle of her poetry, almost.” Then the reader should not be surprised by Moore’s self-imposed difficulty.

2.24 Moore’s language

Imagism has been described as “the grammar school of modern poetry, the instruction and drill in basic principles”. One of the reasons lies in the fact that it revolutionised language in modern poetry. Colloquial, rather than poetical, language was advocated. The first of the six points listed by Richard Aldington in his preface to the Imagist anthology for 1915 is “to use the language of common speech.” However, most of the time, Moore does not use a common vocabulary. Eliot considered Moore’s language “the curious jargon produced in America by universal university education – that jargon which makes it impossible for Americans to talk for half an hour without using the terms of psychoanalysis...” In this sense, Moore’s language is professional rather than colloquial as she drew her vocabulary and material mostly from books. Marion Strobel felt disconcerted by Moore’s seeming pedantry: “she makes us so conscious of her knowledge! And because we are conscious that she has brains, that she is exceedingly well-informed, we are the more irritated that she has not learned to write with simplicity.” In the same symposium, Pearl Andelson made a comparison between Moore and Emily Dickinson in terms of the obscurity of their poetry:

58 Moore & Hall, p. 28.
59 Jarrell, p. 121.
60 Perkins, A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode, p. 329.
61 P. 334.
Marianne Moore has much the Emily Dickinson type of mind, but where Emily Dickinson's not infrequent obscurities arise out of an authentic mysticism, Marianne Moore's are more likely the result of a relentless discipline in the subtler “ologies” and “osophies”. 63

Moore’s vocabulary is intellectual rather than colloquial as she revealed in an essay published in 1957 titled “Subject, Predicate, Object” that: “I think books are chiefly responsible for my doggedly self-determined efforts to write; books and verisimilitude; I like to describe things.”64 Bonnie Costello comments that, “Our reading of Moore requires such schooling, and the poet herself often provides the lessons. Moore gives many names to her predilections.”65 This seems to certify Moore’s pedantry. In “An Octopus” for instance, the language Moore uses is far from common speech:

Of ice. Deceptively reserved and flat,
it lies “in grandeur and in mass”
beneath a sea of shifting snow-dunes;
dots of cyclamen-red and maroon on its clearly defined pseudo-podia
made of glass that will bend – a much needed invention –
comprising twenty-eight ice-fields from fifty to five hundred feet thick,
of unimagined delicacy.
“Picking periwinkles from the cracks”
or killing prey with the concentric crushing rigor of the python,
it hovers forward “spider fashion
on its arms” misleadingly like lace; 66

On the one hand, Moore persistently borrows descriptive phrases and sentences from books as indicated in a scrap of the poem, perhaps for the purpose of achieving artistic precision as proposed by one of the Imagist tenets: “To present an image. We are not a school of painters, but we believe that poetry should render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities...”67 Perhaps, Moore believes that books have said the best about knowledge in certain areas and the only thing left to do in order to present a clear image is to quote from them. On the other hand, even when Moore does not quote the

64 Molesworth, p. xix.
66 Moore, Complete Poems, p. 71.
books, her own descriptive lines as “dots of cyclamen-red and maroon on its clearly defined pseudo-podia” and “its vermilion and onyx and manganese-blue interior expensiveness” do not present common speech. Perhaps, Molesworth says it best when he remarks that, “Moore is first and last a literary poet; her intelligence and experience are bound up with reading, in a way outmoded among many people today.”68 Unfortunately, being a literary poet was not always a merit in terms of Modernist poetics. In 1915, writing to Harriet Monroe, Pound condemned “Every literaryism, every book word” and “the speech of books”.69 In a way, “literary” is almost a synonym for “poetical” which was the very thing that Imagism tried to eliminate.

2.25 Moore’s subject matter

Readers often get the impression that it is hard to grasp the subject matter of Moore’s poetry. As far as Moore’s “Marriage” is concerned, Eliot “had nothing to say about the subject matter” and Williams was “much more concerned to have Moore’s “experimentalist features on display”.70 As for “Octopus”, Molesworth wonders whether the poem’s “somewhat nervous sense of structure and its oddly inconclusive ending result from her not being able to speak openly about the poem’s subject.”71 The difficulty and complexity of Moore’s poetry make its subject matter hard to grasp. Margaret Widdemer commented on Moore’s poetry in the New York Post Literary Review in 1925, “You have to work too hard to find out what she means, as over a difficult translation, to have time to feel.”72 Even such a well-respected critic as Randall Jarrell had difficulty understanding Moore’s poems; he amusingly commented on “Armour’s Undermining Modesty”: “I don’t entirely understand it, but what I understand I love, and what I don’t understand I love almost better.”73 In my view, Moore, more often than not, tries to convey ideas and thoughts of a religious,

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68 Molesworth, p. xix.
69 The Letters of Ezra Pound, p.91.
70 Molesworth, p. 203.
71 P. 186.
72 P. 199.
73 Jarrell, p. 123.
moralistic, philosophical or intellectual nature without necessarily focusing on a specific subject. Moore’s subject matter, if it does exist, is often highly abstract. This obviously contradicts Pound’s demand in 1913 in “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste”, to “Go in fear of abstractions”. Understandably, abstraction tends to make poetry more intellectual which is in conflict with the colloquial style both modern and Modernist poets advocated.

Furthermore, Moore’s moralistic, religious or philosophical tone runs the risk of creating the false impression that she is an omnipresent sage or saint, looking down at humanity, whispering a piece of wisdom here and there, and from time to time condescendingly pointing out our ignorance. In “Picking and Choosing”, for instance, Moore comments on literature:

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. 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. It is not Hardy the novelist and Hardy the poet, but one man interpreting life as emotion. The critic should know what he likes: Gordon Craig with his “this is I” and “this is mine,” with his three wise men, his “sad French greens” and his “Chinese cherry” Gordon Craig so inclinational and unashamed – a critic. And Burke is a psychologist, of acute raccoon-like curiosity.

Moore basically adopts an affirmative tone in this poem. Nevertheless, literature is not necessarily a phase of life for everyone. There is no reason people should be afraid of literature; even if people are, their situation is not necessarily “irremediable”. Moreover, Moore’s statement that people who are familiar with literature inevitably end up saying worthless things sounds a bit presumptuous; it could be argued that the opposite is true. Moore’s view of literature could be regarded as idiosyncratic, opinionated and condescending. When she turns to discipline the critic, perhaps she

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75 Moore, *Complete Poems*, p. 45.
should show awareness that every critic, including Moore herself, can be hopelessly and helplessly “inclinational and unashamed”. Not surprisingly, Marion Strobel points out that the subject-matter of Moore’s poems is “inevitably dry; the manner of expression pedantic. She shouts at our stupidity: ‘Literature is a phase of life’ ... And we yawn back at Miss Moore’s omniscience.” It is truly difficult for an academic to employ common speech when he or she is trying to instruct the students about a very literary issue. In this respect, I am sympathetic to Moore who plays the role of an enthusiastic academic in the poem. Elsewhere, Moore tends to be meditative and philosophical, for example in “A Grave”:

    Man looking into the sea,  
    taking the view from those who have as much right to it as you have to it yourself,  
    it is human nature to stand in the middle of a thing,  
    but you cannot stand in the middle of this;  
    the sea has nothing to give but a well excavated grave.  
    The firs stand in a procession, each with an emerald turkey-foot at the top,  
    reserved as their contours, saying nothing.  
    repression, however, is not the most obvious characteristic of the sea;  
    the sea is a collector, quick to return a rapacious look.

Although the expression in “A Grave” is less pedantic and professional than in “Picking and Choosing”, it is still hard to grasp Moore’s philosophical paradigm between the lines. By using words such as “grave”, “repression” and “collector”, Moore not only humanised but individualised the sea. Despite Moore’s use of “Man” and “you” rather than “I” to create a largely impersonal tone, it is Moore’s personality rather than anyone else’s that is exposed the most. From the perspective of astrophysics, the sea is a necessary outcome of the evolution of planet earth which is located in a goldilocks zone that makes life sustainable. The sea is at least a life-giver in this sense. However, when Moore detects “a rapacious look” from an imagined man’s face and turns the sea into a “collector”, and when she prescribes “repression” as “not the most obvious characteristic of the sea”, the sea on her mind and on the page is no longer the sea that actually exists perhaps for the reason that “repression” is essential to Moore’s personality and poetics.

77 Moore, Complete Poems, p. 49.
In both “Picking and Choosing” and “A Grave”, one tends to believe that Moore could assume such an authoritative tone as a result of her reading. As Molesworth remarks:

She read voraciously, habitually, one is tempted to say indiscriminately and addictively, from The Book of Job to Enid Bagnold. It was at times as if she had rediscovered the medieval sense of “authority,” that special sense of wisdom as originating with those who have lived before us and put their knowledge into some written form.  

Moore’s idiosyncratic wisdom and sense of authority which are cultivated largely by reading are perhaps responsible for her moralistic and pedantic tendencies. Animals, birds and plants, meticulously described in Moore’s poetry serve pretty much the same purpose. Jarrell points out that Moore has turned amoral nature into the morally good:

Nature, in Miss Moore’s poll of it, is overwhelmingly in favour of morality; but the results were implicit in the sampling – like the Literary Digest, she sent postcards to only the nicer animals. In these poems the lion never eats Androcles – or anything else except a paste of seeded rotten apples, the national diet of Erewhon; so that her truthful and surprising phrase, the lion’s ferocious chrysanthemum head, may seem less surprising than it would for a wilder lion. Because so much of our own world is evil, she has transformed the Animal Kingdom, that amoral realm, into a realm of good; her consolatory, fabulous bestiary is more accurate than, but is almost as arranged as any medieval one. We need it as much as she does, but how can we help feeling that she relies, some of the time, too surely upon this last version of pastoral?  

However, Moore does not just tend to moralise the animal kingdom, she is also inclined to humanise and individualise it. For example, in “To a Prize Bird”:

You know how to think, and what you think you speak
With much of Samson’s pride and bleak
finality, and none dare bid you stop.

Pride sits you well, so strut, colossal bird.
No barnyard makes you look absurd;
your brazen claws are staunch against defeat.  

Under Moore’s pen, the bird is like a human being who never hesitates to speak its mind. Besides, its pride and “bleak finality” are like that of Samson. Apparently, when Moore seems to speak for the bird, she actually speaks for herself expressing aspects of

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78 Molesworth, pp. xix-xx.
79 Jarrell, p. 119.
80 Moore, Complete Poems, p. 31.
her personality and moral belief. Similarly, in “The Pangolin”, Moore believes that among animals the pangolin has a sense of humour:

> Humor serves a few steps, it saves years. Unignorant, modest and unemotional, and all emotion, he has everlasting vigor, power to grow.\(^{81}\)

When Moore uses “humour” to humanise and “modest” to moralise the pangolin, it is not surprising that the pangolin lets out a cry at the end of the poem:

> “Again the sun!
anew each day; and new and new and new,
that comes into and steadies my soul.”\(^{82}\)

If the pangolin has a soul, it must be similar to that of Moore. Obviously, Moore, through the mouth of the humanised pangolin, voices her own will. Arguably, one of the limitations of Moore’s poetry lies in Moore’s attitude. Everything in her world seems to be under close control; doubts and anxieties seem very far away. Perhaps “Like a Bulwark” best epitomises Moore’s philosophical paradigm:

> Affirmed. Pent by power that holds it fast – a paradox. Pent. Hard pressed, you take the blame and are inviolate.
> Abased at last?
> Not the tempest-tossed.
> Compressed; firmed by the thrust of the blast till compact, like a bulwark against fate;
> lead-saluted,
> saluted by lead?
> As though flying Old Glory full mast.\(^{83}\)

Moore depicts a world that is too affirmative and undefeatable to be real. Here lies the limitation of Moore’s philosophy. Not coincidentally, when Bonnie Costello compares the differences in aesthetics between Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore, she also implies that Moore’s tone is pedantic:

> Moore tended to balance her gyroscopic observations on a firm moral base, secured in epigram, however complex or paradoxical. Her wisdom is instructive and evaluative. She offers precepts to live by. Bishop’s tendency, however, was to move toward the moral

\(^{81}\) P. 119.  
\(^{82}\) P. 120.  
\(^{83}\) P. 157.
condition of uncertainty and mystery, the moral atmosphere of loss, temporality, memory and desire, the questions we live by.\textsuperscript{34}

In her late years, even Moore’s philosophy and wisdom sometimes seem no more than sophistry as “I May, I Might, I Must” indicates:

\begin{verbatim}
If you will tell me why the fen
appears impassable, I then
will tell you why I think that I
can get across it if I try.\textsuperscript{85}
\end{verbatim}

This poem provides argument for argument’s sake. Although it concerns real life in terms of different psychological attitudes, the nature of her poetic spirit is abstract, philosophical and metaphysical. Jarrell expresses a similar view of Moore’s poetry, writing to Elizabeth Bishop:

\begin{verbatim}
I’ve quite got to like your poems better than Marianne Moore’s as much as I do like hers – but life beats art, so to speak, and sense beats eccentricity, and the way things really are beats the most beautiful unreal visions, half-truths, one can fix up by leaving out and indulging oneself.”\textsuperscript{86}
\end{verbatim}

In Jarrell’s opinion, Bishop tried to capture the process of thinking while Moore offered or imposed a completed thought. Whereas Bishop was open to and forever fascinated by the uncertainties of life, Moore’s highly-wrought urn dispels uncertainties and therefore is discordant with real life.

\subsection*{2.26 The evolution of Moore’s poetics}

David Perkins once commented that “Moore’s career evolved without dramatic changes in style or attitude.”\textsuperscript{87} This is perhaps the case, but changes, though not necessarily dramatic, are obvious and revealing. Randall Jarrell remarked in the 1950s: “The change in Miss Moore’s work, between her earliest and latest poems, is an attractive and favourable change. How much more modernist, special-case, dryly

\textsuperscript{85} Moore, Complete Poems, p. 178.
\textsuperscript{86} Cited by Longenbach, Modern Poetry After Modernism, p. 59.
\textsuperscript{87} Perkins, A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode, p. 556.
elevated and abstract, she was to begin with!” Moore followed through this principle from the 1920s to the 1940s. The rigidity of her syllabic grid is best demonstrated in poems such as “The Steeple-Jack”, “The Jerboa”, “The Buffalo” and “The Pangolin”. In truth, Moore was already less strict with syllabic pattern in her two collections What Are Years and Nevertheless in the 1940s. Moore’s syllabic counting was mostly the product of the 1920s and 1930s. From the 1950s onward, when Moore was in her sixties and seventies, her habit of taking words apart was almost nowhere to be found except in just two poems, “To Victor Hugo of My Crow Pluto” and “Avec Ardeur”, which are basically word-play. In the latter, we notice lines such as:

I refuse
to use

“enchant,”
“dement”;

even “frightful plight”
(however justified)
or “frivolous fool”
(however suitable).

I’ve escaped?
am still trapped

by these
word diseases. Moore’s unusual wordplay is reminiscent of Edith Sitwell’s 1922 Facade which is largely a play with sounds without giving much attention to meaning. Also, Moore’s sense of humour does not overshadow her early habit of taking words apart. Perhaps Moore was more aware of her “word disease” even when she was trying to be humourous. Another change is that Moore’s syllabic poetry in her later years reads more naturally and colloquially. For example, in “Enough” written in 1969:

88 Jarrell, p. 118.
89 Moore, Complete Poems, p. 238.
Am I a fanatic? The opposite.
And where would I like to be?
Sitting under Plato’s olive tree
or propped against its thick old trunk,

away from controversy
or anyone choleric.

If you would see stones set right, unthreatened
by mortar (masons say “mud”),
squared and smooth, let them rise as they should,
Ben Jonson said, or he implied.

In “Discoveries” he then said,
“Stand for truth. It’s enough.” 90

The whole poem follows a syllabic pattern of 10-7-9-8-7-6. The only discordance is that the fifth line in the first stanza has seven syllables while the same line in the second has eight syllables. Apparently, Moore at this point pays more attention to speech rhythm. By contrast, in her early poems, speech rhythm was sacrificed for the sake of strict syllable-counting, which substantially contributed to the difficulty of her work. Over the decades, we can tell that Moore was gradually moving toward, in Perkins’ words, “a more accessible style.” 91 Furthermore, she used very few quotations after the 1940s. Her 1924 collection Observations contains extreme examples such as the lengthy “An Octopus” and “Marriage” which are basically made up of quotations.

In her late years, Moore’s habit of imposing morality on animals also considerably diminished. For example, in “A Jelly-Fish”:

Visible, invisible,
a fluctuating charm
an amber-tinctured amethyst
inhabits it, your arm
approaches and it opens
and it closes; you had meant
to catch it and it quivers;
you abandon your intent. 92

90 P. 245.
91 Perkins, A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode, p. 557.
In this poem, Moore does not teach any lesson. She simply presents a vivid picture of a jelly fish. The depiction of the natural world of animals, birds and insects, is mostly genuine without humanised adornment. “Genuine” is after all a quality Moore claimed to value the most in “Poetry”:

I, too, dislike it.
Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in it, after all, a place for the genuine.93

Also, Moore’s sense of humour grew over the years. Apart from her verbal play as previously indicated in “To Victor Hugo of My Crow Pluto” and “Avec Ardeur”, she was funny in “Prevalent at One Time”:

I’ve always wanted a gig
semi-circular like a fig
for a very fast horse with long tail
for one person, of course,

and then a tiger-skin rug,
for my Japanese pug,
the whole thing glossy black.
I’m no hypochondriac.94

More conspicuously, throughout her later work, there was “a slightly more direct expression of personal feeling.”95 This change is important in that it actually challenged and questioned the plausibility of Eliot’s theory of Impersonality. It is easier to understand that Moore tried to find objective correlatives in the animal world as one way of carrying out the theory of Impersonality. In her late years, however, Moore was seen to express more personality. In “O to be a dragon” from her 1959 collection, Moore has no intention of escaping her personality:

If I, like Solomon,...
could have my wish –

My wish ... O to be a dragon,
a symbol of the power of Heaven – of silkworm size or immense; at times invisible.

93 P. 36.
94 P. 247.
95 Perkins, A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode, p. 557.
Felicitous phenomenon!\textsuperscript{96}

Although this poem is by any standard a Modernist collage which is made up of a remark by a friend at a party and phrases from a book of Moore’s Chinese-American friend Meimei Shi, Moore’s temperament is most apparent in this poem. Moore seldom appears so aspiring and expressive as in this poem.

Apart from her more personal tone, Moore returned partially to traditional versification especially in terms of rhyme. In the 1920s and 1930s, Moore often blended syllabic pattern with light rhyme. Eliot, in his introduction to Moore’s 1935 Selected Poems praised Moore’s light rhyme: “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.”\textsuperscript{97} However, just as Moore had to break words into parts to maintain her syllabic patter, she also needed to do the same to achieve the effect of light rhyme as “In the Days of Prismatic Color” indicates:

\begin{quote}
.....al-

ways has been – at the antipodes from the init-
ial great truths. ‘Part of it was crawling, part of it
was about to crawl, the rest
was torpid in its lair.’ In the short-legged, fit-
ful advance, the gurgling and all the minutiae – we have the
\end{quote}

The reader might be irritated by Moore’s arrangement; Eliot, however, was pleased by Moore’s effort, commenting, “It will be observed that the effect sometimes requires giving a word a slightly more analytical pronunciation, or stressing a syllable more than ordinarily.” Nevertheless, after the 1940s, her rhyme was more traditional as in “What are Years”:

\begin{quote}
The soul to be strong? He
sees deep and is glad, who
accedes to mortality
and in his imprisonment rises
upon himself as
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{96} Moore, Complete Poems, p. 177.
\textsuperscript{98} Moore, Complete Poems, p. 41.
the sea in a chasm, struggling to be
free and unable to be,
in its surrendering
finds its continuing. 99

A later poem “Values in Use” included in Moore’s collection Like a Bulwark also contains rhymed lines and the way the two poems rhyme is similar:

I attended school and I liked the place –
grass and little locust-leaf shadows like lace.

Writing was discussed. They said, “We create
values in the process of living, daren’t await

their historic progress.” Be abstract
and you’ll wish you’d been specific; it’s a fact.100

Nevertheless, taken as a whole, Moore’s poetry, though glowing with intelligence in a world of words, thoughts and ideas, is very far from real life. Randall Jarrell’s criticism is pertinent in this respect:

We are uncomfortable – or else too comfortable – in a world in which feeling, affection, charity, are so entirely divorced from sexuality and power, the bonds of the flesh. In this world of the poems there are many thoughts, things, animals, sentiments, moral insights; but money and passion and power, the brute fact that works, whether or not correctly, whether or not precisely – the whole Medusa-face of the world: these are gone.101

Since the publication of Harriet Monroe’s essay “A Symposium on Marianne Moore” in 1922, it is very rare to run into essays which offer strong criticism of Moore’s poetry in America. As Moore’s admirer, rather than detractor, Jarrell’s criticism is responsible and enlightening.

2.27 Moore’s aesthetic conservatism

Although Moore had a Modernist reputation, the conservative aspect of her aesthetics was apparent. Perkins has sharply pointed out that if Moore’s “technique was Modernist, her temperament was not. She seemed to have little connection with

99 P. 95.
100 Marianne Moore, Like a Bulwark (London: Faber and Faber, 1957) p. 27.
101 Jarrell, p. 122.
conventionally modern attitudes, unless she was felt to rebuke them." Moore, for instance, rebuked the modern attitudes of contemporaries such as Elinor Wylie and Edna St. Vincent Millay. According to Molesworth, Moore once avoided Elinor Wylie simply because Wylie had earned a bad reputation and was rejected by high society:

Mrs. Moore wrote Warner in May that Moore was avoiding William Benet and his fiancée at the time, Elinor Wylie. Wylie is a literary type they chose to shun: she had come from a prominent social family, but Benet was her third husband and she had been ostracized by the highest levels of society.

Quite opposite to Moore’s conservative attitude, Edna St. Vincent Millay was so disgusted at the fact the League of American Penwomen virtually removed Wylie’s name from their list that she wrote a letter not only rejecting their invitation to be the League’s Guest of Honour but condemning their behaviour:

Your recent gross and shocking insolence to one of the most distinguished writers of our time has changed all that.

It is not in the power of an organization which has insulted Elinor Wylie, to honour me.

And indeed I should feel it unbecoming on my part, to sit as Guest of Honour in a gathering of writers, where honour is tendered not so much for the excellence of one’s literary accomplishment as for the circumstances of one’s personal life.

Believe me, if the eminent object of your pusillanimous attack has not directed her movements in conformity with your timid philosophies, no more have I mine. I too am eligible for your disesteem. Strike me too from your lists, and permit me, I beg you, to share with Elinor Wylie a brilliant exile from your dusty province.

Compared with Millay, Moore’s attitude towards women’s freedom in love, marriage and sexuality is rather conservative. Nevertheless, she was positive about women coming out of the kitchen:

We dare not regress by suppressing intelligence or forbidding women to be useful. But steadfastness, conscience and the capacity for sacrifice, on the part of both parents, are basic to good family relations which, in turn, are basic to the well-being of society in general.

Apparently, Moore’s feminism was rather limited. Moore’s aesthetic conservatism is closely connected with her morality as Perkins remarks:

103 Molesworth, p. 191.
She is committed to a copybook morality with its definiteness and simplicity and the old-fashioned heroes – “Cincinnatus was; Regulus” – of the copybook. She sympathizes with whatever is integral, positive, self-controlled, and self-respecting. Reticence is a virtue, and few things can be worse than crying in someone’s lap. In poetry there must be no adventitious charm or seductiveness. It ‘must not wish to disarm anything.” It must be what it is and you must like it or leave it, for that is the way superior people behave.\(^\text{106}\)

Perkins’ comment makes more sense in terms of what Moore said of Millay that, “The problem about Vincent Millay” was that “she was popular all for the wrong reasons.”\(^\text{107}\) Millay’s sexual aggressiveness, seductiveness and playfulness in her love poems were perhaps reasons to irritate Moore. However, Moore’s aversion to what she deems “obscene” is not targeted at Millay personally. According to Molesworth, Moore once “spoke in a letter to her brother about Williams’ ‘obscenities,’ and this was to be an issue with her throughout her friendship with the doctor from Rutherford.”\(^\text{108}\) Molesworth goes on to comment on Moore’s reservations about subject matter:

> The principle of modernism that proclaimed that there was no inherently poetic subject matter, an issue debated by Williams and Wallace Stevens, among others, was a principle that never animated Moore, at least not insofar as it entailed the treatment of “low” or obscene material.\(^\text{109}\)

In the 1920s, obscenity was still one of the frequent causes for censorship, and Moore was certainly aware of it. Not surprisingly, later as editor of *The Dial*, Moore “developed a reputation for being unwelcoming to work she considered obscene.”\(^\text{110}\) Moore once asked Llewelyn Powys to “remove references to syphilis and madness from a review.”\(^\text{111}\) Bonnie Costello describes Moore, in comparison with Elizabeth Bishop, as a gentlewoman who “looks after the good and the beautiful”. Costello’s comment on Moore’s aesthetic conservatism is insightful:

> Moore, as Bishop describes her, is a figure both mannered-eccentric, flirtatious, self-conscious-and mannerly: decorous, tasteful, virtuous in the deepest sense, a figure committed undividedly to civilized values. Manners express the rock foundation of an ethical system, and aesthetics are rooted to morality. Moore's evaluative turn of mind pervades


\(^{108}\) Molesworth, p. 159.

\(^{109}\) P. 160.

\(^{110}\) P. 168.

\(^{111}\) P. 213.
every aspect of experience, from social etiquette to modern warfare. The poetic gestures
which accompany this preoccupation are those of praise, condemnation, selection,
purification, transformation.  \(112\)

Again, as Costello points out, Moore “insists on these attitudes at a cost, of course, the
cost of comprehensive vision. Moore’s is by no means a naive vision, but she chooses
not to depict (only to condemn) what is infelicitous, tragic, evil in the world. Her real
toads are never repulsive.”  \(113\) On the other hand, what Moore chooses to depict is the
good and beautiful. Moore is quite romantic in this sense. The supreme cry Eliot let out
in *The Waste Land* must be at odds with Moore’s perfect world. Moore was too
positive to assimilate Eliot’s pessimism and too morally affirmative to tolerate Millay’s
modern attitudes. In temperament, compared with Eliot’s Modernist sensibility, she
was anti-Modernist; compared with Millay’s “New Woman” attitudes, she was
anti-modern.

**2.28 Moore and Modernism: Moore and Eliot**

From the 1910s to 1930s, the major figures of the Modernist circle made it a
point to support one another so as to promote Modernist poetics. Within the Modernist
coterie, Moore was the closest to Eliot in terms of the essence of Modernist poetics:
she exhibits formal experiment, impersonality, intellectuality and difficulty.
Molesworth points out that it is the aesthetic spirit of “Tradition and the Individual
Talent” with which Moore “is most in accord.”  \(114\) Hugh Kenner seems to understand
the dynamics that drive Moore’s formal radicalism: “She will not imitate the rising
throbbing curve of emotion, but impede it and quick-freeze it. One impediment is the
grid of counted formalisms.”  \(115\) Apart from Moore’s syllabic grid, her obsessive use of
quotations in many of her poems also displays both her erudition and her
determination to be difficult, in Moore’s own words, to encourage “the love of doing

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\(112\) Costello, “Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop”, p.133.
\(113\) P. 133.
\(114\) Molesworth, p. 159.
hard things.”116 Modernist poets enthusiastically wrote positive book reviews for one another. According to Molesworth, when Scofiled Thayer asked Moore to review Eliot’s *The Sacred Wood*, she got “Thayer to agree that she can do so only if he would know ahead of time that she would not speak unfavorably of it.” 117 Not speaking unfavorably of Eliot’s book was certainly the principle. In effect, Moore offered the highest praise for Eliot’s “opening a door upon the past and indicating what is there.”118 Although Moore could not get over Williams “obscenities”, she turned to praise his “concise, energetic disgust, a kind of intellectual hauteur which one usually associates with the French.”119 Also, Moore’s positive review of Stevens’s first collection *Harmonium* “was an important defense against the charges of obscurity and dandified language then, and later, so frequently made against Stevens.”120 Returning favours was almost compulsory good manners in literary politics. Since Moore reviewed the works of her Modernist friends much to their satisfaction, they did not forget to return the favour. Pound, in his essay “Marianne Moore and Mina Loy” praised both women’s “dance of intelligence among words and ideas”.121 When Williams reviewed Moore’s *Observations* in 1925, he acclaimed at the end of the essay: “This is new! The quality is not new! The freedom is new, the unbridled leap.”122 However, it is Eliot who plays a dominant role in establishing Moore’s reputation once and for all as a high Modernist.

On the other hand, Moore herself also consciously cultivated her reputation as a Modernist poet in the 1920s and 1930s. Moore, aware of Eliot’s authority, took the initiative to ask Eliot for advice. As Goodridge remarks, “Given Eliot’s incisive reading of Moore’s early poems, it is not surprising that Eliot was the one person she most wanted to write the introduction for her *Selected Poems* in 1935.”123 Also, according to Molesworth:

117 Molesworth, p. 155.
118 P. 159.
119 P. 160.
120 P. 191.
Moore had earlier requested that Eliot expand his 1923 *Dial* review on her to serve as an introduction to the *Selected Poems*, and many if not all of the reviewers of that volume made a point of mentioning Eliot’s introduction. Moore doubtlessly saw Eliot’s approval as a public “safeguard” for her poetry as well as a genuine personal testament.124

Eliot’s introduction was the most crucial to Moore’s position in American literary history and he highly praised her poetry:

> My conviction, for what is worth, has remained unchanged for the last fourteen years: that Miss Moore’s poems form part of the small body of durable poetry written in our time; of that small body of writings, among what passes for poetry, in which an original sensibility and alert intelligence and deep feeling have been engaged in maintaining the life of the English language.125

Most importantly, Eliot’s introduction to the *Selected Poems* (1935) was almost unanimously quoted by critics before they started to comment on her. As Celeste Goodridge comments:

> His brilliant analysis of what Moore is after sets the tone for most of the criticism of Moore which follows in the thirties, forties and fifties. Given Eliot’s prominent position in the critical community, no assessments of Moore’s poetry could fail to consider and acknowledge, if only implicitly, his reading.126

Eliot has set the keynote for the value of her poetry and his authority has helped secure her position in twentieth century American literary history. After the publication of *Selected Poems*, Moore wrote to Eliot: “You will be amused to note – whereas I am profoundly grateful for – the armor afforded me by your introduction to my book.”127

Moore’s acute awareness of Eliot as a literary authority made her seek continuing validation from him. Stevens wrote to Moore in 1953 that, “The web of friendship between poets is the most delicate thing in the world – and the most precious.”128

Moore’s friendship with Stevens, Williams and Pound may have been equally precious to her. However, as far as Moore’s position in literary history is concerned, perhaps Eliot’s friendship was the most important and precious.

124 Molesworth, p. 276.
126 Goodridge, p. 105.
127 Cited by Goodridge, p. 105.
2.3 Edna St. Vincent Millay

2.31 Millay and her Critics

Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950) was one of the most prominent poets who dominated the American reading public in the period 1910s-1930s. In 1923, she became a celebrity by winning the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. In the same year, just before she was operated on and right after a brief wedding ceremony, she said to Arthur Ficke, “If I die now, I shall be immortal.”129 Her biographer, Daniel Mark Epstein, remarks that, “If she had died then, she might have been canonized, embalmed in the eternal honey of youth and beauty that has preserved John Keats, Percy Shelley, Sylvia Plath, Marilyn Monroe, and Dylan Thomas.”130 In 1924, at the height of her fame, Harriet Monroe, editor of Poetry, considered her a greater poet than Christina Rossetti, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Emily Dickinson.131 Thomas Hardy admired Millay’s poetry so much as to comment in 1928 that there were two great things in the United States: the poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay and the skyscrapers.132 Even after her death, Edmund Wilson expressed his “unfashionable opinion” in “Epilogue 1952: Edna St. Vincent Millay” that, “Edna Millay seems to me one of the only poets writing in English in our time who have attained to anything like the stature of great literary figures in an age in which prose has predominated.”133

On the other hand, the budding New Critics started to attack Millay from the late 1920s as part of a fight for Modernist poetry which then did not have a public following. The attack launched in the 1920s and 1930s did not actually affect Millay’s reputation as, in the words of John Haynes Holmes, “the chief glory of contemporary American literature”.134 However, from the 1940s to the 1960s, the New Critics

132 Milford, p. 290.
134 Cited by Thesing, p. 2.
dominated the critical institutions and Modernist poets such as Eliot, Moore, Stevens and Williams began to enjoy more publicity.

In her lifetime, the majority of Millay’s critics, including critics as different as Monroe and Tate, were mostly attracted to Millay’s sonnets for which Millay was either praised or condemned. However, Millay’s range is wider than that. Apart from the sonnet, she also wrote a great amount of free verse. Besides, she experimented with traditional form and metre; as a result she created more liberations of verse form in poems which are beyond the definition of either free verse or traditional form. Unfortunately, previous and later critics largely bypassed the variety of Millay’s form. As for her language, Millay employed a colloquial style and modern vocabulary in her short poems including free verse poems. But when it comes to her sonnets, the matter is more complicated. She could be colloquial in some poems, but she could also be traditionally poetical in others. Her vocabulary could be modern as well as literary. To conclude that her sonnets are old-fashioned or modern would be simplistic. Millay’s sonnets reject oversimplification. The modernity of Millay’s love poetry not only marks her difference from nineteenth century women poets but also makes her a spokeswoman for the twentieth century. A comprehensive understanding of the poetic achievement of an individual poet is both crucial and possible as Frederick Eckman comments:

If a poet can be read first of all in terms of the large patterns in the work, then a critic may proceed, depth by depth, to what is at once the most important and the most elusive of critical goals: a true understanding of the individual poetic imagination in all its range and complexity.135

In my analysis of Millay’s poetry, I attempt to approach Millay’s poetry in terms of its “range and complexity” by taking a critical view of her navigation between tradition and innovation. In particular, I will highlight Millay’s formal experimentation by discussing in detail her free verse poems and poems in other forms.

2.32 Millay’s Form

2.321 Millay’s sonnets

The sonnet has proved to be “the most enduring, the most widely used and the most immediately recognizable” poetic form. The longevity of the sonnet lies mostly in its stability, accessibility, flexibility and adaptivity. Phillis Levin comments on the vitality of the form that, “As with most traditions, once the pattern became stable and recognizable, writers began experimenting with it anew, usually respecting its overall shape but continually pushing its boundaries.” Perhaps for this reason, the sonnet “has more varieties, and more readers, today than ever before.” The sonnet is also the form Millay was most reputed for. Millay maintained the general pattern of fourteen lines and the predominant iambic pentameter. The reason that a great number of poets in the twentieth-century still favoured this metre is that the iambic pentameter has proved to be the closest to colloquial speech:

The bedrock meter in English has always been iambic pentameter, a five-stress, ten-syllable line. It is the traditional line closest to the form of our speech and thus has been especially favored for the sonnet – from Shakespeare and Milton to Wordsworth and Coleridge to Robinson and Millay. It has been estimated that three-fourths of all English language poetry from Chaucer to Frost has been written in rhymed or unrhymed iambic pentameter.

More conspicuously, Chris Beyers points out that although Eliot’s “Prufrock” strikes one as a free verse, about 30 percent of the lines are iambic pentameter. It seems true that innovation is closely connected with tradition. On the one hand, Millay maintained some aspects of the sonnet tradition; on the other hand, she was quite creative about the rhyme scheme. She wrote both Shakespearean and Petrarchan sonnets without strictly following their rhyming schemes. A typical Petrarchan sonnet consists of two parts, namely, an octave and a sestet. The rhyme scheme of the octave

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is usually a-b-b-a-b-b-a; the rhyme scheme of the sestet is more flexible. Petrarch himself typically used c-d-e-c-d-e or c-d-c-d-c-d. Other variations are c-d-d-c-d-d, c-d-d-e-c-e, or c-d-d-c-c-d. William Wordsworth, for instance, used c-d-c-e-e-d in “Great Men Have Been Among Us”, c-d-d-c-c-d in “Nuns Fret Not at Their Convent’s Narrow Room”, and c-d-d-e-c-e in “London, 1802”. In the twentieth-century, Millay employed more variations in the rhyme scheme of the sestet. In Millay’s Petrarchan sonnets, apart from the above existing rhyme schemes, there are at least thirteen more variations: c-d-e-c-c-e, c-d-e-f-c-e, c-d-e-c-e-d, c-d-d-e-c-e, c-d-c-d-e-e, c-c-d-e-e-d, c-d-c-e-c-d, c-d-e-c-c-d, c-d-e-d-c-e, c-d-d-c-d-c, c-c-d-d-c-d and c-d-c-e-d-e. More interestingly, Millay sometimes ends a Petrarchan sonnet with a Shakespearean couplet. Although the sonnet appears to many as rigid and formal, it seems that Millay found in it enormous space to improvise. Apart from the variations, Millay sometimes used half-rhyme in her sonnets.

2.322 Millay’s free verse

Millay’s reputation as a sonneteer has considerably overshadowed her poems written in free verse. From the 1920s up to the present, Millay’s critics and scholars have almost unanimously focused on her sonnets. Peter Monro Jack was perhaps among the earliest and rarest who briefly mentioned her “witty and beautifully stylized free verse”\(^\text{141}\) in his review of *Conversation at Midnight* in 1937. In *A History of Modern Poetry*, David Perkins did not mention Millay’s free verse. In *A Profile of Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, Edward Hirsch rashly remarked that Millay was one of those women poets whose work “repudiated free verse”.\(^\text{142}\) In fact free verse poems are scattered sparsely through most of Millay’s collections except for the first two collections. From the 1920s to 1940s, Millay steadily wrote free verse. Conspicuously, Millay started her 1920 collection *Second April* with her first free verse

\(^{141}\) Peter Monro Jack, “Conversations of Our Time: Edna St. Vincent Millay’s Tapestry of Contemporary Themes”, in Thesing, pp. 73-76, pp. 75-76.
\(^{142}\) Myers & Wojahn, p. 78.
To what purpose, April, do you return again?
Beauty is not enough.
You can no longer quiet me with the redness
Of little leaves opening stickily.
I know what I know.
The sun is hot on my neck as I observe
The spikes of the crocus.
The smell of the earth is good.
It is apparent that there is no death.
But what does that signify?
Not only under ground are the brains of men
Eaten by maggots.
Life in itself
Is nothing,
An empty cup, a flight of uncarpeted stairs.
It is not enough that yearly, down this hill,
April
Comes like an idiot, babbling and strewn flowers.  

This poem touches upon the issue of Beauty in twentieth century poetry. Traditionally, beauty is seen as the essence of poetry. In 1900, W. B. Yeats wrote to George William Russell that poetry “exists to find the beauty in all things, philosophy, nature, passion, - in what you will, and in so far as it rejects beauty it destroys its own right to exist.” Also Robert Bridges remarked that the poet “is the man who is possessed by the idea of Beauty.” 144 In short, Beauty is supposed to have “fled from drab settings, sordid images, vulgar characters, cynical and depressing ideas, emotions such as anger, guilt, lust, or despair, many forms of irony and wit, conflict and dramatic shift of mood, and versification that was jolting, cacophonous, or dissonant.” 145 Millay’s “Spring” is aggressively modern in that it subverts traditional ideas about the essence of poetry. The title of the poem is deceiving in that it first arouses romantic associations in the reader and then disrupts their expectation. In the poem, Beauty is just a tip of the iceberg above the sea; underneath the water, there are death, ugliness, sordidness, and meaninglessness of human existence which are strung together by a strong sense of

143 Millay, Collected Poems, p. 53.
pessimism. Millay’s juxtaposition of the beauty of nature and the brutality of death so as to highlight the emptiness of life resembles the beginning of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stiring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeling
A little life with dried tubers.
... ...'
What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only

Both poets choose a typically romantic subject “spring” only to overturn it, which evidences a sensibility that characterises the twentieth century. Millay and Eliot give April a modern twist by presenting images that will make lovers of John Keats extremely uncomfortable. Moreover, two scenes Millay presents are more provocative: the brains of men are being eaten by maggots underground; April is like an idiot babbling and strewing flowers. Together, the two scenes create the type of tragicomedy that characterises Samuel Beckett’s post-modern masterpiece *Waiting for Godot*. If Eliot’s April is tragic enough to be considered modern, then Millay’s is tragicomic enough to be regarded as both modern and post-modern. Given the publication dates, Millay’s “Spring” is more pioneering than Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. When *The Waste Land* was published in 1922, “it was interpreted ... as sullen and aggressive ugliness in many modes, betraying a wish to destroy poetry.” If Eliot’s presentation of “aggressive ugliness” is distinctively modern, so is Millay’s in no less degree.

Death is a major theme in Millay’s poetry. As J. D. McClatchy remarks, “The engine that drove her poetry – as it may have propelled her life, through love affairs and addictions – was death. Her fear of it haunted her desperate apostrophes to the

romantic moment, and chilled her appraisals of loss.”¹⁴⁸ If “Spring” is a philosophical reflection upon death in regard to beauty in nature, “Lament” is about dealing with death in real life:

Listen, children:  
Your father is dead.  
From his old coats  
I’ll make you little jackets;  
I’ll make you little trousers  
From his old pants.  
There’ll be in his pockets  
Things he used to put there,  
Keys and pennies  
Covered with tobacco;  
Dan shall have the pennies  
To save in his bank;  
Anne shall have the keys  
To make a pretty noise with.  
Life must go on,  
And the dead be forgotten;  
Life must go on,  
Though good men die;  
Anne, eat your breakfast;  
Dan, take your medicine;  
Life must go on;  
I forget just why.¹⁴⁹

In the poem, the speaker assumes the role of a mother speaking to her children about how to cope with life after their father dies. The mother seems to have a rather practical attitude towards death. Her tone is tinted with invincible courage and formidable nonchalance. The image of the mother reminds one of Millay’s own mother who brought up three daughters by herself when their father left the family. There is no room for tears, pain and sorrow in this poem while the seemingly calm, even cheerful diction betrays a deeper sense of despair. Millay’s speaker is trying to conquer death but it is hard to say whether she succeeds. Colin Falck comments that, “More often her vision is stoic and Hardyish, and she acknowledges the reality of death both for herself

and for others, but without acceptance.” The concluding statement “I forget just why” indicates a hint of trance and a sense of helplessness which contrast sharply with the previous forced composure and brittle optimism.

What is more conspicuous about “Lament” is its conversational tone and modern vocabulary. The colon in the first line indicates the mother’s talk to her children. The mother’s speaking tone is vivified by phrases such as “little jackets”, “little trousers”, and “pretty noise”. Words such as “coats”, “jackets”, “trousers”, “pants”, “pockets”, “keys”, “pennies”, “tobacco”, “bank”, “medicine”, “breakfast” and “medicine” are indicators of the essentials very possibly for a poor family. The simplicity and directness of diction arouses pathos no less powerfully than that of Eliot’s “A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, /I had not thought death had undone so many.” Colin Falck also relates the simplicity of Millay’s diction to the contemporary neglect of her poetry in the past fifty years, “it seems likely that it is a fear of the very simplicity of her poetry – and of the challenge that it poses to us to experience life with something of the intensity with which earlier, and less ironic, generations experienced it – that mainly lies behind her neglect by today’s highbrow readership.”

In the 1930s, Millay’s free verse poems became more descriptive and prose-like in a way resembling those of Robinson Jeffers. Also, her tone was less personal as “The Hedge of Hemlocks” indicates:

Green tops, delicate and curving yet, above this fence of brush, like ferns,
You have done well: more than the marshes now is shut away from his protected dooryard;
The mountain, too, is shut away; not even the wind
May trespass here to stir the purple phlox in the tall grass.

The impersonal tone is perhaps partly due to the fact that from the late 1920s, Millay “emerges as a truly philosophical poet, and her preoccupations with nature, with death,
and with the nobilities and shortcomings of human aspirations are expressed in a range
of intellectually substantial and technically widely varying poems.”

In “From a Train Window”, Millay described the graveyard with a sense of tranquility:

Pleasant enough, gay even, by no means sad
Is the rickety graveyard on the hill. Those are not cypress trees
Perpendicular among the lurching slabs, but cedars from the neighbourhood,
Native to this rocky land, self-sown. Precious
In the early light, reassuring
Is the grave-scarred hillside.
As if after all, the earth might know what it is about.

In this poem and the one above, Millay’s detailed description of nature is very possibly out of a “felt obligation to concreteness, and an awareness that the meaning is in the detail”. Millay’s “concreteness” is in accord with the Imagist tenet to present “enough images of concrete things arranged to stir the reader.” In her forties, Millay perhaps was more reconciled with death. This poem is neither emotional nor sentimental, in striking contrast to the strong sense of pessimism in “Spring”. Altogether Millay wrote over fifty strictly free verse poems.

2.323 Evolution of Millay’s form: Other variations

As Millay continued to write sonnets and free verse, in her 1928 collection The Buck in the Snow, many poets and critics saw a change in Millay’s form. Edd Winfield Parks, for instance, commented that, “The predominantly interesting feature of The Buck in the Snow is its disclosure of Miss Millay’s constant experimenting with new techniques.” Similarly, Harriet Monroe commented positively on this change:

Miss Millay, in this volume, tries some interesting experiments in measures new to her. I do not now recall, in her previous work, any lines longer than pentameter; but here, in fifteen or more of these forty-three poems, including The Buck in the Snow, we find her varying her measures with long sweeping lines among the shorter ones. Also, the

154 Falck, Edna St. Vincent Millay: Selected Poems, p. xxv.
155 Millay, Collected Poems, p. 280.
prevailing iambic pattern is most irregular.\footnote{159}{Harriet Monroe, “The Buck in the Snow by Edna St. Vincent Millay”, \textit{Poetry}, Vol. 33, No. 4, 1929, p. 214.}

Both Parks and Monroe were apparently impressed by Millay’s liberations of verse form that defy easy definitions. As “Dirge without Music” indicates:

\begin{quote}
I am not resigned to the shutting away of loving hearts in the hard ground.
So it is, and so it will be, for so it has been, time out of mind:
Into the darkness they go, the wise and the lovely. Crowned
With lilies and with laurel they go; but I am not resigned.\footnote{160}{Millay, \textit{Collected Poems}, p. 240.}
\end{quote}

Although Millay maintained the traditional quatrain and rhyme, her lines are definitely longer and her metre irregular. All through the 1930s and the 1940s, Millay increasingly abandoned traditional form and rhyme and sometimes her lines became longer than ever before. As “New England Spring, 1942” demonstrates:

\begin{quote}
But Spring is wise. Pale and with gentle eyes, one day somewhat she advances;
The next, with a flurry of snow into flake-filled skies retreats before the heat in our eyes,
and the thing designed
By the sick and longing mind in its lonely fancies –
The sally which would force her and take her.
And Spring is kind.
Should she come running headlong in a wind-whipped acre
Of daffodil skirts down the mountain into this dark valley we would go blind.\footnote{161}{P. 470.}
\end{quote}

In Falck’s view, Millay combined the “Whitmanian heritage of cadenced free verse” and the “greater reflective tightness of Robins Jeffers” to fuse with her special kind of “rhyming sound-patterning which had so far only rarely been used in free verse” to form a style which is uniquely Millay’s. Falck thinks highly of Millay’s innovation and acclaims:

\begin{quote}
Nothing like this exists anywhere else in English poetry, unless it be in others of Millay’s later poems. The meaning of the lines is carried as much by the rhythmic hesitations, the subtly insistent internal-rhyme structure and the skillfully judged punctuation as by the usual poetic devices which are familiar to us in explicatory analysis. This is perhaps a still-unclosed chapter in modern versification.\footnote{162}{Falck, \textit{Edna St. Vincent Millay: Selected Poems}, p. xxviii.}
\end{quote}

Sometimes, Millay allowed her un-metred end-rhymes to fall irregularly and to be spaced widely apart, as “Portrait” indicates:
Over and over I have heard,
As now I hear it,
Your voice harsh and light as the scratching of dry leaves over the hard ground,
Your voice forever assailed and shaken by the wind from the island
Of illustrious living and dead, that never dies down,
And bending at moments under the terrible weight of the perfect word,
Here in this room without fire, without comfort of any kind,
Reading aloud to me immortal page after page conceived in a mortal mind.
Beauty at such moments before me like a wild bright bird
Has been in the room, and eyed me, and let me come near it.163

Millay’s innovation with form resembles that of Eliot as the latter once remarked: “My early verse libre of course was started under the endeavor to practice the same as Laforgue. This meant rhyming lines of irregular length, with the rhymes coming in irregular places. It wasn’t so verse as libre, especially the sort that Ezra called “Amygism.””164 Younger generations of poets such as W. H. Auden also explored the form in a similar way in “Musée des Beaux Arts”:

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer’s horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.165

Falck comments on this poetic practice that, “One step further than this, and we are in free verse that just happens to have some rhymes in it – or else free verse that just happens not to have.”166 The liberations of verse form are identical with free verse in various ways. Falck notes that, “Modernism’s greatest legacy to poetry was to make possible a refined and flexible tradition of free verse – the carving of the new wood

164 Cited by Beyers, p. 91.
166 Falck, American and British Verse in the Twentieth Century: The Poetry that Matters, p. 165.
that Whitman broke.”  

2.33 Millay’s Language

2.331 Modern scenario

John Timberman Newcomb remarks that, “The urgency and the difficulty of learning to represent urban modernity in verse became the theme of many American poems between 1910 and 1925.” Sketches of city life were abundant in Millay’s poetry. For example in a sonnet included in her 1917 collection *Renascence and Other Poems*:

If I should learn, in some quiet way,  
That you were gone, not to return again  
Read from the back-page of a paper, say,  
Held by a neighbor in a subway train,  
How at the corner of this avenue  
And such a street (so are the papers filled)  
A hurrying man, who happened to be you,  
At noon today had happened to be killed  
I should not cry aloud – I could not cry  
Aloud, or wring my hands in such a place –  
I should but watch the station lights rush by  
With a more careful interest on my face;  
Or raise my eyes and read with greatest care  
Where to store furs and how to treat the hair.  

Although this poem deals with a traditional theme, that is, the inevitable encounter of love and death, the setting of the poem is conspicuously modern. Words and phrases such as “the back-page of a paper”, “a neighbor in a subway train”, “the corner of this avenue”, “station lights rush by”, “store furs” and “treat the hair”, together present a glimpse of New York city in the late 1910s. “Recuerdo”, included in her 1920 collection *Second April*, is another poem which is, in the words of Newcomb, among

167 P. 172.
“the most resonant city verses of the period.” In this poem, the reader is brought into contact with the life of pleasure-seeking young people in the restless 1920s:

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

Millay describes the exhausting but exhilarating night life of two lovers. Millay not only presents another modern vehicle “the ferry” but details of quotidian life such as “a morning paper”, “apples and pears”, “all our money” and “subway fares”. The lovers’ encounter with and empathy for an impoverished working-class newspaper seller brings the poem “a strong realist streak.” Also, “by confronting it with such honesty, by imagining a utopian version of modernity and then demonstrating an acute yet empathetic understanding of the real thing, Millay created one of the richest social texts of the American New Verse.”

In the same collection, while grieving about the ending of a love affair, Millay depicts other aspects of the 1920s:

Only until this cigarette is ended,
A little moment at the end of all,
While on the floor the quiet ashes fall,
And in the firelight to a lance extended,
Bizarrely with the jazzing music blended,
The broken shadow dances on the wall.

Jazz was uniquely the music of the 1920s in America. Smoking was a typically “New Woman” fad. That the ashes kept falling on the floor seems to indicate the inevitable ending of a relationship. By juxtaposing images of cigarette smoking, ashes falling and music jazzing, Millay presents to the reader a scenario of modern love. Millay also modernises the sonnet by filling the traditional bottle with modern wine.

171 Millay, Collected Poems, p. 128.
172 Newcomb, How Did Poetry Survive?: The Making of American Verse, p. 247
173 P. 248.
In *Conversation at Midnight*, the reader is brought into close contact with a kaleidoscope of mass culture. For example, Lucas, a young man in the advertising business, speaks ironically of his business:

For whom do you think I write the red-hot, mother-love, body-odour, child-athlete, vitamins-C-and-D
Insufferable bilge that means bad-bread-and-worse-butter to me?
For the exception? – don’t be a fool.
For the boobs, God bless ’em, and may their cringing tribe increase!
“Give us this day our daily slop,” that’s the earnest prayer
Of the advertisement-reader. And the daily release
Is designed to fill that need. Do you think I buy
That lousy stuff I am lyrical about from nine to five? – not I!
Unless of course, I have to; the good stuff is all but crowded out and you can hardly find it.  

Advertisement is a window through which one gets glimpses of the modernity of city life. Besides, modern technology has brought conveniences to modern families. For example, labour-saving devices such as “oil-burning furnace”, “washing-machine”, “electric refrigerator” and “vacuum-cleaner” are inventions uniquely of the twentieth century. Moreover, new discoveries in Astronomy were also mentioned by Ricardo, the host at whose house the conversation takes place:

One man looks through a telescope at the spiral
Nebula in Andromeda; one
Photographs during eclipses the corona of the sun;
One sits in his study, calculates, computes,
Scribbles equations; refutes
A system of geometry.
Twelve men in all the world, let us concede,
Can read
His formulae.  

Very possibly, Ricardo, the host, was referring to Edwin Hubble and Albert Einstein who made revolutionary discoveries about space. Arguably what is more important about *Conversation at Midnight* is the fact that, as a book-length dialogue, it directly addresses the political issues of the period. Millay’s political consciousness and keenly

176 P. 16.
177 P. 72.
felt social responsibility were no less apparent than that of Auden. Approaching contemporary issues makes Millay’s poetry almost inescapably modern. Furthermore, Millay domesticated the sonnet by describing details of ordinary life in the country. In the sonnet sequence “Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree”, included in The Harp-Weaver and Other Poems (1923), domestic scenes are bountiful:

Then cautiously she pushed the cellar door
And stepped into the kitchen – saw the track
Of muddy rubber boots across the floor,
The many paper parcels in a stack
Upon the dresser; with accustomed care
Removed the twine and put the wrappings by,
Folded, and the bags flat, that with an air
Of ease had been whipped open skillfully,
To the gape of children. Treacherously dear
And simple was the dull, familiar task.
And so it was she came at length to ask:
How came the soda there? The sugar there?
Then the dream broke. Silent, she brought the mop,
And forced the trade-slip on the nail that held his razor strop.178

Her vocabulary such as “cellar”, “boots”, “kitchen”, “wrappings”, “soda”, “sugar”, “mop” and “razor” is typical of contemporary life. Allen Tate, in reviewing Millay’s 1928 sonnet collection Fatal Interview, made a general assessment of her sonnets by saying that Millay took “the vocabulary of nineteenth-century poetry as pure as you will find in Christina Rossetti...”179 Millay’s vocabulary about the city scenes and ordinary family life are anything but that of the nineteenth century.

2.332 A colloquial style

Millay adopts a largely conversational tone in her non-sonnet poems including free verse and other liberations of verse form. Millay’s colloquialism is many-faceted. She often starts a poem in the form of a dialogue. In “The Concert”, the presence of another speaker is strongly felt:

\[\text{178 Millay, Collected Poems, p. 611.}\]
\[\text{179 Allan Tate, “Miss Millay’s Sonnet”, in William B. Thesing, pp. 61-64, p. 62.}\]
No, I will go alone.
I will come back when it’s over.
Yes, of course I love you.
No, it will not be long.
Why may you not come with me? –
You are too much my lover.
You would put yourself
Between me and song.\textsuperscript{180}

In a different stanza, Millay plainly points out that the reason she refuses to go with her lover to the concert is that “You and I have nothing to do with music”.\textsuperscript{181} Similarly in “Spring Song”, the conversational tone is sonorous:

\begin{quote}
Want me to tell you? Think you can bear it?
Cover your eyes with your hand and hear it.
You know how cold the days are still?
And everybody saying how late the Spring is?
Well – cover your eyes with your hand – the thing is,
There isn’t going to be any Spring.
\end{quote}

\textit{No parking here! No parking here!}
\textit{They said to Spring: No parking here!} \textsuperscript{182}

Millay employs a modern expression “No parking here” to indicate the late coming of spring and brings the reader into close contact with the twentieth century. In order to convince her reader, she invites them to look around: “Come walk with me in the city gardens.”\textsuperscript{183} The invitational tone sounds almost like Eliot’s “Let us go then, you and I”.\textsuperscript{184} In the end, Millay voices her attitude toward the late Spring:

\begin{quote}
Oh, well, - hell, it’s all for the best,
She certainly made a lot of clutter,
Dropping petals under the trees,
Taking your mind off your bread and butter.
Anyhow, it’s nothing to me.
I can remember, so can you.\textsuperscript{185}
\end{quote}

Millay’s use of “oh, well” and “hell” to emphasise her attitude is a good example of common speech. Besides, “bread and butter” brings the reader closer to daily life.

\textsuperscript{180} Millay, \textit{Collected Poems}, p. 186.
\textsuperscript{181} P. 187.
\textsuperscript{182} P. 193.
\textsuperscript{183} P. 194.
\textsuperscript{184} Eliot, \textit{The Waste Land and Other Poems}, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{185} Millay, \textit{Collected Poems}, p. 194.
In the 1930s, Millay’s lines became more lengthy and conversational as in “Rendezvous”:

Yet here I am, having told you of my quarrel with the taxi-driver over a line of Milton, and you laugh; and you are you, none other. Your laughter pelts my skin with small delicious blows. But I am perverse: I wish you had not scrubbed – with pumice, I suppose – The tobacco stains from your beautiful fingers. And I wish I did not feel like your mother.\(^{186}\)

On many occasions, Millay’s materials are snatched directly from life. Scratches of quotidian life such as a quarrel with a taxi driver not only find their way into Millay’s poems, but make the immediacy of experience and intensity of existence strongly felt. Besides, Millay’s quarrel with the taxi driver about a line of Milton, her lover’s laugh over her argumentative innocence and her seemingly “perverse” wish combine to enliven a charming personality carved by intellect, wit and humour.

### 2.333 Millay’s Transition between old and new

In the early years of her career, Millay’s language was a mixture of new and old. Her vocabulary includes city symbols such as newspapers, subways, ferries and buildings. For example in the 1917 “City Trees”:

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The trees along this city street,
Save for the traffic and the trains,
Would make a sound as thin and sweet
As trees in country lanes\(^{187}\)
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In the same poem, Millay also mentioned the “shrieking city air”. Apparently, she was a little nostalgic about her past life in the country. In the 1920 “Exiled”, she compared her beach experience in the country and her life in the city:

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Always I climbed the wave at morning,
Shook the sand from my shoes at night,
That now am caught beneath great buildings,
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\(^{186}\) Pp. 340-341. 
\(^{187}\) P. 54.
Stricken with noise, confused with light.\textsuperscript{188}

The skyscrapers, traffic noises and city lights created a dazzling kaleidoscope which contrasts strikingly with the simplicity of life near the beach. However, alongside the city imagery, her archaism was also present. As the poem “Renascence” indicates:

\begin{verbatim}
Thou canst not move across the grass
But my quick eyes will see Thee pass,
Nor speak, however silently,
But my hushed voice will answer Thee.
I know the path that tells Thy way
Through the cool eve of every day;
God, I can push the grass apart
And lay me finger on Thy heart!\textsuperscript{189}
\end{verbatim}

“Renascence” is over two hundred lines and the archaic lines above were only occasional. The same is also true with her early sonnets:

\begin{verbatim}
Thou art not lovelier than lilacs, - no
Nor honeysuckle; thou art not more fair
Than small white single poppies, - I can bear
Thy beauty; though I bend before thee, though\textsuperscript{190}
\end{verbatim}

This is the first sonnet Millay published in her first collection. The archaic use of words such as “thou”, “thy” and “thee” in her sonnets was dropped immediately in the following sonnets. In her 1928 collection \textit{The Buck in the Snow}, her archaism seems to surface again unexpectedly:

\begin{verbatim}
Life, were thy pains as are the pains of hell,
So hardly to be borne, yet to be borne,
And all thy boughs more grim with wasp and thorn
Than armoured bough stood over; too chill to spell
With the warm tongue, and sharp with broken shell
Thy ways, whereby in wincing haste forlorn\textsuperscript{191}
\end{verbatim}

It is worth pointing out that from the late 1910s to 1920s, archaism only occasionally appeared in her short lyrics and sonnets. Her diction in the early years is both colloquial and literary. The colloquialism is best demonstrated in her free verse poems; her literary diction is indicated by her occasional use of old expressions. As “Mariposa”

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{188} P. 105.  \\
\textsuperscript{189} P. 13.  \\
\textsuperscript{190} P. 561.  \\
\textsuperscript{191} P. 623.
\end{flushright}
shows:

Suffer me to take your hand.
Suffer me to cherish you
Till the dawn is in the sky. 192

Also, very rarely, in her 1923 collection, a sonnet starts with “I pray you if you love me, bear my joy”. 193 Both “suffer me” and “I pray you” are old-fashioned. In Millay’s reputed 1928 sonnet sequence Fatal Interview, she sometimes reminds one of the seventeenth century poets:

Olympian gods, mark now my bedside lamp
Blown out; and be advised too late that he
Whom you call sire is stolen into the camp
Of warring Earth, and lies abed with me. 194

But almost simultaneously, her tone could be rather colloquial:

Love is not all: it is not meat nor drink
Nor slumber nor a roof against the rain;
Nor yet a floating spar to men that sink
And rise and sink and rise and sink again;
Love can not fill the thickened lung with breath,
Nor clean the blood, nor set the fractured bone;
Yet many a man is making friends with death
Even as I speak, for lack of love alone. 195

To conclude, Millay’s archaism was more obvious in her first collection but dwindled drastically in the following collections in which the number of free verse poems was increasing steadily. Compared with her other poems including free verse, her sonnets, though increasingly conversational over the years, were less colloquial. In A History of Modern Poetry, David Perkins commented on the poems Millay wrote as a school girl and concluded that her style “divorced poetry from contemporary speech and ordinary reality.” 196 Perkins’s comment was based on Millay’s first collection Renascence and Other Poems and he obviously noticed Millay’s early archaism. But it sounds almost like a general appraisal of Millay’s style because Perkins only chose to comment on

192 P. 99.
193 P. 588.
194 P. 641.
195 P. 659.
196 Perkins, A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode, p. 373.
her first collection. The following collections which include free verse and more conversational sonnets were simply bypassed. The mixture of old and new and the transition from literary to conversational make it hard to draw a conclusion about Millay’s language.

2.34 Millay’s Love Poetry: making love modern

Previous scholarship on Millay’s love poetry is almost entirely focused on the sonnet; little is said of poems in other forms. A disadvantage of this tendency lies in the fact that negative criticism about her love sonnets is usually taken as an overall assessment of her love poetry. A more sensible way to assess her love poetry is to take into account the sonnet and other forms including free verse so as to make possible a broader view of her love poetry. Millay’s stance on love is essentially different from that of nineteenth century women poets such as Christina Rossetti, Elizabeth Browning and Emily Dickinson. In nineteenth century women’s poetry, love is usually conceived as eternal which represents the idealism of romantic love. Conspicuously, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “I shall but love thee better after death” is representative of this idealism. In the early decades of the twentieth century, due to the impact of the Suffrage movement and the First World War, the concept of love changed drastically. With the emergence of the “New Woman”, the free love ethos was embraced by some; the concept of permanent love was abandoned. As a typical “New Woman”, Millay never believed that romantic love would last long. Floyd Dell, Millay’s former lover, also confirmed this about Millay: “She had a deep conviction that for people like ourselves love could not be permanent but should be cherished while it lasted.”

In the nineteenth century, the concept of eternal love was closely connected with sacredness and faith. In the twentieth century, love could be playful and faithless. As

“Thursday” displays:

And if I loved you Wednesday,
   Well, what is that to you?
I do not love you Thursday –
   So much is true.

And why you come complaining
   Is more than I can see.
I loved you Wednesday, - yes – but what
   Is that to me? 199

The playful tone reveals the fickleness of the speaker. Love in her eyes is more like a harmless game of which one may get bored easily. In order to maintain the freshness of passion, “faith” must be forgotten:

Oh, think not I am faithful to a vow!
   Faithless am I save to love’s self alone.
   Were you not lovely I would leave you now: 200

Sometimes, the speaker even sets a time limit to a love affair long before it is actually ended. It seems that the speaker is in close control of her busy love schedule:

I shall forget you presently, my dear,
   So make the most of this, your little day,
Your little month, your little half a year,
   Ere I forget, or die, or move away,
And we are done forever; by and by 201

Millay’s attitude toward love is not only playful, but ironical, which conveys a pessimistic perception of modern love:

If you entreat me with your loveliest lie
   I will protest you with my favourite vow.
I will indeed that love were longer-lived,
   And oaths were not so brittle as they are, 202

The conservative New Critic Allen Tate commented on Millay’s A Few Figs from Thistles (1920) and Second April (1921) in which the above poems were included, that morally, “it did perceptible damage to our young American womanhood, whose virgin

199 Millay, Collected Poems, p. 129.
200 P. 570.
201 P. 571.
202 P. 571.
impatience competed noisily with the Armistice and the industrial boom.”203 The damage Tate complained about effectively proves the modernity of Millay’s attitude toward love. The modern sensibility Millay expresses in the above poems also disqualifies what Herbert Marshall McLuhan said about Millay in 1945 that Millay “has never been anything but a purveyor of cliche sentiment. She is an exhibitionist with no discoverable sensibility of her own.”204

I irony is a technique Millay employs frequently all through her career. Norman A. Brittin called Millay an “indignant satirist”. 205 Colin Falck notes that “irony was always a deep need of her nature – and yet she never at any time succumbed to the temptation to allow it to become the deepest need of all. Her satirical intelligence was as sharp as Robinson’s or Frost’s or Eliot’s.”206 In the late thirties, Millay reiterates the transience of love in “Pretty Love, I Must Outlive You” and her irony is piercing:

Parrots, tortoises and redwoods  
Live a longer life than men do,  
Men a longer life than dogs do,  
Dogs a longer life than love does.207

J. D. McClatchy remarks that Millay’s “sense of irony” was “stinging”.208 However, one of the New Critics, Cleanth Brooks, oddly concluded in 1932 that the reason that Millay failed to be a major poet was that she lacked irony: “Miss Millay has not grown up.”209 Brooks’ comment does not hold water. Perhaps the transience of love is due to lack of faith on both sides. In “Theme and Variations”, Millay points out this “unspoken pact”:

We meet and part;  
Our talk is all of heres and nows,  
Our conduct likewise; in no act  
Is any future, any past;  
Under our sly, unspoken pact,  
I know with whom I saw you last,  
But I say nothing; and you know

203 Tate, p. 62.  
207 Millay, Collected Poems, p. 322.  
208 McClatchy, p. 47.  
At six-fifteen to whom I go.\textsuperscript{210}

Both the lovers are not faithful. However, Millay does not impose any criticism. The landscape of faithless love is a typical one in twentieth-century poetry and culture. This poem was published in her 1939 collection \textit{Huntsman, What Quarry?} Auden wrote similarly in the late 1930s in “Lullaby”: “Lay your sleeping head, my love / Human on my faithless arm; /.../ But in my arms till break of day / Let the living creature lie”.\textsuperscript{211} Furthermore, in the nineteenth century, love was considered not only eternal but beautiful as Christina Rossetti exclaimed in “Love” in 1847:

\begin{verbatim}
Love is all happiness, love is all beauty,
Love is the crown of flaxen heads and hoary;
Love is the only everlasting duty;\textsuperscript{212}
\end{verbatim}

By contrast, Millay sometimes found the picture of love in the early twentieth century to be repulsive and ugly:

\begin{verbatim}
Love is not blind. I see with single eye
Your ugliness and other women’s grace.
I know the imperfection of your face, -
The eyes too wide apart, the brow too high \textsuperscript{213}
\end{verbatim}

The tone of this sonnet is sarcastic. Cary Nelson considers irony a salient feature of Millay’s sonnet as he remarks that Millay regularly published “articulate, ironic, and sometimes antiromantic sonnets.”\textsuperscript{214} In the nineteenth century, poets idealized, sanctified and eternalised love to such an extent that sex was a taboo in poetry. If chaste love is connected with beauty, sex must be associated with ugliness and writing about sex must seem appallingly obscene to them or to their audiences. Christina Rossetti and Mrs. Browning never wrote about sex, while the seemingly lady-like Emily Dickinson actually had a tempestuous mind and was daring enough to write, however implicitly, about sexual love:

\begin{verbatim}
Wild nights – Wild nights!
Were I with thee
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{210} Millay, \textit{Collected Poems}, p. 360.
\textsuperscript{211} Auden, p. 107.
\textsuperscript{212} William Michael Rossetti (ed.)\textit{The Poetical Works of Christina Georgina Rossetti} (London: Macmillan,1911) p.97
\textsuperscript{213} Millay, \textit{Collected Poems}, p. 586.
Wild nights should be
Our luxury!

Futile – the winds –
To a Heart in port –
Done with the Compass –
Done with the Chart!

Rowing in Eden –
Ah – the Sea!
Might I but moor – tonight –
In thee! 215

Dickinson wrote about sex but only metaphorically. Millay, on the other hand, wrote openly about sexuality:

What lips my lips have kissed, and where and why,
I have forgotten, and what arms have lain
Under my head till morning; but the rain
Is full of ghosts tonight, that tap and sigh
Upon the glass and listen for reply, 216

Millay is daring enough not only to refer directly to physical love but to confess her countless love affairs. Millay’s description of her sexuality is both sensual and sensuous. An anonymous reviewer for a British periodical, the Morning Post (London), remarked in 1931 that Millay’s sonnets, with its “pagan frankness and unreserve” would have shocked Christina Rossetti.217 Furthermore, Millay wrote directly about sex and lust in terms of her poetry:

I too beneath your moon, almighty Sex,
Go forth at nightfall crying like a cat,
Leaving the lofty tower I labored at
For birds to foul and boys and girls to vex
With tittering chalk; and you, and the long necks
Of neighbours sitting where their mothers sat
Are well aware of shadowy this and that
In me, that’s neither noble nor complex.
Such as I am, however, I have brought
To what it is, this tower; it is my own;
Though it was reared To Beauty, it was wrought

217 Cited by Thesing, p. 7.
From what I had to build with: honest bone
Is there, and anguish; pride; and burning thought;
And lust is there, and nights not spent alone.  

Millay is perhaps the first woman poet in the twentieth-century to lay bare the biological nature of sexual love, with acute awareness that writing about sexual love in poetry was considered profane in her time but she did not give a damn. In this Petrarchan sonnet, Millay not only daringly admitted her unquenchable, even animalistic, lust for sex, she also pointed out its significance to her poetry. Apparently, “lofty tower” means poetry, in which Millay felt compelled to bring lust and sex because she had to be honest with herself. Meanwhile, she was well aware that traditionally poetry was supposed to present Beauty. However, Millay chose to live in real life rather than in a dream or her imagination. Roughly from 1913 to 1923, Millay had countless relationships with men and women. After she graduated from Vassar College in 1917, she moved to Greenwich Village in New York and led the life of a bohemian. Sex became one indispensable part of her life and, not surprisingly, found its way into her poetry. Millay’s distrust of eternal love, her playfulness, irony and outspokenness about sex make her poetry essentially different from nineteenth century women’s poetry. Allen Tate, however, commented in 1928 that Millay’s poetry “does not define the break with the nineteenth century ... she foreshadowed an age without bringing it to terms”.  

This is far from the case.

2.35 Millay and Modernism

2.351 The issue with Form

A phenomenon in Millay scholarship remains that her opponents as well as proponents, more often than not, put too much emphasis on the differences between Millay’s poetry and that of the Modernist poets. As far as poetic form is concerned,

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219 Tate, p. 62.
one usually gets the impression that Modernism is for free verse and against traditional form such as the sonnet. This is too simple to be the case. On the one hand, Modernist poetics do not necessarily demand rejection of the sonnet, nor were all the Modernist poets against the sonnet. On the other hand, Richard Aldington remarked in 1915 that, “We do not insist upon ‘free-verse’ as the only method of writing poetry.” More conspicuously, Eliot and Pound mounted a counter movement to free verse in 1917 and Eliot as a critic also openly told against free verse in the 1920s and 1930s. As a result, in the 1920s and 1930s free verse “was less generally employed by sophisticated poets, though it continued to be a favorite form of amateurs.” The reasons for the disfavour of free verse are summarized by David Perkins:

In part, this was a reaction against the widespread advocacy of it in the 1910s, which had soon become common place. In part, it was brought about by the flaccid dullness to which the form lent itself in the hands of minor artists. In part, it was a result of the association of free verse with Imagism, so that when the latter fell into disfavor, so did the former. In part, it was a result of the influence of The Waste Land, since its first great poem of the Modernist movement had not adopted free verse but had used traditional meters in a quite irregular way.

Had Eliot and Pound lived long enough to see the dominance of free verse today, it would have surprised them. But this is a different subject. When Allen Tate reviewed Millay’s sonnet collection Fatal Interview in 1928, however partial his criticism of her vocabulary may seem, he did not condemn the sonnet as a valid poetic form. On the contrary, he praised her skilful use of the Shakespearean sonnet:

Form first to last very sonnet has its special rhythm and sharply defined imagery; they move like a smooth machine, but not machine-like, under the hand of a masterly technician. The best sonnets would adorn any of the great English sequences. There is some interesting analysis to be made of Miss Millay’s skillful use of the Shakespearean form, whose difficult final couplet she has mastered, and perhaps is alone in having mastered since Shakespeare.

Enough evidence indicates that although Modernist poets and critics as a whole did not openly invalidate traditional form such as the sonnet, their attitude toward traditional

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220 Aldington, p. vi.
221 Perkins, A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode, p. 316.
223 Tate, p. 64.
form was not necessarily encouraging. Williams Carlos Williams once remarked that, “Forcing twentieth-century America into a sonnet – gosh, how I hate sonnets – is like putting a crab into a square box. You’ve got to cut his legs to make him fit. When you get through, you don’t have a crab anymore.” 224 Nevertheless, a major problem with Millay’s opponents such as the New Critics lies in the fact that they did not comment on Millay’s free verse poems at all. Mentioning her free verse would run the risk of emphasising Millay’s affinity to Modernism. On the other hand, Millay’s proponents also seek to highlight or even exaggerate the differences between Millay and the Modernist poets. Patricia A. Klemans remarked in 1979 that, “Millay was writing perfect love sonnets at a time when love seemed trite and the sonnet was ‘out.’” 225 This comment is very problematic. It is worth noting that Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and Marianne Moore’s “American Love” are poems about love and that e. e. Cummings wrote erotic love sonnets. Moore also experimented with the sonnet and her practice seems to “occupy the very edge of the form.” 226 As a result, both sides failed to mention Millay’s free verse poems. Millay’s free verse poems and poems which reflect liberations of the verse form are important in that in these poems, Millay adopted a conspicuously colloquial style and a modern vocabulary. By contrast, the colloquialism and modern vocabulary in her sonnets are not as striking. Besides, her diction and vocabulary in the sonnets suggest affinities with the Nineteenth century to a certain extent.

2.352 Millay and the New Critics

A major reason that Millay fell into critical oblivion in the 1940s is that the New Critics dominated the American academies. Colin Falco implies that Millay was

226 Burt & Mikics, p. 22.
buried by New Critics who “needed to get modernism established.”227 The majority of New Critics such as Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren all attacked Millay. The negative criticism they launched needs qualification. Louis Filler describes the habitual New Critic’s strategy: “to pick apart, word by word, a few chosen poems, then set bleeding and mutilated passages beside those of poets he admires.”228 In 1928, when Allen Tate reviewed Millay’s sonnet collection Fatal Interview, he quoted only one sonnet:

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Oh, sleep forever in the Latmian cave
Mortal Endymion, darling of the moon!
Her silver garments by the senseless wave
Shouldered and dropped and on the shingle strewn.229
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Then he came to the conclusion that Millay took the vocabulary of the nineteenth century. Had he chosen a different sonnet in the same collection, his conclusion would have been substantially challenged:

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Since I cannot persuade you from this mood
Of pale preoccupation with the dead,
Not for my comfort nor for your own good
Shift your concern to living bones instead.230
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Or another one:

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I drank and thirsted still; but I surmise
My kisses now are sand against your mouth,
Teeth in your palm and pennies on your eyes.
Speak but one cruel word, to shame my tears.231
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Even if her diction sometimes is reminiscent of nineteenth century poetry, her sentiment is uniquely that of the “New Woman”:

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I know my mind and I have made my choice;
Not from your temper does my doom depend;
Love me or love me not, you have no voice
In this, which is my portion to the end.
Your presence and your favours, the full part
That you could give, you now can take away.232
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229 Collected Poems, p. 681.
230 P. 635.
231 P. 668.
The lines above are colloquial enough except for the second. The resolute tone reveals a deep feminist consciousness. After Tate drew a hasty decision, he immediately compared Millay with Eliot: “Eliot penetrated to the fundamental structure of the nineteenth century mind and showed its breakdown. Miss Millay assumed no such profound alteration of the intelligence because, I suppose, not being an intellect but a sensibility, she was not aware of it.” Another problem with Tate’s comment is that he exaggerated the Modernist break with tradition as he complained that Millay’s poetry “does not define the break with the nineteenth century. This task was left to the school of Eliot”. But the truth is that Eliot was quite open to tradition and he even emphasised the importance of tradition in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”. Besides, Eliot’s irregular employment of traditional metre in many of his poems is apparent. In his notorious sexist essay “The Poet as Woman”, John Crowe Ransom accused Millay of “deficiency in masculinity”. As previously discussed, Cleanth Brooks unjustly criticised Millay for lack of irony. In my view, the fact that the New Critics picked up Millay as the most conspicuous target to attack only verifies the predominant place Millay occupied in the period 1910s-1930s.

2.353 Millay’s attack on Eliot and Pound

There is no evidence to indicate that Millay was consciously anti-Modernist from the 1910s to 1930s. Given the fact that Millay had dominated the American public for over two decades, she had no need to bother with the Modernist coterie whose difficult poetry was hardly attracted to the reading public. But as things changed in the 1940s when Eliot won the Nobel Prize and his authority reached its zenith, Millay suffered critical negligence. This was the time when she felt the need to launch her attack on Eliot, Pound and their Modernism. In her letter to Cass Canfield in 1949, who was board chairman of Harper & Brothers from 1945-55, Millay mentioned that

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232 P. 674.
233 Tate, p. 62.
she was working on a satire against Eliot:

Quite apart from my new poetry of which I was speaking, I have been recently engaged in writing – after having read a thoughtful review by Lewis Gannett concerning a late book by T. S. Eliot, and more recently after reading the brilliant and truly witty, although sometimes I thought, in some ways overstressed articles by Robert Hillyer in the Saturday Review of Literature, against the awarding of the Bollingen Award to Ezra Pound – a satire in verse against T. S. Eliot. In this collection of poems, of which I think there will be about twenty … there is nothing coarse, obscene, as there sometimes is in the work of Auden and of Pound, and nothing so silly as the childish horsing around of Eliot, when he is trying to be funny. He has no sense of humour, and so he is not yet a true Englishman. There is, I think, in these poems of mine against Eliot nothing which would be considered abusive: they are murderous. I am enclosing copies of several of them, including the first one and the last one, which I should like you to see.²³⁵

In my view, Millay’s attack on Eliot has more to do with the fall of her reputation and less to do with Modernist poetics. When New Critics helped create the poetic taste which features Eliot’s poetry, Millay’s rage was hard to hide:

It is the fashion now to wave aside
As tedious, obvious, vacuous, trivial, trite,
All things which do not tickle, tease, excite
To some subversion, or in verbiage hide
Intent, or mock, or with hot sauce provide
A dish to prick the thickened appetite;
Straightforwardness is wrong, evasion right;
It is correct, de rigueur, to deride.

What funny wits these modern wags expose,
For all their versatility: Voltaire,
Who wore to bed a night-cap, and would close,
In fear of drafts, all windows, could declare
In antique stuffiness, a phrase that blows
Still through men’s smoky minds, and clears the air.²³⁶

In the octave, Millay, in favour of accessibility and directness, was mainly against the difficulty and obscurity of Modernist poetics. In the sestet, she gave credit to her employment of traditional form by claiming that the bottle was old but the wine tastes just fine. Millay actually spoke for a large number of poets who adopted traditional form from the 1910s to 1930s. In The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism, Pericles

²³⁵ Millay, Letters of Edna St Vincent Millay, p. 353.
²³⁶ Millay, Collected Poems, p. 725.
Lewis comments positively on traditional form that, “Not all modern poetry abandoned formal structure, however. For some of the greatest modern poets, the challenge was to use the traditional forms in ways appropriate to modern content.”\textsuperscript{237}
CHAPTER THREE: BRITISH POETRY

3.1 British Literary Scene: 1910s-1930s

3.11 Poetic forces

In the 1910s and 1920s, there were various poetic forces at work in Britain. Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) remained perhaps the only major poet who stuck to traditional form and metre and outright rejected some new trends in poetry such as Imagism and Modernism. Timothy Webb comments on Hardy’s achievement that, “For all his unfashionable awkwardness, his rejection of literary experiment and his homage to Tennyson rather than T. S. Eliot or the precepts of Modernism, Hardy finally evolved into one of the most distinctive poetic voices of the twentieth century.”¹ Robert Bridges (1844-1930) and the much younger W. B. Yeats (1865-1939) gradually assimilated some Modernist elements. Although Yeats was more or less influenced by Modernist poetics and considerably revised his early poems, his attitude toward Modernism was basically negative. Like Hardy, Yeats rejected free verse as he once told Pound, “vers libre is prose”.² Even when he did write some free verse poems, he employed the form only to dismiss it “because he associated free verse with dejection and sterility.”³ More conspicuously, his famous “The Second Coming” is “unflinchingly modern; but it deliberately rejects any temptation to be Modernist.”⁴ Even by 1936, he did not think highly of Eliot as he remarked in the introduction to The Oxford Book of Modern Verse: 1892-1935: “Eliot has produced his great effect upon his generation because he has described men and women that get out of bed or into it from mere habit; in describing this life that has lost heart his own art seems grey, cold, dry.”⁵ His dubious, if not entirely negative, attitude toward Modernism resulted in the fact that he included more poems by W. J. Turner, a Georgian poet, than by Eliot. Perhaps the fact that Yeats, rather than Eliot, won the Nobel Prize in 1928 signifies the

³ Longenbach, Stone Cottage, p. 214.
⁴ Corcoran, p. 19.
poetic taste in the first decades of the twentieth century.

On the other hand, a poetic revival was already in the air in the British literary scene by 1911, which, according to Robert H. Ross, was witnessed in “the publication of Masefield’s *Everlasting Mercy*, the seminal work of the new realistic school.” Moreover, the publication of *Georgian Poetry* in 1912 aroused enormous public interest and Georgian poets were soon identified as the new poets in England. In the same year, Pound initiated Imagism with Richard Aldington and H. D. as a poetic movement in London. A few years later, Edith Sitwell launched a counter anthology *Wheels* (1916-1921) in an effort to attack Georgian poetry and attract critical attention to herself as a Modernist. However, both Imagism and *Wheels* failed to attract public interest; their influence was limited to a small circle of like-minded poets and critics.

In the 1910s and 1920s, it was Hardy, Bridges, Yeats and the Georgians, rather than Pound and Sitwell, who dominated the reading public and created the critical taste. Perkins’s comment on the two decades seems pertinent: “in England poets still generally derived their technique, subject matter, and sensibility from nineteenth-century precedents. The tradition a young poet would be expected to assimilate and carry forward included the Romantics, Tennyson, Hardy, Yeats, and the Georgians.”

### 3.12 Transition: Victorian to Modern

In literary studies, the urge to highlight a complete break with the past too often runs the risk of oversimplifying the complicated nature of literary activities of both the past and the present. A discreet emphasis on the intertwining connections as well as the indisputable differences between the past and the present presents a picture approximately identical to historical authenticity. English poetry of the early twentieth century evolved from Victorian writing modes; naturally, poetry of the period at issue

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7 *Imagism* was actually started and theorised by T. E. Hulme but Pound named it as a movement.
carried forward some aspects of the Victorian poetry. The dominant poets of the period 1910s-1920s had one thing in common: the gradual transition of their poetics from Victorian to Modern. Hardy was entirely immune to Modernism and modernised his poetry in his own right. Georgian poets as a whole agreed with some but disagreed with aspects of Imagism while striving to achieve their poetic ideal. The influences of Victorian poetics on modern poetry are at least two-faceted. On the one hand, Victorian poetry had already undergone drastic changes in language, subject matter and form. Gerard Manley Hopkins, an innovative Victorian poet, “became an inspirational model, if not always a direct or immediate poetic influence, on English poetry after the First World War.”

Also, as Alison G. Sulloway points out, in the 1880s, “Many of Hopkins’s complaints about his fellow poets centred upon what he considered their archaic language and their thoroughly outmoded treatment of outmoded subjects.” Hopkins’s experiment was not exceptional. A degree of colloquial speech was already noticeable in Tennyson’s In Memoriam. Many aspects of modern poetry including Modernist poetry were conceived or originated in the Victorian period. In “Dover Beach”, Matthew Arnold’s irregular use of rhyme and metre makes the poem resemble a free verse poem. As such, the experimental edge of Victorian poetry was carried forward by modern and Modernist poets in the early twentieth century. On the other hand, the weaknesses of Victorian poetry were also preserved by twentieth century modern poets to various degrees. For instance, the prevalent use of decorative adjectives and presentation of a genteel sensibility were considered a distinctive Victorian disease by poets, modern or Modernist. In the twentieth century, in revolt against the previous period, a term “Victorianism” was often employed by poets and critics to attack the flaws of Victorian poetics. For example, Yeats commented on the beginning of the twentieth century in the introduction to his 1936 Oxford Book of Modern Verse:

Then in 1900 everybody got down off his stilts; henceforth nobody drank absinthe with his black coffee; nobody went mad; nobody committed suicide; nobody joined the Catholic church; or if they did I have forgotten.

9 Corcoran, p. 11.
Victorianism had been defeated ...\textsuperscript{11}

Yeats, with his great sense of humour, poked fun at the social changes around 1900, but the term “Victorianism” was adopted by later critics to condemn anything that was considered conventional. As a result, the experimental momentum of Victorian poetry was largely bypassed and its flaws were overemphasised. Eventually, the term evolved into a derogatory word to dismiss Victorian poetics as a whole.

3.13 Victorianism: A controversial term

The criticism of early twentieth-century English poetry would be groundless and unthinkable without the controversial term “Victorianism”, sometimes “Victorian”. Modern poets and critics, Modernist or otherwise, tended to take advantage of this convenient label to voice modernity. Victorianism, like other terms such as “Romanticism” and “Modernism”, is widely used but only vaguely defined. Jerome Hamilton Buckley pointed out that into the twentieth century the term “defined ambiguously if at all, persisted, a shield for the conservative and a target for the modernist.”\textsuperscript{12} In 1914, Richard Aldington attempted to describe in Egoist the poetic flaws of the Victorian period without employing the term:

However often gentlemen from Highgate and the adjacent suburbs may write and protest it is nevertheless true that the majority of the poetry of the last century had nothing to do with life and very little to do with poetry. There was a plague of prettiness and a plague of pomposity and several other minor diseases – such as over-much suavity, the cult of decorated adjectives. And except for Browning and a little of Swinburne there was no energy which was not bombast, no rendering of life without an Anglican moral, no aesthetic without aesthetic cant.\textsuperscript{13}

Aldington considered the poetry of the previous century was seriously flawed especially in terms of its decorative vocabulary and its clinging to morality. For one thing, the glittering style and the genteel sensibility made abundant adjectives a necessity and pushed poetry far away from reality. For another, he pointed out the

\textsuperscript{13} Cited by Ross, p. 72.
moral conservatism and aesthetic fatigue of the Victorian period. Similarly, Pound in his 1915 letter to Harriet Monroe commented on how to avoid Victorianism:

Objectivity and again objectivity, and expression: no hindside-beforeness, no straddled adjectives ... no Tennysonianness of speech; nothing – nothing, that you couldn’t, in some circumstances, in the stress of some emotion, actually say. Every literaryism, every book word, fritters away a scrap of the reader’s patience, a scrap of his sense of your sincerity.\(^{14}\)

Both Pound and Aldington voiced their repulsion from decorative adjectives and poetic diction. Pound, in particular, emphasised colloquialism which is targeted at literariness. Although Pound and Aldington rightly pointed out the weak aspects of Victorian poetics, an indiscriminate impression of the Victorian period can be misleading. Joseph E. Baker summarised the stereotypical views on the Victorian poetics in terms of its emphasis on religion, morality and propriety:

To talk of duty, honor, the obligations of being a gentleman, the responsibilities of matrimony, or the sacredness of religious belief is to be Victorian. The Victorians were so bent on being moral that they ignored the unpleasant aspects of life. They had no use for art which was not ethical; they displayed, it is alleged, an embarrassing familiarity with the purposes of the Almighty... Victorian stuffiness, Victorian decorum, Victorian prudery, Victorian solemnity! \(^{15}\)

Baker listed the prejudiced impression of Victorian literature only to invalidate it. Under scrutiny, more and more scholars were aware of the misleading nature of the term “Victorian”. As M. H. Abrams remarks on the Victorian period (1930-1901):

It was an age of immense, variegated, and often self-critical literary activity. The frequent derogatory connotations of the term “Victorian” in our time – sexual priggishness, narrow-mindedness, complacency, the stress on respectability – are indeed based on attitudes and values expressed by many members of the rapidly expanding Victorian middle class; but current attacks on such Victorian attributes merely echo the attacks voiced by a number of writers within the age itself. \(^{16}\)

With the experimentalism and self-criticism of the Victorian period more openly discussed, the myth around the term “Victorianism” should be clarified. However biased it may have seemed, the term had figured significantly in early

\(^{14}\) *The Letters of Ezra Pound*, p. 91.


twentieth-century literary studies. The term also figured significantly in Australian poetic studies of the same period against which a bunch of poets tried to establish modern poetics. Without the parameter, the momentum of modern and Modernist poetics might not be effectively felt.

3.14 Georgian poetry

In the 1910s, Georgian poetry was widely regarded as the emerging new poetry. Although Pound declared the Imagist movement in London in 1912, it was essentially an American enterprise and its influence was limited to the Modernist circle. It is proper to say that Georgian poetry coexisted with Imagist poetry as the modern modes in England. As co-existing competitive forces, Georgian poetry actually had much in common with aspects of Pound’s Imagism as Ross points out:

To be ‘Georgian’ in 1912-1915 meant also to share in the prevailing anti-Victorianism of the age. When Ezra Pound claimed in 1912 that ‘modern’ poetry must ‘move against’ Victorian ‘poppycock’ – that it must no longer ‘try to seem forcible by rhetorical din, and luxurious riot’, must have ‘fewer painted adjectives impeding the shock and stroke of it’, and must be ‘direct, free from emotional slither’ – he was speaking not only for the Leftist poets but for most of the Georgians as well. The Georgians, too, resolved to liberate their poetry from what they considered the two major vices: Victorian lushness – the ‘cult of the decorated adjective’, as Richard Aldington called it and fin de siècle enervation. This resolve was reflected in the tone, form, and diction of much of Georgian verse.

In their resolve to get rid of “painted adjectives” and “fin de siècle enervation” and to “record actual personal experience in language close to common speech, Georgian poets are most in accord with Imagism. The poetic revival felt by many also found its expression in the preface to the first volume of Georgian Poetry when Edward Marsh remarked that, “This volume is issued in the belief that English poetry is now once again putting on a new strength and beauty.”

D. H. Lawrence also enthusiastically praised the new air in Georgian poetry in his essay “The Georgian Renaissance”:

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17 Ross, p. 141.
We are waking up after a night of oppressive dreams. The nihilists, the intellectual, hopeless people – Ibsen, Flaubert, Thomas Hardy – represent the dream we are waking from. It was a dream of demolition. Nothing was, but was nothing. Everything was taken from us. And now our lungs are full of new air, and our eyes see it is morning, but we have not forgotten the terror of the night. We dreamed we were falling through space into nothingness, and the anguish of it leaves us rather eager.\textsuperscript{19}

As co-existing new poetic forces, Georgian poetry was obviously more competitive than Imagist poetry as Peter Childs comments that:

The first significant collection of twentieth-century poets was Edward Marsh’s ultraEnglish \textit{Georgian Poetry} 1911-1922, soon followed by Ezra Pound’s unEnglish \textit{Des Imagistes} in 1914. These two volumes defined the poles of poetry for the next fifteen years, ranging from the innovative but never widely popular work of the modernists to the largely unexceptionable but also unexceptional verse of the Georgians, whose continuing appeal can be gauged by the fact that Sir Algernon Methuen’s predominantly \textit{Georgian Anthology of Modern Verse} was reprinted nearly eighty times between 1921 and the end of the World War II.\textsuperscript{20}

Enough evidence indicates that Georgian poetry was not only the “new” poetry of the early twentieth century, but the dominant writing mode made possible by the embrace of a large reading public.

\section*{3.15 Georgian Division}

However, the poetic ideal of Georgian poetry was best represented by Robert Frost who then lived in London and was quite popular with Georgian poets. Frost was once recommended to Marsh to be included in Georgian Poetry while Marsh only wished to represent British poets. Had he been included, Frost probably would be considered the best Georgian poet who represented the strengths of Georgian poetics. Perkins confirms that, “Frost had this success in the Georgian poetic world was not accidental, for in many respects his verse shared the Georgian sensibility and realized its poetic ideal.”\textsuperscript{21} However, similar to the short-lived Imagism, the vigour of

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{19} Cited by Ross, p. 39.\\
\textsuperscript{21} Perkins, \textit{A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode}, p. 230.
\end{flushleft}
Georgian ideals did not last very long. In the last two anthologies, Georgian poetry was sliding into another direction. Robert H. Ross pointed out that Georgian poets should be divided into two groups, the Georgians, who featured mainly in the first two volumes, and the Neo-Georgians, who featured mainly in the last two volumes. The Georgians included such poets as Walter de la Mare, W. H. Davies, Harold Monro, Lascelles Abercrombie, Wilfrid Gibson, Rupert Brooke; the Neo-Georgians included the Squirearchy: J. C. Squire, Edward Shanks, John Freeman and W. J. Turner. It is worth notice that most of the negative criticism was initially directed at the Neo-Georgians. Although known as the bloodiest gravedigger of Georgian poets, John Middleton Murry took care to reserve eight Georgians while he condemned all the Neo-Georgians. Similarly, Edith Sitwell’s attack against Georgian poets was focused on the Neo-Georgians, especially J. C. Squire.22 Also, Eliot’s criticism that “all the writers have in common is the quality of pleasantness … the Georgians caress everything they touch…”23 was directed specifically at the third volume, but his criticism was picked up by other critics as Eliot’s criticism of Georgian poets in general. To say the least, Eliot’s accusation of “pleasantness” was not applicable to the second volume in which realism was the dominant writing mode.

The major flaw of the Neo-Georgians lies in the fact that they actually betrayed the poetic ideal the Georgians set out to achieve which was against Victorian painted adjectives and the ennui of the fin de siècle. The bloodless, moon-washed, over-decorated verse of the Neo-Georgians made one realize that Victorianism24 was back and fin de siècle enervation was kicking. The distinction between the Georgians and the neo-Georgians is significant in that I will shortly argue that Edith Sitwell is more like a neo-Georgian in many respects. With the passage of time, however, “the literary history of the modern age was written more and more from a Modernist point of view, the charges once specified against such poets as Drinkwater, Squire, Shanks, Freeman, and Turner, were splashed over the Georgian anthologies as a whole, and,

22 Edith Sitwell was a very good friend of John Freeman with whom she often discussed poetry.
23 Cited by Perkins, A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode, p. 207.
24 The term Victorianism is used here only in a relative sense and refers only to its flaws of Victorian poetics.
sometimes, over pre-Modernist poetry in general.”

Literary Modernism did not become the academic orthodoxy until the 1940s when the reputation of Georgian poetry was at its lowest, as Perkins remarks:

But the thorough blackening of the Georgian name was the work of critics writing at a time when Modernism was becoming an academic orthodoxy and Georgian poetry was temporarily dead. They were kicking a corpse. If only because it has figured prominently in literary history, the term “Georgian” cannot now be dropped. But it may be used without disparaging implications.

Because of Modernist critics’ indiscriminate dismissal of Georgian poets, prejudice against Georgian poets was finally cemented. Due to Georgian Poetry’s bad reputation, even Eliot had to declare that Harold Monro “had little in common” with Georgian poetry. Critics then followed suit and argued that D. H. Lawrence was never a Georgian despite the fact that he consciously contributed to Georgian Anthologies. Then the same could be said of many poets such as Wilfred Owen, W. H. Davies, Siegfried Sasson and Edward Thomas. As a matter of fact, Harold Monro was both the backbone and promoter of Georgian Poetry all through the five volumes. If Eliot truly felt it in his heart that Monro was an important poet, if not necessarily a Modernist poet, he could at least say the same about other Georgians; some were better poets than Monro. Within the Modernist group including T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Marianne Moore and Wallace Stevens, not every poet was as accomplished as Eliot. The same could be said about the Georgians. If Eliot represented the ideal of Modernism, Robert Frost represented the ideal of Georgianism. If Robert Frost has been recognized as one of the most important poets of the twentieth-century, it is time to repay the Georgians over-due respect. Georgians, rather than the neo-Georgians, are among those modern poets who played a role in reviving English poetry from the mire of Victorianism and fin de siècle and Georgianism has remained a keynote in English poetic history of the 1910s. Perhaps, in this spirit, Ross in the 1960s felt the pressing need to reassess and reiterate the position of Georgian poetry in English poetic history:

Put in the simplest terms, English poetry entered the second decade with Watson and

26 P. 204.
Phillips, and it emerged at the other end with *The Waste Land*. In the years between, Georgians, Imagists, Vorticists, Post-Impressionists, verslibrists, all played a part. With all the new schools of the time the Georgians too shared a common distaste for poetic verbiage; they tried to write without rant, bombast, or rhetorical flourish; and they insisted by and large upon a return to unstilted, unpretentious poetic diction. Gentrists though they were, the major Georgians agreed with Ezra Pound: modern poetry must not ‘try to seem forcible by rhetorical din, and luxurious riot’; it must have ‘fewer painted adjectives impeding the shock and stroke of it’; it must be ‘austere, direct, free from emotional slither’.  

In *A History of Modern Poetry*, David Perkins also reminded us that, “The savagery of the Modernist criticism of the Georgians can only be understood if we keep in mind that the Georgians were widely assumed to be the important new poets of the age.” Likewise, Anthony Thwaite commented on Georgian poetry that, “To the poetry-reading public of the First World War and the 1920s (and in many cases even later), this was modern poetry, these were the modern poets.” Between the 1960s and the 1990s, the position of Georgian poets in English literary history has been partially recovered. Philip Larkin regarded Georgian poetry as one of the neglected national treasures: “I am interested in the Georgians, and how far they represented an ‘English tradition’ that was submerged by the double impact of the Great War and the Irish-American-continental properties of Yeats and Eliot.” The *Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry* recognises that Georgian poetry signals “a reaction against the expansive sententiousness of the Victorians” and the Georgians “were considered daring and indeed revolutionary in the literary context of their time.” The “newness” of Georgian poetry was further recognised in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*: “Although after the supersession of their movement the Georgians were regarded as timid pastoralists, they were in fact rebelling against the poetic modes influential in Britain since the 1890s – the withdrawal from life of the Aesthetes and the Tory imperialism of the public poets.”

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28 Ross, p. 259.
29 P. 206.
33 P. 184.
consideration is crucial to a renewed assessment of the position of Georgian poets in literary history.

3.16 Modernism or Romanticism: break or continuity

Like the majority of modern poets in America, British poets and critics also felt deep respect for tradition. Modernist defiance for and break with the nineteenth century tradition was met with cold eyes in Britain. Respect for tradition does not necessarily repel innovation; rather, it encourages gradual innovation within tradition. In the conclusion of *Twentieth-Century British Poetry: A Critical Introduction*, John Williams remarks that, “In many respects, to argue that Romanticism has played a formative role in the continuing evolution of British poetry from the late eighteenth century through to the 1980s need not be overly contentious.”\(^{35}\) In Williams’s view, Romanticism, rather than Modernism, remains “a useful and relevant term where twentieth-century poetry is being assessed.”\(^{36}\) After all, Modernism was started by two Americans; their emphasis on a radical break with Romanticism contrasted as well as contradicted the effort of English poets to continue and reinvigorate the tradition in various ways. The impact of Modernism was never profoundly felt in England as in America especially in terms of the period 1940s-1960s. In the 1910s and 1920s, Modernism, coexisting with the prevalent Georgian poetry, was a minor influence. Commenting on British poetry of the period 1918-1928, Perkins noted:

> Had one inquired in England or America in 1925, most readers and critics would have agreed that the greatest living poets of the English language were Yeats, Hardy, and Bridges. In the second rank English readers might have mentioned Housman, de la Mare, Hodgson, Frost, Masefield, and Davies. Pressed to name additional American poets, perhaps they would have recollected Lindsay, Amy Lowell, Sandburg, and Robinson. The controversial poetry of T. S. Eliot was widely heard of, but not much read as yet. He certainly would not have been ranked with Yeats or Hardy. In fact, many critics still doubted whether Eliot’s intellectual verse, so deficient in melody and beauty, could be considered poetry at all. \(^{37}\)

When free verse finally became the dominant verse form in twentieth-century

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\(^{36}\) P. 104.  
American poetry, it was not the case with British poetry. Free verse “has never won the ground in British poetry that its most committed adherents have sought for it” and remains “primarily the province of poets influenced by American Imagists” and the followers “form a significant minority...”\(^{38}\) Right into the 1930s, W. H. Auden became the most prominent figure of the generation; his poetic landscape differed from that of Eliot in many ways. Auden was not at all prejudiced against traditional form and metre; he attempted to explore the possibilities of all forms. In *The Dyer’s Hand and Other Essays* (1963) Auden wrote:

> Rhymes, metres, stanza forms, etc., are like servants. If the master is fair enough to win their affection and firm enough to command their respect, the result is an orderly happy household. If he is too tyrannical, they give notice; if he lacks authority, they become slovenly, impertinent, drunk and dishonest ... \(^{39}\)

In truth, Auden rarely wrote in free verse. Despite the fact that Auden was able to “make virtually any form dance to his tune at whatever tempo he chose”, he had “an increasing respect for Classical models of verse, particularly the epistolary and ode forms used by Horace...”\(^{40}\) In reaction to Eliot’s theory of Impersonality insisting that the poet should function as a disinterested agent, Auden adopted the “self-revelatory, confessional mode”.\(^{41}\) Eliot’s impersonality required he speak behind a mask; Auden approached his subject directly. Although Auden was substantially influenced by Eliot; he also substantially modified, if not totally abandoned, Modernism. Auden was traditional in terms of form and personal in terms of writing mode. He was more a Romantic than a Modernist except that he remained an intellectual poet all his life. A “Neo-Romantic” style developed in England during the 1930s and was briefly ascendant during the 1940s. Dylan Thomas was its major poet. “Romantic” was the word used at the time, and implied that the Neo-Romantics were challenging the high Modernism of the 1920s and the discursive, intellectual styles of the 1930s.\(^{42}\) In Williams’ opinion, the revival of the spirit of Romanticism in the 1930s and 1940s was inevitable, “The association of Modernism with a critique of Romanticism and the

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\(^{40}\) P. 75.
\(^{41}\) P. 44.
rediscovery, through Pound and the Imagists, of the virtues of Classicism, further encourages the idea that the attack on Modernism signifies a renewed spirit of Romanticism.”

In the 1960s and 1970s, poets and critics such as Philip Hobsbaum and Philip Larkin found it hard to tolerate Modernism and dismissed it as a disturbance to the development of English poetry. Formal experimentation is undoubtedly the most striking feature of poetic Modernism and free verse was then greatly promoted. For Hobsbaum, however, the concern for form is “an integral quality in the best English poetry. Without it, it turns into something very like prose.” In Hobsbaum’s view, the breakdown of form was detrimental to English poetry and he attacked Modernism in terms of its influence on English poetry, “Certainly it is true to say that the influence of Eliot and Pound on English poetry has, so far, been damaging.” Nevertheless, Hobsbaum was in no way a conservative poet about form. For poetry to develop, he felt that poets should exert more freedom to reshape “a form rather than breaking it down.” He thought highly of Wilfred Owen’s mastery of half-rhyme and believed that Owen best embodied the right direction for English poetry. Hobsbaum prized the continuity rather than break between tradition and innovation. Philip Larkin’s damnation on Modernism might be the fiercest so far. He lashed Eliot for leading English poetry astray:

…it is as obvious as it is strenuously denied that in this century English poetry went off on a loop-line that took it away from the general reader. Several factors caused this. One was the aberration of modernism, that blighted all the arts. One was the emergence of English literature as an academic subject, and the consequent demand for a kind of poetry that needed elucidation. One, I am afraid, was the culture-mongering activities of the Americans Eliot and Pound. In any case, the strong connection between poetry and the reading public that had been forged by Kipling, Housman, Brooke and Omar Khayyam was destroyed as a result.

Larkin addresses an important issue concerning the relationship between poetry and

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43 P. 45.
45 P. 291.
46 P. 307.
the reading public. The popularity of poets in the period 1910s-1930s has become a major reason that they were first targeted and then condemned by Modernist poets and critics. Edna St. Vincent Millay in America and the Georgians in Britain may have suffered most in this regard. Beyond popularity, however, lies the naked battlefield of literary politics. As Perkins comments:

That some of the Modernist poets, notably T. S. Eliot and Edith Sitwell, felt a need to attack rival kinds of poetry wholesale is understandable. They were out to shame and frighten readers who might otherwise have sympathized with Georgian perspicuity and enjoyment of life. Moreover, they were not kicking helpless victims, but jostling their way into a hostile literary crowd, where they received as much as they gave.48

In some degree, poets and critics are no different from politicians when they are fighting for fame, status and recognition. However hard Modernist poets fought for their surviving space, it is Hardy, Yeats and the Georgians rather than Eliot and his likes, that dominated the reading public of the 1910s-1930s.

48 Perkins, A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode, p. 204.
3.2 Edith Sitwell

3.2.1 Introduction

In her lifetime, Edith Sitwell (1887-1964) developed a precarious Modernist reputation through the experimental *Facade* (1922) and by attacking Georgian poetry and promoting Modernist poetics. Despite the fact that Sitwell was a steadfast defender of Eliot’s work in the 1920s and 1930s, she was never publicly recognised as a Modernist poet by Eliot. Besides, Eliot was no less critical of Sitwell’s poetry than of Georgian poetry. Despite her high-pitched anti-Georgian pose, she was mainly recognised by W. B. Yeats and some Georgian poets such as Siegfried Sassoon, Edmund Blunden and Walter de la Mare whose joint effort enabled Sitwell to be awarded the King’s Medal by the Royal Society of Literature in 1934. As one of the most influential poets in the twentieth century, Yeats played a significant role in maintaining Sitwell’s reputation as a modern poet. Yeats not only promoted her poetry, he genuinely expressed his appreciation of Edith Sitwell’s *Gold Coast Customs* (1929). In 1930, in a letter to Wyndham Lewis, he defended Sitwell’s poetry against Lewis’s attack: “Somebody tells me that you have satirized Edith Sitwell. If that is so, visionary excitement has in part benumbed your senses. When I read her *Gold Coast Customs* a year ago, I felt ... that something absent from all literature of all generations, passion ennobled by intensity, by endurance, by wisdom.”49 Yeats was perhaps the only major poet who openly praised her work.

Contemporary criticism of Sitwell’s poetry is divided. One group considers her largely a traditional type of poet. As Ralph J. Mills remarked in his 1966 *Edith Sitwell: A Critical Essay*:

> Her imagination is partially an eighteenth-century one, baroque elements aside, and combines the kind of elegance and intellectual acumen we associate with writers of that period with many of the techniques and goals of the symbolist movement. Her later prophetic poems of the years of World War II and after reveal strong similarities with

Blake’s work of the same order and also with Christopher Smart.⁵⁰

Regardless of her borrowing from French Symbolist poetry, Mills considers Sitwell a traditional poet in terms of her conventional imagination and prophetic stance. Geoffrey Elborn, Sitwell’s biographer, comments at the beginning of his introduction to Edith’s biography that, “Edith Sitwell was one of the most colourful and controversial women of the twentieth century, so it is not surprising that she is mainly remembered as a personality, rather than as the serious poet she was.”⁵¹ Elborn was rather sympathetic to Sitwell’s poetry, but he perhaps unknowingly pointed out a serious flaw in Edith’s work, namely, her love of adjectives which were considered a sign of Victorianism by modern poets. Another group of scholars tends to consider her a Modernist. In A History of Modern Poetry, David Perkins considers Sitwell a Modernist just like Eliot.⁵² Perkins, however, bases his conclusion solely on Facade; his attitude towards her following collections is basically negative especially in relation to Sitwell’s increasing religious rhetoric from the 1940s onward. Sitwell’s most recent biographer, Richard Greene, identifies Sitwell as one of the Modernist poets who was unfairly treated by critics:

Of the great poets of her generation, Sitwell was the easiest to knock off the pedestal. She was a flamboyant, combative aristocrat and, better still, she was a woman; therefore, she served as a critical soft target. Attacking her was a way of attacking the influence of Yeats, Pound, and Eliot without taking on their more fortified reputations.⁵³

In my view, the negative criticism by critics has more to do with the quality of Sitwell’s poetry. As previously discussed, even Eliot was negative about Sitwell’s work. At most, Sitwell’s experiment was limited only to Facade. She returned to a more romantic writing mode in her following collections Bucolic Comedies (1923), The Sleeping Beauty (1924) and Troy Park (1925). This apparently regressive change is seldom discussed by critics who are unanimously focused on Facade. Furthermore, Sitwell started to assume the role of a prophet from Gold Coast Customs (1929) concerning herself more with religious salvation and remained so till the end of her life. Moreover, her predilection for adjectives was omnipresent in the majority of her poetry.

⁵² Perkins, A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode, p. 204.
With the exception of *Facade*, she had more affinities with neo-Georgian poets such as John Freeman and W. J. Turner in terms of her language and diction. Those who considered her a Modernist usually ignored the significant change in Sitwell’s poetic outlook after *Facade*.

Contemporary Feminist critics also offered their criticism of Sitwell and her work. In the view of Anthea Trodd, “In Britain in the 1920s the modern woman poet was represented by Edith Sitwell who, unlike any other woman poet in this period, exploited considerable gifts for performance and publicity.”\(^{54}\) What she said of Sitwell might be true, but Anna Wickham actually had an international reputation in the 1920s almost inconceivable for Sitwell. She further points out that Sitwell’s “notoriety as a poet was maintained by the journal *New Verse* (1933-39), which published many of the young poets of the decade and regularly targeted Sitwell as representative of all they sought to abolish in poetry.”\(^{55}\) It seems that Trodd was mainly interested in Sitwell’s publicity or notoriety. Jane Dowson seems more interested in the reason that Sitwell has been ignored by feminist critics as she comments that Sitwell “has been ignored by feminist critics, probably because she did not articulate any sympathy for women’s rights.”\(^{56}\)

3.22 Sitwell’s experiment with techniques: *Facade*

Sitwell’s reputation as a Modernist poet is mainly based on her 1922 collection *Facade* which contrasts strikingly with her following collections because of its experimental edge. According to John Pearson, in the early 1920s, Sitwell began to develop an interest in the connection between “her poetry and the Modern Movement in the other arts.”\(^{57}\) Sitwell herself commented on *Facade* that the poems “are

\(^{54}\) Trodd, p. 86.

\(^{55}\) P. 88.


technical experiments – studies in the effect that texture has on rhythm, and the effect that varying and elaborate patterns of rhymes and of assonances and dissonances have upon rhythm.”\(^{58}\) As far as form is concerned, *Facade* includes no poems that can be strictly defined as free verse. Similarly to Anna Wickham, Sitwell was very reliant on rhyme. With “rhyme” outweighing the form, her “technical experiments” largely involve a play of sounds. Like Wickham, although Sitwell held on to rhyme, she was quite flexible with metre. For example, in “Pere Amelot”:

> Out of his nightcap he drew three pence ...  
> Marie and Angelique pass  
> The knife through Pere Amelot’s back – in the dense  
> Bushes fly ... he nods on the grass.

> The man with the lanthorn, a moment after,  
> Picks up the moon that fell  
> Like an Augustan coin when laughter  
> Shook the hen-cackling grass of Hell;\(^{59}\)

In this poem, Sitwell maintains traditional quatrains and exact rhymes, but the metre is irregular. Sometimes, she abandons both the stanzaic form and metre, as “The Bat” indicates:

> CASTELLATED, tall  
> From battlements fall  
> Shades on heroic  
> Lonely grass,  
> Where the moonlight’s echoes die and pass.  
> Near the rustic boorish,  
> Fustian Moorish,  
> Castle wall of the ultimate Shade,  
> With his cloak castellated as that wall, afraid.\(^{60}\)

The act of ignoring traditional metre, and sometimes stanzaic form, while maintaining rhyme became the common practice of many modern poets, such as Edna St. Vincent Millay and Anna Wickham. This type of poetic practice indicates the transition between traditional form and free verse. There is only one poem in *Facade* whose irregular use of rhyme makes it read almost like free verse, but not quite. As “When Sir

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\(^{59}\) P. 149.  
\(^{60}\) P. 150.
Beelzebub” shows:

WHEN
Sir
Beelzebub called for his syllabub in the hotel in Hell
Where Proserpine first fell,
Blue as the gendarmerie were the waves of the sea,
(Rocking and shocking the bar-maid).
Nobody comes to give him his rum but the
Rim of the sky hippopotamus-glum
Enhances the chances to bless with a benison
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) ...
Like Balaclava, the lava came down from the
Roof, and the sea’s blue wooden gendarmerie
Took them in charge while Beelzebub roared for his rum.
... None of them come!61

By mentioning Tennyson, Sitwell was apparently conscious of her endeavour to get rid of “classical metres”. By using classical metres irregularly, she actually succeeds in this aim; while some lines scan as dactylic tetrameter, with a sprinkling of trimeters, other lines are more flexible with varying meters. The unrhymed words such as “sea”, “glum”, “feet” and “metres” almost create the impression of a free verse poem, but her frequent use of internal rhymes such as “rocking and shocking”, “enhances and chances”, “vegetation and deputations”, “benison and Tennyson” divert one’s attention more to the effect internal rhymes have upon the rhythm than to the form. In the early decades of the twentieth century, rhyme remained the last straw of which the majority of modern poets were unwilling to let go. Traditional stanzas and metres could be deserted without much consideration, but not rhyme which was valued by many.

In Facade, Sitwell’s perception of modern life is a form of disenchantment, which allows no romantic self-deception and points at the ironical and farcical nature of modern life. A short passage by Sitwell preceding the poems sets the tone for the whole collection:

61 P. 173.
This modern world is but a thin match-board flooring spread over a shallow hell. For Dante’s hell has faded, is dead. Hell is no vastness; here are no more devils who laugh or who weep – only the maimed dwarfs of this life, terrible straining mechanisms, crouching in trivial sands, and laughing at the giant’s crumbling! 62

The emptiness and absurdity of modern life are expressed through images which repel any romantic associations. As “Clown’s Houses” indicates:

Beneath the flat and paper sky
The sun, a demon’s eye,
Glowed through the air, that mask of glass;
All wand’ring sounds that pass

As power on a mummy’s face,
Or fawned with simian grace
Round booths with many a hard bright toy
And wooden brittle joy.63

The image of a “flat and paper sky” expresses a sense of ennui; the image of “wooden brittle joy” is actually joyless, for joy has become a superficial notion and transient illusion. Besides, the repulsive imagery such as “a demon’s eye”, “a mummy’s face” and “simian grace” arouses a tragic, farcical sense of human existence. A keener sense of “hard reality” defies the so-called “eternity” while embracing “unpredictability”:

Tall windows show Infinity;
And, hard reality,
The candles weep and pry and dance
Like lives mocked at by Chance.64

Beneath the surface of infinity lies the hard reality of mortality. The certainty of life incarnated by the solid windows is invalidated by the uncertainty of individual living symbolised by the candle light. When Chance rules, human life is vulnerable to the point that living is more like a play of doom. Sitwell presents a world in which modern people are stuck in a dilemma and all they can find is despair:

There is nothing to give
And nothing to buy –
It is too late to live
And too late to die,
Since the sad spring came again

62 P. 149.
63 P. 151.
64 P. 152.
With its red lacquer buds and its pain,\textsuperscript{65}

Sitwell’s use of “red lacquer” rather than “red” to describe the flowering highlights the artificial nature of modern life. Similarly to Eliot and Pound, Sitwell was also greatly influenced by French Symbolist poetry in the early years of her career. According to her reading notes, she read works by Arthur Symons, Baudelaire and other Symbolist poets. Richard Greene comments that, “Sitwell’s immersion in French Poetry taught her to seek out images that are fragmentary, sometimes dreamlike, suggestive rather than representative, and synaesthetic (that is, crossing the usual borders of sensory experience).”\textsuperscript{66} Synaesthesia has proved a lively technique inherited by twentieth-century English poets from French Symbolist poets. Modern poets such as W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Amy Lowell, Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, W. H. Auden and Dylan Thomas, to name just a few, favoured synaesthesia as an effective means of achieving special effects, in particular through metaphor. Synaesthesia also remains a salient feature of *Facade*. As in “Trio for Two Cats and a Trombone”:

\begin{quote}
Long steel grass –
The white soldiers pass –
The light is braying like an ass.\textsuperscript{67}
\end{quote}

In the last line, “light” is incarnated into a visual sound “ass braying” which indicates not only the dazzling scene of soldiers’ marching but the stupidity of military fanaticism. But sometimes, certain poems are basically a pointless word-play simply for the sake of sound as in “Water Party”:

\begin{quote}
Rose Castles
Those bustles
Beneath parasols seen!
Fat blondine pearls
Rondine curls
Seem. Banneolns sheen
The brave tartan
Waves’ Spartan
Domes – (Crystal Palaces)
Where like fallacies
Die the calices
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{65} P. 168.
\textsuperscript{66} Greene, *Edith Sitwell: Avant-Garde Poet, English Genius*, p.76.
Of the water-flowers green.
Said the Dean
To the Queen,
On the tartan wave seen:
“Each chilly
White lily
Has her own crinoline,
And divans divine
In a smooth seventh heaven of polished pitch-pine.”

Although Sitwell believed that “a great deal of meaning is or can be conveyed by the sequence of verbal sounds”, the meaning in this poem as in many other poems in Facade is nowhere to be located. Before the public performance of Facade in 1923, Virginia Woolf wrote to her sister Vanessa that she had heard from Violet Dickinson that “the Sitwells have been reciting what seems to her sheer nonsense through megaphones.” It is probably true that when Sitwell puts too much emphasis on the sound effects, there is not much space left for meaning. Even Virginia Woolf herself found it hard to grasp its meaning after she watched the performance of Facade:

…the London season of course in full swing. So I judged yesterday in the Aeolian Hall, listening, in a dazed way, to Edith Sitwell vociferating through the megaphone … but I kept saying to myself “I don’t really understand … I don’t really admire”. The only view, presentable view that I framed, was to the effect that she was monotonous. She has one tune only on her merry go round. And she makes her verse keep step accurately to the Hornpipe. This seems to be wrong; but I’m all sandy with writing criticism, & must be off to my book again….

Virginia Woolf, certainly an intelligent audience member, could not begin to understand the poems, which says a lot about the general reaction to the performance. David Perkins comments on the public response to the performance that, “There were some cheers, but on the whole the audience was alienated and the reviews were murderous.” But taken as a whole, Perkins thinks highly of the experimental impetus imbedded in Facade as he comments:

Facade was a gay, witty, and gallant harlequinade, gallant because the antics of the harlequin both expressed and masked a fundamental despair. But it was more important

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68 P. 171.
70 Cited by Elborn, p. 40.
71 Perkins, A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode, p. 430.
as a fascinating experiment in technique than in any other way. Juxtaposition of images and themes was swift. Metaphors seemed to grow out of each other by free association. Everything was conveyed by rhythm and image. The special success was in the versification, which departed from the usual norms and yet moved with authority. The verse of *Facade* differed from poem to poem; in general it was neither conventional free verse nor was it metrical verse of a traditional kind. These were strongly marked and varying rhythms that recalled both nursery rhymes and jazz syncopation.\textsuperscript{72}

Perkins rightly points out that Sitwell’s form is rather a transition between traditional form and free verse. In *Facade*, experiments with sound and rhythm by employing techniques such as music composition, dance rhythms, synaesthesia, assonances and dissonances, are of primary concern to Sitwell. There is no denying that the experimental impetus in *Facade* is impressive. Sitwell wrote of her inspiration for experiment, “I was, in the beginning of my work, very strongly influenced by that great composer, Stravinsky, although he is an artist in a different medium.”\textsuperscript{73} Apparently, Sitwell sought to fuse music with words to achieve special sound effects as her biographer, Geoffrey Elborn, comments that:

She was fascinated by the transcendental études of Liszt, in which the composer had written music to cover every pianistic complexity possible, demanding a dazzling technique in performance. The idea of writing similarly technically difficult poems did not materialize until Edith wrote her *Hornpipe*, which contains all the accents and rhythms of the sailors’ dance. But after that others were to follow, where not only rhythms of dances such as the *Waltz*, *Polka*, and *Fox Trot* are used, but also there is a remarkably skilful playing with language, where the vowel sounds actually telescope into each other.\textsuperscript{74}

*Facade* is successful in that Sitwell mixed elements of modern music, farcical scenes, nonsense verse and word-play so as to convey a sense of despair. Her techniques are indisputably of a Modernist nature. However, we need to remind ourselves of a plain fact that Sitwell did not continue her experiment with the rhythm of modern music, nonsense verse, play of sounds and her very idiosyncratic images. My understanding is that her main achievement in *Facade* is first and foremost an experiment with sound. As for the subject matter of these poems, one does not really have much to say, not because it is too difficult for common readers to work out the subject matter, but

\textsuperscript{72} Pp. 430-431.
\textsuperscript{74} Elborn, p. 37.
because there is no real subject matter. Titles of the poems in *Facade* do not necessarily indicate the subject matter, rather, they either indicate the means of technique such as “Trio for Two Cats and a Trombone”, or they themselves are simply farcical or pointless enough to serve the nonsensical purpose such as “Ass-Face”, “Came the Great Popinjay”, or “Black Mrs. Behemoth”. After *Facade*, Sitwell was basically done with experiment.

### 3.23 Free Verse

Sitwell was open-minded about poetic form. She employed traditional stanzas and rhymes without sticking to the metres. She did not write in free verse until the 1940s. As someone who was very supportive of Modernist poetics, Sitwell was keen to keep up with the Modernist momentum. The reason that she did not write any free verse poems in *Facade* is two-faceted. On the one hand, her emphasis on sophisticated sound effects considerably contradicts the liberating elements of free verse. On the other hand, writing free verse seems a hard nut to crack for Sitwell. In 1923, in a letter to her close friend John Freeman, one of the Georgian poets, she expressed her difficulty in writing free verse:

> Unrhymed verse is so horribly difficult to write, with regard to the endings. I am nearly going mad myself at the moment, puzzling it all out, and I feel your remarks may help me a little, if anything can. But it is all very difficult. Perhaps unrhymed verse should not be written by women. But if so, it limits one very much.\(^75\)

Sitwell seems to be trapped in a dilemma. She has faith in the potential of free verse, but she does not trust her own capability. In *Facade*, Sitwell basically abandoned traditional metre but maintained rhyme, which is already a move toward free verse. In her following collections after *Facade* such as *Bucolic Comedies* (1923), *The Sleeping Beauty* (1924), *Troy Park* (1925), *Elegy on Dead Fashion* (1926) and *Gold Coast Customs* (1929), Sitwell continued to hold on to rhyme. Change came from the 1940s when some free verse eventually found their way into her poetry. For example, In

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“Harvest”:

I, an old woman whose heart is like the Sun
That has seen too much, looked on too many sorrows,
Yet is not weary of shining, fulfillment and harvest
Heard the priests that howled for rain and the universal darkness,
Saw the golden princes sacrificed to the Rain-god,
The cloud that came, and was small as the hand of Man.
And now in the time of the swallow, the bright one, the chatterer,
The young women wait like the mother of corn for the lost one –
Their golden eyelids are darkened like the great rain-clouds.76

One gets the impression that Sitwell’s sensibility was deeply rooted in a remote past
where kings, queens, princes and princesses had lived. Almost from the very beginning,
free verse was closely associated with a conversational style and a modern vocabulary.
However, in Sitwell’s free verse poems, the reader can hardly get a glimpse of modern
life. When Sitwell does not invoke the dead kings and queens, she brings in religious
concepts. As “The Cold of Fire” indicates:

The aeons of Cold
And all the deaths that Adam has endured
Since the first death, can not outfreeze our night.
And where is the fire of love that will warm our hands?
There is only this conflagration
Of all the sins of the world! To the dust’s busyness
She speaks of the annihilation
Of every form of dust, burned down to Nothingness!
To the small lovers, of a kiss that seems the red
Lightning of Comets firing worlds, - and of a Night
That shall outburn all nights that lovers know –
The last red Night before the Judgment Day!77

Apart from the religious references such as to “Adam” and “the Judgment Day”, she
employs abstract concepts such as the capitalised “Cold”, “Nothingness” and “Night”.
Whether she is addressing death or love seems unimportant since she is practically
paraphrasing some religious preaching. Her themes were largely overshadowed by a
religious sensibility. In the 1950s, Sitwell’s religious fervour continued. As “Bagatelle”
demonstrates:

The Worm said, ‘I am small, my redness is from Adam.
But conquerors tall
Come to my embrace as I were Venus. I
Am the paramour in the last bed of love, and mine, the kiss
That gives Eternity.
I am Princess of Darkness. Yet the huge gold world,
With all plantations, powers of gold growth that shall be the bread of men,
Arise from the toil of the small, the mighty Worm beneath the earth –
The blind, all-seeing Power at her great work of death and of rebirth.’ 78

Speaking through the persona of the Worm and assuming the role of Princess of Darkness, Sitwell ascends to the position of a prophet whose religious prescriptions soar high above common people and far from modern life. Sitwell’s form is free, but her imagination and sensibility are trapped in abstract religious teachings. To bring poetry into close contact with modern life, Ezra Pound warned poets in 1913 to “Go in fear of abstractions”. 79 It is important to note that although Sitwell started to write free verse poems from the 1940s, she continued to write rhymed poems till the end of her career. The amount of rhymed verse weighs predominantly over that of her free verse.

3.24 Sitwell’s Language

Despite the experimental nature of Facade, a major flaw in Sitwell’s poetry is her language which features poetical rather than colloquial speech. As someone who went out of her way to speak for Eliot and Modernism and who was enthusiastic about free verse, it seems almost unthinkable that Sitwell was entirely unmoved by colloquial speech. In Facade, her vocabulary includes words that are used mostly for the sake of their sound. For example, in “The Wind’s Bastinado”:

The wind’s bastinado
Whipt on the calico
Skin of the Macaroon
And the black Picaroon
Beneath the galloon
Of the midnight sky.
Came the great Soldan

In his sedan
Floating his fan –
Saw what the sly
Shadow’s cocoon
In the barracoon
Held. Out they fly.\textsuperscript{80}

The word “Soldan” reminds one of countries such as Egypt in the Medieval Ages. The vocabulary in \textit{Facade} basically has no connections with daily life. In her following collections, her sentiment seems to be deeply rooted in an ancient world. In \textit{The Sleeping Beauty}, the reader may find him or herself walking in a world of kings, queens and princesses. As the lines indicate:

\begin{quote}
The queen sits with her court, and through the glade
The light from their silks casts another silver shade.
...
“Madam, the Soldan and the king of Ethiop’s land
Approach as suitors for your daughter’s hand.”\textsuperscript{81}
\end{quote}

Even in the 1940s and 1950s, Sitwell still clung to the world of Kings. Besides, she developed another predilection for abstract concepts which, more often than not, arouse strong religious associations. For example in “A Sleepy Tune”:

\begin{quote}
This is the hour
When they sing of the noon of the world: ‘There was a King
Who reigned in Babylon –
Grown sleepy now .... His hair was like the honey-red foxed
Burned by fires like the Sun in the wheat-festival
– He lies embalmed by bees ... the sweetness lapping over
Him, with only Darkness no more than our gold Comb.\textsuperscript{82}
\end{quote}

One wonders why Sitwell was not slightly attracted to modern life but was so nostalgic about a remote world in which her poetic imagination seems permanently entrenched. In “Anne Boleyn’s Song”, she continued to allow herself to be fascinated by the past. The abstract concepts in Sitwell’s poems are usually capitalised as “Darkness” and “Comb”. In her late years, Sitwell was simply obsessed with the concept of death and frequently wrote about it. As “Metamorphosis” shows:

\begin{quote}
It is not Death which is the skeleton –
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{81} P. 47.
\textsuperscript{82} Sitwell, \textit{The Canticle of the Rose}, p. 236.
But Time ... Death merely strikes the hour of one –

Night’s creeping end ere light beings again ...
O Death has never worm for heart and brain  

Sometimes, the concept of death is entwined with religion and her imagination about the Kings’ world. As “Prometheus’ Song” indicates:

The echo of my breath in the streets’ winter weather
When Kings’ and Beggars’, Lovers’, Haters’ breath is blown together
As by the wind of Death:

‘See that poor stick of bone
To which my body and my soul are nailed
As the Thief upon the Cross,
As I upon the rock!
Once she was the whole world’s gain and loss!

She, the foul path I trod
From Chaos unto God!
What now is left? That cross-road stake thrust through my heart –
And those poor rags of Heaven or of Hell
Blown here, blown there, upon that stick of bone.  

It will not be an exaggeration to conclude that this poem best epitomises Sitwell’s poetic sensibility. Her profound nostalgia about the past world and her religious rendering of life in general make it difficult for her to come to terms with modern life. In Sitwell’s poetic world, there is no place for the modernity of the early decades of the twentieth century which features mass culture, cars, subways, newspapers and advertisements. In 1947, C. M Bowra sought to praise Sitwell’s work and claimed that Sitwell’s poetry was focused “on pure poetry, on the purely poetical, and relying above all on her wonderful sensibility”. Bowra actually considered “literariness” a merit rather than a defect. Sitwell’s literary conventionalism is the very reason that colloquialism was virtually beyond her. Deprived of daily life, she could only write abstractly. Here lies the limitation of her poetic sensibility which is antique, not modern.
3.25 Sitwell’s Victorianism: A golden woman

In the 1910s, decorative adjectives were considered by both Ezra Pound and Richard Aldington a sign of Victorianism. Sitwell, however, loved adjectives. All through her writing career, Facade remains the only collection that is not infested with the disease of adjectives. For example, in “Popular Song”, included Bucolic Comedies:

But she was a negress black as the shade
That time on the brightest lady laid.
Then a satyr, dog-haired as trunks of trees,
Began to flatter, began to tease,
And she ran like the nymphs with golden foot
That trampled the strawberry, buttercup root,
In the thick gold dew as bright as the mesh
Of dead Panope’s golden flesh.\(^{86}\)

Apart from colourful adjectives such as “black”, “bright”, “green” and “golden”, Sitwell employs conventional imagery of “satyr”, “Panope”, “nymphs”, “dew”, “rose”, “angle”, “nymph”, “dew”, “pearl”, “nightingale”, “jewel”, “heaven”, “garden”, “flower”, “snow”, “dove” and “sun”, to name the most representative, and she uses them with unusual frequency. For example, in The Sleeping Beauty:

And sleep in golden nets of summer light,
“Sweet fig,” he called me, and would stay the flight

Of plums that seemed Jove’s golden-feathered rain.
Then, birds like Fortunatus moved again

Among the boughs with silent feathered feet,
Spraying down dew like jewels amid the sweet

Green darkness; figs, each like a purse of gold,
Grow among leaves like rippled water green, and cold.\(^{87}\)

It is significant to point out that Sitwell’s love of adjectives and conventional imagery is simply habitual, something inseparable from her poetic imagination. Even in her prose work, this predilection was striking. In an essay on her brother, Sacheverell

\(^{86}\) Sitwell, Collected Poems, 1930, p. 184.
\(^{87}\) Pp. 2-3.
Sitwell’s poetry, she seemed to be carried away by her own poetic sensibility as she put, “Mr. Sitwell possesses this cunning so that, at times, his texture is soft as the dewy bosom of a bird, floating from sunny spaces among soft warm dark leaves, or it is as deep as the shadow cast by faunal branches weighted with dew.” Even in her prose, Sitwell’s love of adjectives is unstoppable.

Among the colours she uses, her predilection for “gold” or “golden” is overwhelming. Even in the less colourful *Gold Coast Customs*, her love of “gold” is almost fanatic:

Can a planet tease  
With its great gold train,  
Walking beside the pompous main –  
That great gold planet the heat of the Sun  
Where we saw black Shadow, a black man, run,  
So a negress dare  
Wear long gold hair?  

From the 1940s to 1960s, Sitwell had eventually become a “golden” woman as she claims in “Invocation”: “But I, a golden woman like the corn goddess”. Again in “An Old Woman”, the poem is filled with “golden” lines such as “Rising from their beds, and laying gold”, “And he who blessed the fox with a golden fleece”, “Bearded with thick ripe gold”, “I too was a golden woman like those that walk”, “Where the seed of gold drops dead and the kettle simmers”, “The golden heroes proud as pomp of waves”, “On many a golden cheek, and creeds grow old” and “The golden lovers walk in the holy fields”. The 1946 collection *The Song of the Cold* in which “Invocation” and “An Old Woman” are included, can almost be titled “The Song of the Gold” because the colour “gold” shines through the whole collection. In her 1953 collection *Gardeners and Astronomers*, one is once again awed by her sickness of “gold” as the title poem indicates:

Pierce their gold through the seeds, behold their secrets,

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91 P. 4.
92 P. 5.
93 P. 6.
And the weight of the warm air
Shapes the exquisite corolla to a world of gold rain
Closed in thick gold armour like a King’s 94

The colour “gold” is omnipresent in all of her collections and, in her late years, had become a symbol of Sitwell herself. Even in her last collection *The Outcasts* (1962), as “an old dying woman”, 95 she felt that “My life is a gold prayer”. 96 Her obsession with “gold” might be explained by her unresolved complex over her ancestral past which is of royal blood. The colour “gold” captures the essence of her poetic imagination but it also reveals the weakness of her poetry. Some of Sitwell’s promoters, however, consider her constant use of adjectives, especially colourful adjectives, a merit. In 1947, C. M. Bowra commented positively on Sitwell’s poetry in comparison to that of Georgian poetry: “The placid flow of Georgian verse, so colourless and so unadventurous, shows how far poets can go in rejecting the gifts of their senses.” 97 Bowra’s statement hardly does Sitwell a service. Geoffrey Elborn considers *The Sleeping Beauty* “was Edith’s most ambitious poem up to that time and is the one of considerable length where there is a development of a theme without extraneous decoration, which at times flawed some of her work.” 98 Given Sitwell’s love of decorative adjectives throughout her work, it seems just to say that “extraneous decoration” flawed “the majority” of her work. Indeed, Sitwell’s poetry is much more colourful than Georgian poetry, but this is exactly where Georgian poetry as a whole is much better than that of Sitwell.

3.26 Sitwell and Georgian Poetry

Sitwell first built a reputation through the annual anthology *Wheels* (1916-1921), which was started as a conscious challenge to the then predominant *Georgian Poetry* (1911-1922). Geoffrey Elborn commented on Sitwell’s attitude

94 Sitwell, *Gardeners and Astronomers*, p. 3.
96 P. 25.
97 Bowra, p. 10.
98 Elborn, p. 44.
toward Georgian Poetry that, “She felt that it dealt only with the ramblings of English village cricket matches and country-loving beer drinkers. This was a less than fair assessment, but in any case she wanted to oppose the bulk of pastoral sentimentality that the Georgian produced.”

However, the goal Sitwell set out to achieve was not accomplished. Eliot, for instance, was as negative about Wheels as about Georgian Poetry though for him, the former might seem slightly better than the latter as he reviewed Wheels in 1918 in the Egoist. The poets in Wheels seemed to Eliot “have a little the air of smattering…Instead of rainbows, cuckoos, daffodils and timid hares, they give us garden gods, guitars, and mandolins...” By 1921, Eliot simply dismissed the Wheels poets as a whole:

The poets who consider themselves most opposed to Georgianism, and who know a little French, are mostly such as could imagine the Last Judgment as a lavish display of Bengal lights, Roman candles, Catherine wheels and inflammable fire balloons, vous, hypocrite lecteur.

At this point, Eliot had lost his sympathy for Wheels poets and simply considered them no better than Georgian poets. He ridiculed their superficial borrowing from French Symbolist poetry and criticised their overuse of decorated vocabulary. David Perkins comments that Sitwell’s “intentions were not fulfilled, partly because her own premises about poetry were not clearly formulated and focused but chiefly because she did not capture for Wheels the more daringly or powerfully Modernist poems written in England.” Sitwell’s Wheels may have failed as a potential challenge to Georgian Poetry, but her sonorous anti-Georgian stance and her position as editor of Wheels not only won her considerable publicity but left the general impression that she was to be identified with the Modernist camp.

Critics and scholars often take it for granted that Sitwell is definitely an opposite of Georgian poets. The impression was primarily created by Sitwell herself as she wrote in her autobiography, “At the time I began to write, a change in the direction, imagery, and rhythms in poetry had become necessary, owing to the rhythmical

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100 Cited by Glendinning, p. 60.
101 Cited by Elborn, p. 25.
flaccidity, the verbal deadness, the dead and expected patterns, of some of the poetry immediately preceding us.”^103 By the time she started Wheels, Georgian poetry had already become the new and dominant writing mode in England. Determined to make a difference and attract attention, Sitwell at least had the Georgians in mind when she made the above statement.

However, Sitwell’s relationship with Georgian poets is rather complicated. She admired and befriended the old Georgians such as W. H. Davies, Siegfried Sassoon, Edmund Blunden and Walter de la Mare. In her lifetime, she was mainly recognised by W. B. Yeats and the old Georgians. In fact, the reason that she was awarded the King’s Medal by the Royal Society of Literature in 1934 was the great effort made by Yeats and the Georgian poets such as Siegfried Sassoon, Walter de la Mare and Edmund Blunden. This was a fact seldom noticed by critics. In Aspects of Modern Poetry, she defended Davies’s country poems by claiming that his poems “are among the beauties of nature, and are therefore disliked by persons to whom travelling in the country means a ride upon a motor bicycle.”^104 At the end of her essay, she felt the need to reiterate his importance, “But he has been consistently misunderstood and underrated from the first – simply because he is on traditional lines, and because his poems have a radiant innocence and a rare physical beauty.”^105

Sitwell’s savage attacks were mainly targeted at the neo-Georgian circle which included J. C. Squire, John Freeman and W. J. Turner. John Freeman, however, is an exception. Sitwell befriended and respected him and admired his poetry. Without scrutiny, Sitwell’s anti-Georgian stance can be misleading. However articulately Sitwell announced her break with Georgian poetry at the beginning of her career, her work showed that she actually had a lot in common with Georgian poets. Despite their claimed simple outlook, Georgian poets are notorious for their love of adjectives. For example, W. J. Turner shares with Sitwell a love of “gold” in “Romance”:

When I was but thirteen or so

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103 Sitwell, Taken Care of, p. 123.
104 Sitwell, Aspects of Modern Poetry, p. 90.
105 P. 98.
I went into a golden land,
Chimborazo, Cotopaxi
Took me by the land.

I walked in a great golden dream
To and fro from school –
Shining Popocatapetl
The dusty streets did rule.

I walked home with a gold dark boy
And never a word I’d say,
Chimborazo, Cotopaxi
Had taken my speech away: 106

Not surprisingly, “gold” is also found in a stanza of “The Voices in the Dream” by Lascelles Abercrombie:

The spring makes golden ways,
Lead here, for here the gold
Grows brightest for our eyes,
And for our hearts lovelier even than love. 107

Apart from their love of adjectives, Georgian poets also share with Sitwell a love of conventional images such as “nightingale”, “dove”, “snow”, “jewel” and “nymph”, to name just a few. For example, in W. H. Davies’s “Wasted Hours”:

Too many times have nightingales
Wasted their passion on my sleep,
And brought repentance soon:
But this one night I’ll seek the woods,
The nightingale, and moon. 108

Also, in a stanza of W. J. Turner’s “Magic”, the conventional imagery is apparent:

Still as a great jewel is the air
With boughs and leaves smooth-carved in it,
And rocks and trees and giant ferns,
And blooms with inner radiance lit,
And naked water like a nymph
That dances tireless slim and bare. 109

In varying degrees, the majority of the Georgian poets tended to express a sense of

“pleasantness”. Eliot attacked the Georgian anthology for 1916-1917 because “the Georgians caress everything they touch...”\textsuperscript{110} This pleasantness is omnipresent in Sitwell’s following collections after \textit{Facade}. Often, the pleasantness is expressed through adjectives such as “gentle”, “sweet”, “lovely”, “fair” and “soft”. As her lines in \textit{Bucolic Comedies}, \textit{The Sleeping Beauty} and \textit{Troy Park} respectively demonstrate:

\begin{quote}
Where the small fruit-buds begin to harden
Into sweet tunes in the palace garden,

They peck at the fruit-buds’ hairy herds
With their lips like the gentle bills of birds.\textsuperscript{111}

“Her mouth,” the first fay said, “as fair shall be
As any gentle ripe red strawberry\textsuperscript{112}

Our nurses called to us, their faces lovely
As that dove-soft hour we call good night;\textsuperscript{113}
\end{quote}

Among the Georgian poets, John Freeman perhaps resembles Sitwell the most in sentiment as “I Will Ask” indicates:

\begin{quote}
And I will take celandine, nettle and parsley, white
In its own green light,
Or milkwort and sorrel, thyme, harebell and meadow-sweet
Lifting at your feet,
And ivy-blossom beloved of soft bees; I will take
The loveliest – \textsuperscript{114}
\end{quote}

In Perkins’s view, Freeman “reached the extreme of insipidity”.\textsuperscript{115} Compared with the old Georgians such as W. H. Davies and Lascelles Abercrombie, Sitwell’s use of adjectives and conventional imagery is unusually frequent. Perhaps Turner and Freeman resemble Sitwell the most in that respect. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Sitwell’s reputation as a Modernist, however precarious, was partially obtained by a Modernist pose displayed in \textit{Wheels}. As Perkins remarks:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Wheels} was, therefore, the first manifestation in England of a reaction against the Georgian hegemony, the first at least that originated with English poets and caught the
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{110} Cited by Perkins, \textit{A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode}, p. 207.
\textsuperscript{111} Sitwell, \textit{Collected Poems}, 1930, p. 175.
\textsuperscript{112} P. 4.
\textsuperscript{113} P. 136.
\textsuperscript{114} \textit{Georgian Poetry: 1920-1922}, p. 65.
\textsuperscript{115} Perkins, \textit{A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode}, p. 206.
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 Modernist movement. 116

Despite her Modernist pose against Georgian poetry, the weaknesses of her poetry are essentially no different from those of the Georgians. In effect, Perkins’ comment on Sitwell’s brother, Sacheverell Sitwell, can be applied to Edith Sitwell especially in terms of her similarity with Georgian poets:

His poetry includes pastoral verse and adaptations of Baroque or neoclassic poets; some of it seems slightly archaic in diction and imaginative habit…. His poetry is pleasant and sometimes charming but rather insipid. Were he not a Sitwell, he might have been thought a belated Georgian. 117

3.27 The evolution of Sitwell’s poetics

Sitwell’s career can be divided into two phases in terms of the nature of her creativity. The experimental momentum exhibited in Facade is perhaps enough to consolidate her reputation as a Modernist. However, Sitwell’s innovation did not last long. Right after Facade, she immediately “returned to more traditional and Romantic types of poetry” 118. Her following collections Bucolic Comedies (1923), The Sleeping Beauty (1924) and Troy Park (1925) are essentially no different in terms of her tiresomely repetitive use of adjectives and conventional imagery. Perkins comments on Bucolic Comedies that the poems are not “conceived as experiments in versification. They are light, fanciful, brightly colored poems that render life from a mannered distance, making it resemble fairy tale, nursery rhyme, folktale, or legend.” 119 This statement can also apply to The Sleeping Beauty and Troy Park.

Sitwell’s 1929 collection Gold Coast Customs deserves some special attention for the reason that it marks the transition of Sitwell’s development from an experimentalist in Facade, a traditionalist in Bucolic Comedies, The Sleeping Beauty, and Troy Park, to a religious poet and prophet in her later volumes from Gold Coast

116 P. 428.
117 P 434.
118 P. 432.
119 P. 432.
**Customs** onwards. *Gold Coast Customs* is slightly better than the preceding three collections in that it is less colourful and nostalgic. Although Sitwell’s “anger and horror are vividly present as well as her sympathy for the poor and the victimized”, the whole collection was seriously marred by its lingering adjectives and repetitive use of words and phrases. For example, the reader may be struck by words made up by Sitwell which refer to various kinds of animal skins such as “ratskin”, “bridskin”, “wormskin”, “monkey-skin”, “apeskin” and “monkey-skin”. Perhaps in order to employ horrifying images, she uses “eyeless” to create phrases such as “eyeless mud”, “eyeless face”, “eyeless day”, “eyeless holes” which makes the word “eyeless” simply meaningless. Even the word “murdered” is used by Sitwell to make up phrases such as “murdered light”, “murdered bone”, “murdered God” and “murdered heart”. Repetition is a serious flaw throughout Edith’s writing career. Geoffrey Elborn remarks that much of Edith’s “later work lacks verbal invention and tends to be too repetitive, with certain symbols such as ‘gold’ and ‘bone’ and ‘Judas coloured’ being overworked.”¹²⁰ Not surprisingly in her time, some younger critics felt that Edith “was repeating herself by returning to a limited group of images and symbols”.¹²¹

From *Street Songs* (1942) till her death in 1964, Edith wrote as a prophet or Goddess expressing her concern for the world. Sitwell commented on the religious fervour in her late career:

> After a year of war I began to write poetry again – I had written nothing after *Gold Coast Customs* – of the state of the world, of the terrible rain … falling alike upon guilty and guiltless …
> I wrote of the sufferings of Christ, the Starved Man hung upon the Cross, the God of the Poor Man, who bears in His Heart all wounds.
> But, too, with poor Christopher Smart, I blessed Jesus Christ with the Rose and his people, which is a nation of living sweetness.
> My time of experiments was done.¹²²

In truth, Sitwell’s experiment was long done after *Facade* which remains her only distinctively experimental work.

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¹²⁰ Elborn, pp. 149-150.
¹²² Sitwell, *Taken Care of*, p. 152.
3.28 Sitwell and Modernism

Sitwell’s reputation as a Modernist is partly due to her promotion of Modernism, especially of Eliot’s work. She seemed to notice almost from the beginning that Eliot brought something new to English poetry as she pointed out in *Aspects of Modern Poetry*, “In the year 1917, with the publication of Mr. Eliot’s first volume, “Prufrock,” began what may fairly be described as a new reign in poetry.” Sitwell not only praised Eliot’s early work, she also exhibited great interest in *The Waste Land*. In 1924, she wrote to John Freeman, one of the neo-Georgians, about Eliot’s work:

It is such a disappointment to me that you do not like The Waste Land. In the first place, though I agree with you that a poem cannot exist without form, I find form in this poem. Is it not true, this passage from one of Coleridge’s Lectures: ‘The true ground of the mistake lies in the confounding mechanical regularity with organic form. The form is mechanic, when on any given material we impress a pre-determined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material: - as when to a mass of wet clay we give whatever shape we wish it to retain when hardened. The organic form, on the other hand, is innate: it shapes, as it develops, itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form. Such as the life is, such is the form.’ I find that organic form in all Tom Eliot’s poems. But why should I say that, to quote that, to you, whose form is never mechanic, but always living.

Not only did Sitwell admire Eliot’s poetry, but she made it a point to defend him whenever she got the chance. As she wrote to John Freeman again in 1925:

I have been having a sharp battle with Mr. Strong because he included such a gross attack on Tom Eliot’s The Waste Land. I confess I was absolutely furious, and charged Mr. Strong, head down, like a bull. But he is going to behave well, and, I hope, apologize.

In her *Poetry and Criticism* (1925), Sitwell was almost completely under Eliot’s spell. She repeated or paraphrased whatever important points he made in his critical essays. For example, she actually paraphrased Eliot’s theory of Impersonality by arguing that “Poetry is primarily an art, and not a dumping-ground for emotions.” She even spoke for Modernist abhorrence of moral messages: “When we are told that a poem cannot be a great poem unless it be built on a lofty moral theme, it is obvious that this belief is

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based on a total misapprehension of the nature of poetry.” 126 However, this contradicts her later adoption of religious and moral themes. Despite Sitwell’s stance in 1925 that moralising was irrelevant to modern poetry, she launched a public attack against D. H. Lawrence’s work in 1963:

The public canonisation of that insignificant, dirty little book *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* was a signal to persons who wish to unload the filth in their minds on the British public.

As the author of *Gold Coast Customs* I can scarcely be accused of shirking reality, but I do not wish to spend the rest of my life with my nose nailed to other people’s lavatories.127

Sitwell’s drastic change of stance on the moral theme was seldom noticed by critics. Moreover, the way she talked about her very small but intelligent audience also reminds one of Eliot’s remarks on the necessity of the existence of a small number of intellectual readers in “The Social Function of Poetry”. Sitwell expressed pretty much the same idea to Allanah Harper in 1928: “You know, I write for a small – a very small – audience. Perhaps you don’t know how important it is to a poet to have just a few friends with the kind of intelligence and sensitiveness you possess to such a rare degree.”128 Sitwell even defended free verse by arguing against rhyme. She quoted Milton that rhyme was “no necessary adjunct or true ornament of poem or good verse, in longer works especially, but the invention of a barbarous age, to set off wretched matter and lame meter.”129 Also, she called those who derided free verse because of its absence of rhyme “vulgar readers”.130 Despite her defence of free verse against rhyme, rhymed verse was the predominant form in her poetry in the 1920s. Even when she wrote more free verse poems in the 1940s and 1950s, the amount of rhymed verse still prevails over that of free verse.

That Sitwell went out of her way to defend Eliot’s poetry and criticism is not out of sheer sympathy. She was eager to establish herself as a Modernist poet. As John Pearson commented on the motive of *Poetry and Criticism*:

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130 P. 25.
She was not one to cast her poetry upon the waters and calmly wait to see what happened. Poetry, once written, had to be defended, publicized, explained, and *Poetry and Criticism* is particularly interesting for the eager way that she insists upon the kinship now between her poetry and the Modern Movement in the other arts.\(^\text{131}\)

Despite her highly appreciative stance on and enthusiastic support for Modernist poetics in general and Eliot’s in particular, Eliot, as Elborn declares, “never publicly lifted a finger to protect her or speak in her defence”\(^\text{132}\) as he did for Marianne Moore, nor did he recognise Sitwell as a Modernist as he did Moore. However, Sitwell seemed quite tolerant of Eliot’s negative criticism. She continued to sound awed by Eliot’s talent. As she wrote to him in 1935:

> I have just read the unpublished poems of a young man called Thomas Driberg. They seem to me to show really remarkable promise, and, at moments, achievement. He is very greatly under your influence (though not in form; he needs more shaping). But then, who is not? \(^\text{133}\)

Furthermore, in her 1944 letter to Maurice Bowra, Sitwell emphasised technique when she commented on women’s poetry in general:

> Women’s poetry, with the exception of Sappho … 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 … 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 … \(^\text{134}\)

Sitwell reiterated Eliot’s theory of Impersonality by dismissing the majority of women’s poetry as unbearably personal. Besides, she emphasised the need for women poets to be difficult, which is an element of Modernist rhetoric. I will argue, however, that the so-called difficulty of Sitwell’s poetry is only superficial. Sitwell was famous for creating images odd enough that only she herself might be able to understand them. Take “cock’s crow trees” in *Facade* for example; it is “nowhere interpreted by the author.”\(^\text{135}\) Also, she made up words related to skin in *Gold Coast Customs* such as “Monkey-skin”, “rat-skin” and “ape-skin” whose almost indistinguishable differences

\(^\text{131}\) Pearson, p. 193.  
\(^\text{132}\) Elborn, p. 95.  
\(^\text{133}\) Lehmann & Parker, p. 53.  
\(^\text{134}\) P. 116.  
do not necessarily contribute to differences in meaning. Being difficult does not necessarily mean something superior in quality; rather, it could also mean eccentricity produced by a willful individuality. Her experiment with sound effects in *Facade* forced her to pick out odd or non-sense words just in order to keep up the rhythm such as in lines “Beneath the gilt Capricorn / Said the Noctambulo / Turning his folio / To the papillio”\(^{136}\)

Apart from her unfair assessment of Emily Dickinson, she seemed to suggest that the only way for women poets to write well was to write “hard” poetry and employ “strange” images. This is obviously a Modernist stance. However, given the time when she wrote the above message, it is really a rather contradictory preaching. Sitwell simply gave up her experimental technique in her three collections following *Facade* and there was little experiment in *Gold Coast Customs*. Furthermore, her “glittering” manner is not part of Modernist technique, but rather her own style. By claiming that women poets should employ as “glittering a manner as possible, and with as strange images as possible”, Sitwell was basically justifying her own poetics.

Despite Sitwell’s Modernist rhetoric, the gap between Sitwell’s theory and practice is striking. For all her admiration for Modernism, she was unable to employ colloquial speech. Her poetry remains literary all through her career. However, when Sitwell summarised her career as a poet near the end of her life, she elaborated on her early experiments with rhythms, without mentioning her later withdrawal at all:

The violence of an epoch is responsible for the technical experiments of painters and poets of today. How to attain speed is the problem. And, as far as poets are concerned, to do this we must study the effect of texture on rhythm. These experiments are, for the most part, of a violent order. And if you ask why rhythms have become more violent, the answer is: this is an age of machinery, a wild race for time, confined within limits that are at once mad and circumscribed. Try to get out, and you will knock your head against the walls of materialism. This state of things is mirrored in modern syncopated dance-music, which removes music from the world of inspiration (which evolves itself organically from the inner need of the artist and brings it into the world of machinery where form is superimposed as a local idea). There is no time or space in which to dream. It is because of this that in those poems which deal with the world crumbling into dust, or with materialism building monstrous shapes out of the deadened dust, I, for one, use the most

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complicated dance-rhythms which could be found, or else syncopated rhythms which are not dance-rhythms.\footnote{Sitwell, \textit{Taken Care of}, p. 142.}

This lengthy passage could be taken as Sitwell’s ambitious theorising of her poetic endeavor, but unfortunately, is only strictly applicable to \textit{Facade}. I think Sitwell was aware that there was a huge gap between \textit{Facade} and her later works, but she chose not to comment on it. Written just a year before her death, this message sounds more like a summary of her whole writing career. It is a shrewd statement to help establish her reputation as a Modernist, but it is significantly misleading.

3.29 Conclusion

Sitwell’s writing career lasted for roughly three decades. The reason that \textit{Facade} has remained her best collection is at least two-faceted. On the one hand, Sitwell tried to incorporate the elements of modern music and art into poetry in order to achieve sound effects. Although many may have the impression that Sitwell’s experiment with sound repels meaning and makes \textit{Facade} considerably resemble Edward Lear’s nonsense verse, Sitwell’s experimental spirit is strikingly modern. On the other hand, Sitwell’s obsession with adjectives, especially colourful adjectives, had not yet infested \textit{Facade} as much as it did her following collections. Sitwell’s conventional vocabulary and imagery, especially her excessive use of adjectives, has seriously damaged the majority of her work. Sitwell’s poetry glitters with adjectives to the point that even Georgian poetry seems rather plain. Apart from her vocabulary, her diction is essentially literary, rather than colloquial, which puts her at odds with many of her contemporaries such as Robert Frost, T. S. Eliot, Lesbia Harford and Anna Wickham, to name just a few. Moreover, repetition is a serious problem present in most of her work published after \textit{Facade}: repetition of decorated adjectives and conventional imagery in \textit{Bucolic Comedies}, \textit{The Sleeping Beauty} and \textit{Troy Park}; repetition of a prophetic tone incarnated in Sitwell herself as a “golden” woman and of religious preaching from \textit{Gold Coast Customs} to her last collection \textit{The Outcast}. 

\footnote{Sitwell, \textit{Taken Care of}, p. 142.}
Taken as a whole, Sitwell’s poetry is very far from modern daily life. *Facade* may reveal a profound despair, but it is basically abstract. *Gold Coast Customs* may strive to reflect on social problems in contemporary London, but its allegorical style and repetitive use of religious vocabulary and abstract words make colloquial speech utterly impossible. Although she meant to present horrible images to voice her disgust with some social phenomena, the reader can only get a vague impression of her intention. This partly explains why critics often failed to see much reality in her poetry while she claimed she did concern herself with reality. Furthermore, the gap between Sitwell’s theory and practice is obvious. Although she publicly promoted Modernist poetics in *Poetry and Criticism* (1925) and partly in *Aspects of Modern Poetry* (1934), her poetry after *Facade* actually turned away from the general paths of both modern and Modernist poetry and into a more conventional direction. More conspicuously, the contradictory character of her poetic stance is unveiled in *Aspects of Modern Poetry* in which her admiration for a representative Georgian poet W. H. Davies and her brother Sacheverell Sitwell, a “belated Gerogian”¹³⁸ in Perkins’s words, and for such high Modernists such as Eliot and Pound, seems to indicate her poetic predicament which may have contributed to her choice of a more conventional role as a prophet who is neither modern as the best of the Georgian poets nor Modernist as Eliot and Pound.

Changes in Sitwell’s poetics deserve more attention than granted in terms of a comprehensive understanding and assessment of her poetic achievements. David Perkins has been the only scholar who directly pointed out that Sitwell returned to a more traditional and Romantic style after *Facade* and that *Street Songs* (1942) marked her transformation into a “a prophetess”¹³⁹ in *Gold Coast Customs* (1929). Sitwell’s ascendance to the role of a prophet from 1942 till 1962 kept herself and her work more and more distant from contemporary life. No wonder she wrote in the preface to her last collection *The Outcasts* that, “Poetry is, indeed, the deification of reality.”¹⁴⁰

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¹³⁹ P. 433.
¹⁴⁰ Sitwell, *The Outcasts*, p. 11.
the end of her life, her stance on modern poetry was strikingly anti-modern. From a high-pitched experimentalist to a conspicuously anti-modern prophet, Sitwell’s poetic assessment rejects any over-simplified terms such as “Avant-Garde”, “Modernist” or “Modern”. The transitional and to some degree, regressive character of her poetics merits a special place in the discussion of Sitwell’s poetic value.
3.3 Anna Wickham

3.31 Introduction

Anna Wickham was the pseudonym of Edith Alice Mary Harper (1883–1947), a British poet who was brought up in Australia and returned to England in 1906. She is sometimes considered an Australian poet. Wickham’s first collection *Songs of John Oland* was published privately in 1911. Her second collection *The Contemplative Quarry* was published by Harold Monro’s Poetry Bookshop in 1915, her third, *The Man with a Hammer*, was published by Grant Richards Ltd in 1916. In 1921, Harold Monro published her fourth collection *The Little Old House*. Meanwhile, *The Contemplative Quarry* and *A Man with a Hammer* were published as a combined volume in America in 1920 and was critically welcomed. Then she was silent for almost fifteen years until 1936, when Wickham’s *Richards’ Shilling Selection*, edited by John Gawsworth was published. She never published another volume and committed suicide in 1947.

In her lifetime, Wickham enjoyed an international reputation, especially in the 1910s and 1920s. Contemporary academic interest in Wickham’s poetry is predominantly feminist with only two exceptions. One is Barbara White Sounders’ 1967 Masters’ thesis “Anna Wickham: A Georgian Poet” which was perhaps the earliest attempt to approach Wickham’s work academically. However, Sounders’ identification of Wickham as a Georgian poet simply because Wickham wrote in the period when Georgian poetry was blooming needs qualification. For one thing, Wickham was not included in any of the five volumes of Georgian poetry. For another, a bigger problem with using the label “Georgian” is that, as Robert H. Ross asserts, “the literary histories of twentieth-century poetry have been remarkably incomplete on the Georgians.” Therefore adopting the term “Georgian” may run the risk of arousing more controversies given the fact that critical prejudice against “Georgian...
Poetry” since the 1910s has not been resolved even to the present day. Furthermore, Sounders analysed Wickham’s poetry without referring to any features of Georgian poetry. Another problem with Sounders’ thesis lies in the fact that, writing in 1967, she simply practised the New Critical “lemon-squeezer” method excluding any historical relevance. She wrote as if literary Modernism did not exist and Wickham’s experimentation with free verse was simply bypassed. Sounders’ approach is basically ahistorical. The other exception is R. D. Smith’s critical introduction to his 1984 The Writings of Anna Wickham: Free Woman and Poet in which he gave a detailed analysis of her poems without leaning towards either a Modernist perspective or a feminist perspective. He managed to give a rather convincing assessment of her work by praising her strengths and criticised her weaknesses.

All other academic interest is unanimously feminist and the critics differ more in degree than in kind. Important feminist works are Jennifer Vaughan Jones’s PhD dissertation The Poetry and Place of Anna Wickham: 1910-1930 (1994) and her critical biography Anna Wickham: A Poet’s Daring Life (2003), Jane Dowson’s Women, Modernism, and British Poetry, 1910-1939: Resisting Femininity (2002) and Nelljean McConeghey Rice’s A New Matrix For Modernism: A Study of the Lives and Poetry of Charlotte Mew and Anna Wickham (2003). Rice sought to “contribute to a Feminist project to reconfigure the Modernist movement” and claimed that her “critical and theoretical approach is best described as cultural biography.” The most recent study is Ann Vickery’s chapter “Between a Modernist Passport and House Arrest” in Stressing the Modern (2007). Vickery is rather critical of the previous studies and feels keenly that “A detailed engagement with Wickham’s poetry is now required to supplement these biographical and background studies.” Vickery’s statement is apt. However, Vickery’s own chapter also consists of considerable biographical materials. The few poems she quotes read like footnotes to testify to some details of Wickham’s life.

3.32 Wickham’s form

3.321 Free verse experiment

If there was only one thing for which Anna Wickham should be remembered as a distinctively modern poet, it would be her free verse experimentation. She started writing free verse poems before Imagism even existed and published her first collection Songs of John Oland in 1911. The following spring, Imagism was conceived “in a tea shop in Kensington, where, over buns, Pound informed two young poets, H.D. and Richard Aldington, that they were Imagistes.” As far as free verse is concerned, Wickham modernised her form all by herself and should be considered a pioneering experimentalist in this regard. Wickham’s free verse innovation both surprised and impressed Harold Monro, as R. D. Smith recorded:

The ‘probationary month’ had barely passed before Anna made her way to the Poetry Bookshop, which Harold Monro and his wife, Alida Klementaski, were running in Red Lion Square, Bloomsbury. She asked, “Have you any free rhythms?” He looked at me, interested, realizing I meant Free Verse. He said, “We’ve all been trying to write them”. I gave him my Songs.’ In the next months Anna also widened her acquaintance with distinguished writers, and artists in the studios of Chelsea and the Hampstead Road. She met Augustus John, Jacob Epstein, T. E. Hume, Ezra Pound, Hannen Swaffer, Nina Hamnett, David Garnett and a chirrup of young poets.

The “Songs” Wickham mentioned was Songs of John Oland which is basically a free verse collection. In “Illusion” Wickham’s temperament resembles that of Ezra Pound:

I who am great stalk above trees,
And come upon the world from heights.
I kick aside the little boxes of straight built towns,
Those great coveted houses!
Extend my arms to touch the round horizon,
And find the zenith just beyond my fingers.

Like Pound, Wickham is too ambitious and stubborn a personality to be less critical of her times. “Change” therefore becomes the key word of her philosophy as she claims:

147 P. 161.
Illusion! Illusion! What wonder men
Fight for false hope and die for Gods that are not,
Beneath the rounded falsity.
But when I sleep, I leave eternal circles
And where the great stars march
Find Truth in Change.148

Wickham’s free verse innovation might also explain her impatience with poetic conventions and her aspiration for change. In “Sinner”, Wickham is critical of both herself and the world at large:

Why should I sail to new coasts?
Why seek strange lands?
What is there in cliffs that amazes me,
Or in sand that I do not know!

I find no charm in this blue coral sea,
Nor in the coloured sky at nightfall,
All these things I have seen and I remember;
My memories are part of my contaminated self,
The world’s beauty rots for me.149

Nature, which arouses romantic associations in nineteenth century poetry, does not seem to impress Wickham very much; her temperament is essentially anti-romantic. Not only is she weary of the traditional concept of beauty, but she is relentlessly critical of herself. In the twentieth century, it is still very rare for any poet to be so critical of his or her character. Wickham’s “my contaminated self” is outspoken to the point of being self-defacing. In *Women, Modernism, and British Poetry, 1910-1939: Resisting Femininity*, Jane Dowson labels Wickham a “female Modernist”. However, she is oblivious to Wickham’s conspicuous free verse innovation. Instead, she simply remarks that Wickham’s “experiments with assonance and half-rhyme were pioneering”150 without offering any textual evidence to verify her statement. Similarly, Ann Vickery, in *Stressing the Modern*, fails to notice that Wickham’s 1911 collection *Songs of John Oland* features free verse.

148 P. 162.
149 P. 164.
150 Dowson, p. 201.
3.322 Negotiation with form

Although Wickham started off writing free verse, she did not have steady faith in the form. Through Harold Monro’s Poetry Bookshop, Wickham was acquainted with Hume and Pound among many, and there is enough reason to believe that Wickham was soon familiar with the new tendency in poetry called Imagism. Given the impact of Imagism, especially its promotion of free verse, Wickham should have been reassured of the credibility of her free verse experiment. However, she seemed uncertain about free verse that she wrote very occasionally in free verse in her following years. It is worth noting that Wickham’s first collection features not only free verse but other liberations of verse form. Other liberations of verse form, rather than free verse, become the salient feature of Wickham’s following collections. As “The Egoist” indicates:

And now of this matter of ear-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 trot in iambic, as it is for me,  
Who live not in the horse-age, but in the day of aeroplanes, to write my rhythms free.\textsuperscript{151}

Although Wickham maintains the traditional stanza form, she abandons traditional metre. The lengthy lines in her second stanza remind one of D. H. Lawrence’s prose style. The poem is free of metre but not of rhyme. Despite that Wickham claims she prefers “faulty” rhyme to “ear-perfect” rhyme, the rhymes she uses in the poem are actually “ear-perfect”. Here lies the contradiction between her theory and practice. Actually, rhyme is so important for her that she sticks to it even when she abandons both stanza and meter. For example in “Imperatrix”:

Am I pleasant?  
Tell me that, old Wise!  
Let me look into your eyes,  
To see if you can comprehend my beauty,

\textsuperscript{151} Wickham, \textit{The Writings}, pp. 173-174.
That is a lover’s duty:
I look at you to see
If you can think of anything but me.
Ah, you remember praise and your philosophy!
My love shall be a sphere of silence and of light,
Where Love is all alone with love’s delight.
Here is a woodcutter who is so weak
With love of me, he cannot speak.
Tell me, dumb man, am I pleasant, am I pleasant?
Farewell, philosopher! I love a peasant.\textsuperscript{152}

If free verse distinguishes her first collection, rhyme becomes the most salient feature of Wickham’s following collections. Wickham’s liberations of verse form are similar to that of Millay, Pound and Auden, as previously discussed and should still be considered a modern act. Furthermore, Wickham’s withdrawal from free verse from her second collection \textit{The Contemplative Quarry} (1915) deserves some consideration.

Very possibly, Wickham herself is not certain about free verse in the first place. Even the momentum of Imagism in its initial years when Pound still played a major role did not assure her of its justification. Although Pound and Eliot told against free verse as early as 1917, Wickham’s substantial return to rhyme happened in 1915. Even after she returned to traditional rhyme, she was still wrestling with the justification of rhyme as she was dubious about free verse. In “Formalist”, included in her 1916 collection \textit{The Man with a Hammer}, Wickham expresses her uncertainty about rhyme:

\begin{verbatim}
As men whose bones are wind-blown dust have sung,
Let me sing now!
I’ll sing of gourds, and goads, of honey, and the plough.
I am a raw uneasy parv en,
I am uncertain of my time.
How can I pour the liquor of new days
In the old pipes of Rhyme?\textsuperscript{153}
\end{verbatim}

Wickham seems to indicate that “rhyme”, the old bottle, is unfit for the new wine, but she does not really have faith in free verse, the new bottle. Although she has doubts about “rhyme”, she holds fast to it until the end of her writing career. Ann Vickery seems to be aware of the contradiction between Wickham’s theory and practice as she comments on this poem that, “Despite this disavowal, several of the poems follow a

\textsuperscript{152} P. 218.
\textsuperscript{153} P. 195.
traditional rhyme scheme.” It is perhaps true that Wickham was uncertain of her time and her poetics. In the late 1910s, Pound had abandoned Imagism for Vorticism. Also, “the authority of Eliot as a critic also told against free verse in the 1920s and 1930s.” Wickham was certainly aware of the formal changes in poetry. It is hard to say to what extent Wickham’s association with Modernist poets such as Pound encouraged her return to rhyme, but she was certainly aware of the critical change.

3.3 Wickham’s language

Wickham’s language is closely connected with her personality. In many ways, she was almost a female version of Ezra Pound. She was outspoken, aggressive, argumentative, quarrelsome, humourous and mischievous; she was intolerant of hypocrisy and critical of others as well as herself. Reading through her poetry, one gets a perfect sense of her strong personality. Wickham is a poet who is always ready to render every move of her mind into poetry. Unlike Eliot who wrote critical essays about poetry, Wickham discussed poetics in her poems. In “The Egoist”, she comments on the vocabulary of modern poetry:

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 I can make a synthesis,
And learn poetic form that in them is;
But I will use the figure that is real
For me, the figure that I feel.

Wickham has the habit of starting a poem with a question and then gives her reply. Her reply, however, often conveys a sense of uncertainty. Wickham touches upon the issue of Beauty which is central to poetry in the previous century. To put it simply, poets were supposed to express beauty in poetry by using agreeable words; any words that arouse repulsive feelings should be avoided. However, in the twentieth century, the

\[154\] Vickery, p. 140.
\[155\] Perkins, A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode, p. 317.
\[156\] Wickham, The Writings, pp. 173-174.
concept of beauty was challenged by poets who sought to express what was real, rather than what was beautiful. For example, Eliot considers April the cruelest month and Millay describes April as a babbling idiot. Wickham also feels the need to express what is real and what she feels. By this principal, her vocabulary includes words that are quite provocative. For example, in “Multiplication”, she was quite ironical about D. H. Lawrence:

Had I married you, dear,
When I was nineteen,
I had been little since
But a printing machine;
For, before my fortieth year had run,
I well had produced you
A twenty-first son.

Your ingenious love
Had expressed through me
Automatic, unreasoned, fecundity.
I had scattered the earth
With the seed of your loins,
And stamped you on boys
Like a king’s head on coins.157

Marianne Moore would certainly be enraged by Wickham’s use of “a printing machine” and “the seed of your loins”. Despite her irony and humour, Wickham’s accusation of Lawrence is not necessarily justifiable. Lawrence was Wickham’s close friend, but according to Jennifer Vaughan Jones, “Lawrence never tried to approach her sexually, a fact that years later Anna said she was rather offended about.” 158 Similarly, Wickham launched fire against Harold Monro who enthusiastically promoted her poetry. As “The Indictment” details:

Your woman breeds dogs
Like an old ham
Breeds maggots.
To all such dreary,
Spavined, skinflint faggots
Commend me.
And you enjoying me,
Cloying me even
With your appreciation,
Fling to her the fees and usufruct
Of my creation
With hope to end me.  

Wickham can be threateningly aggressive when she takes offence against anyone, including her close friends. Poets seldom swear to such an extent in poetry. Poetry for Wickham, however, has become a vehicle by which she would express any emotion. Wickham’s use of “maggots” and “faggots” reminds one of Millay’s “Spring” in which she describes the image of men’s brains being eaten by maggots. Wickham’s anger is first and foremost directed at a money issue. It seems that this is the only reason she cannot help but feel angered by Monro. In “To Harold Monro”, she once again brings up the money issue:

You bloody Deaconess in rhyme,
You told me not to waste your time –
And that from you to me!

Now let Eternity be told
Your slut has left my books unsold –
And you have filched my fee.  

It is interesting to recall that Monro was very appreciative and supportive of Wickham’s poetry, and he was quite impressed by her “chiefly conversational” style. Certainly, her tone is rather conversational especially when she was swearing at Monro and his wife. Wickham is harsh not only on friends, but on herself. In “Men of the West”, her frankness about her own image is astounding:

I have grown fat
From my prosperity,
My flesh is rank
From inactivity.

I have gained a paunch
From this orderly town,
And with it such disorder
That to keep my dinner down

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159 Wickham, *The Writings*, p. 342.
160 P. 332.
161 P. 116.
In the twentieth century, Wickham perhaps finds no equal in deliberate self-defacing in poetry. I suspect she could find any rival in the history of English poetry in this regard. She uses words such as “fat”, “rank” and “paunch” to describe the status of her body which provoke a strong sense of ugliness and repulsion. Her image was further blackened by her “inactivity”. Perhaps she does not really care about the way she looks. However, Wickham’s self-defacing betrays a deeper sense of pessimism. Nevertheless, the reader gets a glimpse of modernity from her “prosperity”, “superfine products” and “druggist on this clean street”.

Apart from her physical “ugliness”, Wickham was also confessional about her spiritual “ugliness”:

I am no man’s love,  
But a lonely devil  
Tossing the balls of good and evil;  
Slogging the air:  
A mime at a fair!

I am no man’s love,  
But a bearded wench  
Lolling in a booth on a scarlet bench,  
Where yokels come to grin, and see  
What I be!

I am no man’s love,  
But a five-lagged calf;  
And I am penned to raise a laugh;  
And now and then I try to run –  
And that’s the fun.163

By employing words such as “devil”, “mime”, “a bearded wench” and “a five-lagged calf”, Wickham’s self-mockery is ruthless. This poem conveys an acute sense of desperation. This poem could be taken as the best portrait of Wickham’s psychology in

162 Pp. 342-343.  
163 P. 289.
her later years when her sons were away and she was left home alone, bitter, cynical and self-abandoned. However, Wickham could appear very gracious and loving elsewhere. In “Conflicting Occupation”, she reveals some interesting details of her family life:

If the baby playing typewriter,
Would only let me write,
I might compose him something.
On the Spirit of Delight,
Something as Rhythmical
And accurate as Shelley’s
But if I turn my back,
My young fill their small bellies,
With ink and sealing wax and tacks.164

Wickham’s vocabulary such as “typewriter”, “ink”, “sealing wax” and “tacks” depicts a modern writer’s life. Besides, her sense of humour is apparent in her description of the innocence of children.

3.34 Wickham’s conservatism

Wickham’s vocabulary challenges traditional understanding of poetry in which beauty plays a central part. Her conversational style is also a modern feature. However, no poet can be modern in a complete sense. Wickham is no exception. Her vocabulary could be old-fashioned as to include words such as “God”, “king”, “lord”, “master”, “slave” and “sinner”. For example in “The Shrew”:

You wish, O master of my destiny,
That I control myself!
‘Twere better you ruled me.
For if I rule myself, I smile at you, and hate.
If you rule me, I love you though I curse, O mate!165

Wickham calls her husband “master” perhaps out of irony given her angry tone. However, when she is happy with him in “The Supreme Courtesy”, his “mastery”

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164 Cited by Vickery, p. 133.
165 Wickham, The Writings, p. 206.
seems a joy:

O, he is cruel-quick enough!
But to my touch, as pleasant as fine stuff,
And from a wound of him I’d die,
Happy at such keen mastery.\(^\text{166}\)

It seems that Wickham’s sensibility is closely related with the old world in which her poetic imagination was nurtured. In her eyes, her lover is her master; sometimes, he is even her King as “The Assignation” shows:

My King, O my Delight!
Who is so strangely dear,
Kiss me not to-night,
Kiss me not for a year.\(^\text{167}\)

Wickham sounds like Zora Cross who, in her sonnets, considers herself a submissive slave to her lover. The emotional abandonment in love of both Wickham and Cross is conventional. Sometimes, Wickham’s archaism is apparent as “Invocation to the Intelligence of a Gentleman” displays:

Nymph in a Cloud!
Shy loiterer on a height!
By faith art thou avowed
Thou art not known to sight.
Pity the clod in me,
Frail denizen of air;
I, lacking sight of thee,
Must doubt if thou art there!\(^\text{168}\)

It seems that Wickham’s sensibility was partially trapped in the Victorian period and she was used to addressing a man “gentleman” and a woman “lady”. In “The Dependence”, she expresses her love for a woman:

I am your shadow, since I love,
‘Tis you compel my changing mood,
Now to be still, and now to move,
You are my evil and my good.
Smile, lady, and behold in me,
The grace of mirrored courtesy.\(^\text{169}\)

\(^{166}\) P. 223.
\(^{167}\) P. 213.
\(^{168}\) P. 265.
\(^{169}\) P. 229.
Apart from the rather old-fashioned spelling of “its” in the second line, her use of “lady” and “behold” are signs of conventionality. Although Wickham appears as a strikingly unconventional personality, she seems to be drawn to “courtesy” as the poem makes clear. Also, the title of another poem “The Supreme Courtesy” also confirms this. Moreover, she sometimes deals with abstract concepts such as “soul” and “faith” as indicated in “Soul’s Liberty” and “Eternal Faith”. Similar to Edna St. Vincent Millay and Lesbia Harford, Wickham is a poet in transition. The modernity of her language is dotted with relics of conventionality.

3.35 Radicalism of Wickham’s love poetry

Wickham was essentially a “New Woman”. Her views on love and marriage are unconventional. Like Millay, she does not believe romantic love will last. In “Song of Anastasia”, she claims:

Shall I mock you, and tell you that love shall endure,
Knowing you know the quality of things that are secure?
Let love be fierce as lightning, and as brief
As summer-hail, that is a storm’s relief.  

In her view, the brevity of love is closely connected with its intensity which is the very quality and power of love. Since love can not last long, marriage should not be a barrier to new love. Accordingly, there is no point demanding fidelity in either love or marriage. In “The Revolt of Wives”, she criticised the role traditional morality imposed upon women:

My whole long life away in things of sex,
As in those good Victorian days
When teeming women lived in stays.

The lines above compare favourably to one of Millay’s sonnets: “I, being born a woman and distressed / By all the needs and notions of my kind”. Like Millay,
Wickham championed free love as she claims in “Ship Near Shoals”:

I have been misused by chaste men with one wife
That I would live with satyrs all my life.
Virtue has bound me with such infamy
That I must fly where Love himself is free,
And know all vice but that small vice of dignity.175

Wickham found Victorian morality such as chastity, virtue and dignity suffocating. She felt humiliated by men who prized traditional fidelity, so she deliberately employed a conventional image “satyrs” to voice her sexual freedom. In “Remembrance”, she dismissed fidelity in marriage outright:

What shall I do with my marriage dress?
In which I walked the lover’s way.
Shall I wear it in forgetfulness,
Through a less honoured day?
Shall fastenings he has drawn for his delight,
Be loosed by a less honoured hand, at night? 176

Even outside marriage, she never lowered her standard about free love which, first and foremost, values freedom. In “Gift to a Jade”, she chided her lover who demanded loyalty:

For love he offered me his perfect world.
This world was so constricted, and so small,
It had no sort of loveliness at all,
And I flung back the little silly ball.
At that cold moralist I hotly hurled,
His perfect pure symmetrical small world.177

Wickham considered the requirement of fidelity in love a silly act. Not only did Wickham champion sexual freedom in marriage, she believed her children would benefit from their unconventional mother. As “Mother Sin” indicates:

Out of the womb of Mother Sin
With stained and sensitive skin,
Is born the strong solitary soul
Who is master of power and of control.
Fearlessness did him beget;
Nor let the moralist forget,

175 Wickham, The Writings, p. 180.
176 P. 214.
177 P. 189.
The child of Sin and Courage well may be
Nobler than any child of timid purity.\textsuperscript{178}

Apparently, Wickham uses the title “Mother Sin” only ironically. In “Genuflection”, she does not really succumb to religious teachings. Instead, her seeming confession amounts to blasphemy:

\begin{align*}
& 
I \text{ most offend my Deity when I kneel;} \\
& 
I \text{ have no profit from repeated prayers.} \\
& 
I \text{ know the law too perfect and too real} \\
& 
\text{To swerve or falter for my small affairs.} \\
& 
\text{Not till my ruinous fears begin} \\
& 
\text{Do I ask God for freedom from my sin.} \\
& 
\text{Self-fear is chiepest ally of the Devil,} \\
& 
\text{And I fall straight from praying into evil.}\textsuperscript{179}
\end{align*}

Again, this poem reads almost like Millay’s “The Penitent” which describes a defiant and flippant “New Woman”:

\begin{align*}
& 
\text{So up I got in anger,} \\
& 
\text{And took a book I had,} \\
& 
\text{And put a ribbon on my hair} \\
& 
\text{To please a passing lad,} \\
& 
\text{And, “One thing there’s no getting by –} \\
& 
\text{I’ve been a wicked girl,” said I;} \\
& 
\text{“But if I can’t be sorry, why,} \\
& 
\text{I might as well be glad!”}\textsuperscript{180}
\end{align*}

Conceivably, Wickham’s unbridled attitude toward marriage poses serious problems in her family life. Her extramarital affairs would not be tolerated by her husband. In “The Conscience”, published in 1916, Wickham seems to indicate that her “unfaithful” behaviour sometimes makes her conscience ache:

\begin{align*}
& 
\text{Deadly destructive to my man and me} \\
& 
\text{Are my rare fits of sore morality.} \\
& 
\text{A mad domestic hell begins} \\
& 
\text{When woman hides virtues, and displays her sins.}\textsuperscript{181}
\end{align*}

Deep down, she finds it hard not to consider “faithfulness” virtuous and “infidelity” immoral. Between the lines, Wickham was a little guilty of her infidelity. She was

\textsuperscript{178} P. 187. \\
\textsuperscript{179} P. 185. \\
\textsuperscript{180} Millay, Collected Poems, p. 140. \\
\textsuperscript{181} Wickham, The Writings, p. 219.
almost prophetic when she said her unconventional behaviour turned out to be “destructive” to her family. It is hard not to say that her husband’s death in 1929 has nothing to do with Wickham’s frequent love affairs. Vickery comments that, “There is a possibility that Patrick’s death was not accidental for his estate was left in a chaotic and dismal state. In a fit of despair, Anna attempted to hang herself at Patrick’s office but was stopped by the arrival of her son, Jim, who cut her down.”

Wickham was openly bisexual. She was quite vocal about her lesbianism. In “Song of the Old Sinner from Oxford”, she recorded her lesbian love as a school girl:

\[
\text{In the bed of my Love}
\text{Was a text-book on Conics,}
\text{In the bed of my Love}
\text{Was a compass and rule.}
\text{So I cried out my youth}
\text{On her horny old bosom,}
\text{Then laughed for a morning}
\text{And went back to school.}^{183}
\]

It was apparent that Wickham maintained her lesbian love affairs even after she was married. In “The Vain Girl”, she recorded such a love affair:

\[
\text{When you left me last night}
\text{I dressed myself in shiny white:}
\text{I wore my simplest satin dress}
\text{Knowing you love my slenderness.}
\text{And I was like an ivory snake}
\text{And I was this for Beauty’s sake.}^{184}
\]

The love affair between Wickham and Natalie Barney was well known. “The Boor’s Wooing” was very likely written about their affair:

\[
\text{I love her for her white, deft hands.}
\text{With what an art, she smooths the strands}
\text{Of Chloe’s hair to make a seemliness}
\text{Among the gins of that sweet-scented wilderness!}
\text{...}
\text{And she shall kilt her skirt, and bare her arms,}
\text{And live about my fields, and on my farms.}
\]

\[^{182}\text{Cited by Vickery, p. 164.}\]
\[^{183}\text{Wickham, The Writings, p. 319.}\]
\[^{184}\text{P. 262.}\]
Is she thin Venus on a painted fan?
No, she’s right woman, and Myself’s her man!\textsuperscript{185}

Eventually, love turns out one disappointment after another. In the late years of her life, she is quite bitter about love and a strong sense of pessimism is felt in “Da Capo”:

\begin{quote}
Woo me with orudres  
Calm me with castigations;  
Have my lips wet  
With the plague’s sweat:  
Raise me to all prostrations!
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
Clamp me with pain so close around  
That I lose sense and sight and sound:  
Induce me old ecstasy  
Of infinite frustrations!\textsuperscript{186}
\end{quote}

As for her attitude toward sex, Wickham is very similar to Lawrence. Alida Klemantaski, who became Alida Monro in 1920 by marriage, complained to Monro about Wickham’s stance on sexuality:

\begin{quote}
Mrs. Hepburn drives me mad. Bodies seem lovely things till she comes & makes[crossed out] strives to make one feel that sex is the only thing that matters & one act between a man & a woman, all that life means, & defiles the body with her thought. I hate having to come in contact with her & only want to get away & hide from everything.\textsuperscript{187}
\end{quote}

Wickham prizes sexuality in no less degree than Lawrence. Their similar stance perhaps explains their intimate friendship. In “The Slighted Lady”, Wickham openly admitted her infidelity out of her sexual drive:

\begin{quote}
‘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.’
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
Then she stept down from her high window  
And walked with her young lover, singing to his lure.\textsuperscript{188}
\end{quote}

Perhaps no woman poet before was outspoken as Wickham. This poem was included in her 1915 collection \textit{The Contemplative Quarry}. In persuading Harcourt Brace to

\textsuperscript{186} Pp. 31-31.  
\textsuperscript{187} Jones, p. 115.  
\textsuperscript{188} Wickham, \textit{The Writings}, p. 189.
publish a combined American edition of Wickham’s *The Contemplative Quarry* and *The Man with a Hammer*, Louis Untermeyer was convinced that “the rapid social changes occurring in the United States would be conducive to the outspoken nature of her work.” Sometimes, sexuality seems to cast a spell on her that she has to do something about it. As “Technician” demonstrates:

So I made love to you: removing you  
From my nerve tissue,  
Thus to save me loving you,  
Till – by intention – I was all bereft  
And had no scent nor tincture of you left.

But now I am a clear passivity,  
Fine sublimation of my destiny,  
And you may fill me as the light fills air,  
And where I am, you’ll know yourself is there.  

Wickham was certainly aware of her uncontrollable sexual desire. In “Page Ending”, she comments on this briefly: “My wrecking lust has no just bounds / When I know beauty and love wounds.” Wickham’s unconventional stance on love and marriage makes her poetry strikingly modern.

### 3.36 Wickham’s propaganda

In 1926, in a letter to Percival Serle, Lesbia Harford mentioned in passing that she did not like Anna Wickham’s polemically feminist poetry which she considered “spoilt as much by its slovenliness as by its propaganda aspect”. Harford’s comment on the polemical aspect of Wickham’s poetry is justifiable. A major flaw of Wickham’s poetry is her high-pitched feminist propaganda. For example, in “The Slighted Lady”:

There was a man who won a beautiful woman.  
Not only was she lovely, and shaped like a woman,

---

189 Vickery, p. 145.  
190 Wickham, *The Writings*, p. 323.  
191 P. 315.  
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.

But there came a day when the woman 
understood even more than the man had said; 
Then she spoke, and the man, sated with 
possession, and weary with words, slept. 
He slept on the threshold of his house. 
The woman was within, in a small room.193

It seems that Wickham was trying to interpret some aspects of feminist tenets by creating dramatic scenes to reiterate feminist consciousness. Wickham might believe her interpretation makes sense, but the outcome is a feminist poster. Yvor Winters, for instance, criticised Wickham’s generalities about men and women:

But even perspicuous generalities do not constitute poetry, and platitudes are not perspicuous; and a perusal of this sort of poetry in quantities enforces boredom. This poet, like too many others, becomes more interested in the reason for her unhappiness than in the unhappiness itself; and, having reasons that are commonplace enough, there is no subtle evasion in her statement, nothing to disguise, however thinly, the barrenness of trodden ground.194

Winters’s criticism is actually pertinent. Apart from general statements about women and women, Wickham also makes individual argument to highlight her feminist consciousness:

Am I your mate because I share your bed? 
Go then! Find each day a new mate outside your house. 
I am your mate if I can share your vision.195

This is not just propaganda, it is repetition of feminist propaganda. In “Woman and a Dilemma”, contrary to what the title implies, she does not seem to have a real dilemma:

The gentleman I married 
Says I ruined his intelligence 
By marrying him. 
The gentleman I did not marry

193 Wickham, The Writings, p. 188. 
195 Wickham, The Writings, p. 166.
Says I ruined his intelligence  
By not marrying him.  
I wonder if either of these gentlemen  
Had an intelligence!  
I wonder if marriage  
Is an affair of the intelligence.  
But now I will borrow a book from a eunuch.  
I begin to be interested  
In my own intelligence.  

It seems that Wickham is seeking to discuss marriage in terms of intelligence. At the end of the poem, her subject shifts to her own intelligence which practically has nothing to do with marriage. One wonders why she yokes together the issue of intelligence with marriage. Wickham does have a great sense of humour by borrowing “a book from a eunuch...”, but that is just a pose. Moreover, the dramatic remarks by two gentlemen are very possibly fabricated by Wickham herself in order to shed light on her own intelligence.

Although Wickham claimed in the above poem that she ruined her husband’s intelligence, it does not seem to bother her husband at all. In “The Individualist”, Wickham speaks through her husband about their love:

When I get a child  
I get him with fixed intent,  
I don’t get him by accident.  
I get him because I am content with life,  
Satisfied with myself,  
And because I love my wife.  

Wickham presents the image of a happy husband who wants a child out of love. In “The Promise”, Wickham herself emphasises that her child is conceived out of beauty and pleasure:

I will not love you for my duty,  
Not for all your treasure,  
But I will love because of beauty,  
And because of pleasure.  
The boy that I shall bear will be a love-child,  
Conceived in holy blindness,

\footnote{196}{P. 304.}  
\footnote{197}{P. 216.}
I give him to the world who shall be reconciled
To love-kindness.
Since I no longer love for duty,
Nor for all man’s treasure,
And since I bear the child to Beauty,
Because of pleasure.\textsuperscript{198}

Apparently, Wickham and her husband love each other and wish to produce a child out of beauty and pleasure. However, her high-pitched polemic soon proves to be a weak rhetoric. In “The Angry Woman”, Wickham seems to have lost her head by questioning the beauty and pleasure she previously claims her child is conceived of. Her attitude seems to have taken a drastic turn and she no longer considers her child a joy by asking “how can I serve my son, but to be much myself.” Taking care of the child seems to be something she hates to do:

```
    Shall I for ever brush my infants hair?
    Cumber his body in conceited needle-work?
    Or shall I save some pains till he is grown?
```

Wickham seems to be tortured by the role of a caring mother. She then lets out a cry: “Why should dull custom make my son my enemy / So that the privilege of his manhood is to leave my house?”\textsuperscript{199} Mother’s responsibility has made her son her hateful enemy. If this is the case, one wonders why she says her child is conceived out of pleasure and beauty. Wickham considers her husband her enemy in “The Defiance”, now her son becomes her enemy. One wonders if she is too argumentative to be always honest with how she feels. When she is not angry, she can actually be very affectionate as “Song to the Young John” indicates:

```
The apple-blossomy king
Is lord of this new spring,
He is the spirit of young joy,
My little yellow-headed boy.

His eyes are a bluebell wood, set in a boy’s head.
His hair the white-gold, ghost of sunlight, form springs dead.
The pink of apple-blossom is in his bonnie cheeks,
I hear bird-song in sleepy glades, when the king speaks.
```

\textsuperscript{198} P. 212.
\textsuperscript{199} P. 203.
He moves like a young larch in a light wind,
His body brings slim budding trees to mind.
How all my senses thrill to the dear treasure,
Till I must weep for sweet excess of pleasure.\(^{200}\)

There is no doubt that Wickham is a good mother. Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote to Edmund Wilson about her impression of Wickham when they met in Paris in the 1920s: “She’s the most essentially motherly woman I ever met. Would you expect that? It was an astonishment to me. I like her tremendously.” Apparently, when the good mother stops arguing, she does produce poetry.

### 3.37 Wickham and Modernism

Despite her experiment with free verse, Wickham’s poetry is strikingly personal. She once claimed that, “Self-knowledge and self-expression are the only techniques of my continuance.”\(^{201}\) Her whole poetic lies in her highly charged self-expression and she believed in spontaneity. She stated, “I could never learn to study technique: with me it has to come spontaneously, or not at all.”\(^{202}\) It is the immediate reaction to real life encounters that puts her poetry at odds with the impersonal nature of Modernist poetry. However, it is also the immediacy and intensity of her emotion that gives her poetry the impetus and power to strike readers as indisputably modern. Richard Aldington, in his review of Wickham’s *The Contemplative Quarry* in *The Egoist*, remarked that, “She makes me think of those punching machines on Folkestone pier where you hit a leather projection and a dial registers the force of a blow of life. Life hits Anna Wickham and she registers a poem.”\(^{203}\) Her poetry is not from books as Marianne Moore’s largely is, but mainly from real life. David Garnett commented on the personal nature of her poetry:

> I soon realized that her thoughts and feelings were her poems. A stream of good and bad ones flowed through her. Later she might brood over what she had jotted down and if she felt it was what she wanted to say, she would type it out and preserve it. This poetry made

\(^{200}\) Pp. 169-170.  
\(^{201}\) P. 53.  
\(^{202}\) P. 29.  
\(^{203}\) Cited by Vickery, p. 140.
Besides, Wickham seeks to express not only a personality, but a strong personality. As “Comment” indicates:

Tone
Is utterly my own.
Far less exterior than skill,
It comes from the deep centre of the will.
For nobler qualities of Song,
Not singing, but the singer must be strong.

For Wickham, her personality plays a predominant role in her poetry. It is not content, nor form, nor the technique that matters. A unique tone which conveys personality is central to her poetics. As Barbara White Saunders points out: “The key factor is intensity. Not only is Miss Wickham’s style impassioned, her subjects are chosen for their ability to inspire deep and powerful feelings.” Since emotion is a window through which one’s personality is often observed, Wickham feels the need to control her mood if she strives to write good poetry. As “Examination” makes clear:

If my work is to be good,
I must transcend skill, I must master mood.
For the expression of the rare thing in me,
Is not in do, but deeper, in to be.
Something of this kind was meant,
When piety was likened to a scent.
A smell is not in movement, not in power,
It is a function of a perfect flower.

Wickham seems to indicate that disciplining one’s mood can help extract the essence of one’s personality. The gravitational pull of one’s personality can be powerful as the irresistible scent flowers send off. Once again, Wickham invalidates technique and emphasises the charm of personality. One gets the feeling that Wickham’s poetic is rather impressionistic. Without skill, it is difficult for anyone to become a good craftsman. Gradually, Wickham is aware of the defect of her poetics. In “Fecundity”, she expresses the need for technique:

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204 Cited by Vickery, p. 140.
205 Wickham, The Writings, p. 195.
207 Wickham, The Writings, p. 193.
Fret and strain,
And ugly signs of pain,
Never yet had part
In birth of Art.
Men are brought forth in grief:
Labour for Beauty is a soul’s relief.
Expression is conceived, and has its shape,
Of Sloth’s most painful violent rape.
A spirit big with Beauty shall be discontent:
She knows all rapture when her time is spent.
Go! my sick striving spirit, seek
A simple, swift, victorious technique!\(^{208}\)

For Wickham, the anxiety of writing should find its release in a simple technique. To express her personality, Wickham understandably values simplicity and straightforwardness. However, whether this is a victorious technique for Wickham is open to question. Wickham’s personality is of a contradictory nature which also reflects in her contradictory poetics. On the one hand, she claims she must transcend skill; on the other hand, she claims that she does have a skill. As “Return of Pleasure” shows:

> 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.’\(^{209}\)

If Wickham does have a skill to invigorate poetry, it is a direct means of expressing her personality. Also, it is hard to define one’s self-expression as a skill. Ultimately, Wickham’s poetic boils down to “put myself, and everything I see, upon the page.” Perhaps because of this, the majority of Wickham’s poems read like anecdotes and footnotes of her tempestuous life. However, Wickham’s poetry does have power to attract poets and critics; it is a power of her personality and a strong will to exhaust every drop of it. As “Resolution” displays:

> I will not draw only a house or a tree,
> I will draw very Me;
> Everything I think, everything I see!

\(^{208}\) P. 194.
\(^{209}\) P. 194.
I will have no shame,
No hope of praise or fear of blame!
These things are mean things, and the same.

I am the product of old laws,
Old effect of old cause.
The thing that is, may make the blind Gods pause.  

The first stanza is a reiteration of her “theory of personality”. The second stanza, however, reveals the power of her poetry: her invincible daringness and shamelessness. Her outspokenness about infidelity, sexuality and lesbian love, her affection for her husband and sons, her ironies and curses directed at close friends and her deliberate self-defacing, together present a vivid picture of her complicated personality and gives her poetry an unusual charm. Furthermore, Wickham declares that she does not care about praise or blame, but she actually cares a great deal. In 1928, Natalie Barney compared her negatively with T. S. Eliot and Wickham was greatly enraged: “You have suggested to me that I had not the tact nor social equipment to deal with men like T. S. Eliot.”  

Given her associations with Pound, Wickham was certainly aware of Eliot’s theory of Impersonality and his status as a Modernist poet. Wickham’s strong reaction to Barney’s mention of Eliot is perhaps due to her suspicion of Eliot’s difficult poetics. In the third stanza, Wickham is frank enough to point out the conventional elements in her poetry. In the meantime, she is confident that the unconventional aspects of her poetry disclose the power of her creativity. Wickham’s relationship with Modernism is complicated. Her free verse experiment almost made her a Modernist pioneer. She was not against Imagism; she knew Pound and Hume. She was close to Monro and Lawrence who appreciated and promoted her poetry. However, Wickham’s poetry is essentially personal and accessible which is at odds with Eliot’s impersonal and difficult poetics.

3.38 Wickham’s International Reputation

In her lifetime, Wickham enjoyed an international reputation, one which her

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210 P. 195.
211 Vickery, p. 159.
contemporaries such as Edith Sitwell, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Marianne Moore, Lesbia Harfod and Zora Cross could only imagine. As R. D. Smith commented in 1984:

She had an international reputation as a poet: improbable as it seems today, anthologies printed more of her poems than they did of such greater poets as de la Mare, Graves, and even in some volumes, W. B. Yeats. She was in *International Who's Who* and Humbert Wolfe had written of her in the great 14th Edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

Wickham herself was certainly aware of her reputation as she wrote in the prelude of her unfinished autobiography in 1935: “I have a European reputation: my poetry is mentioned with honour in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*: that should give me a right to live.”

The reason for her reputation is multi-faceted, but it is primarily connected with the nature of her poetry. Her free verse experiment, which is recognisably a Modernist move, familiarized her with Modernist theorists and poets such as Pound and Hume. Her conversational style and intensity of feeling attracted poets such as Harold Monro and Louis Untermeyer. Wickham’s poetry incorporates elements which are of a Modern and Modernist nature. Other poets and critics such as Amy Lowell and Edmund Wilson also admired her poetry. Not surprisingly, she had several steadfast and enthusiastic promoters in both America and England and that their unremitting efforts to promote her work resulted in her being anthologised frequently in both countries.

Wickham had three ardent promoters, Harold Monro in the 1910s and 1920s and John Gawsworth in the 1930s in England and Louis Untermeyer in America who not only greatly promoted her work in the 1920s but continued to do so even decades after her death in 1947. In the introduction to Wickham’s combined volume published in America in 1921, Untermeyer wrote enthusiastically:

But already a small and widely-scattered group of women are taking stock of themselves – appraising their limitations, inventions and energies without a thought of man’s contempt or condescension. Searchers like May Sinclair, Virginia Woolf, Rebecca West, Willa Cather and Dorothy Richardson are working in a prose that illuminates their experiments. In poetry, a regiment of young women are recording an even more vigorous

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212 Wickham, *The Writings*, p. 23.
213 P. 52.
self-examination. The most typical, and in many ways the best of these seekers and singers is Anna Wickham.214

In Untermeyer’s eyes, Wickham, rather than Edith Sitwell or Charlotte Mew, was the only outstanding woman poet in London. Interestingly enough, Untermeyer even had heated debates with Yvor Winters over Wickham’s poetry in 1922 in Harriet Monroe’s *Poetry* which was open to conflicting opinions in order to invite discussions over poetics. Untermeyer remained a powerful promoter of Wickham’s work all through his life. Even in 1973, Untermeyer still thought highly of Wickham, “In the pattern of her life, as in the patterns of her poetry, she was a precursor of Anne Sexton and ... Sylvia Plath.”215 In England, Harold Monro played an instrumental role in promoting her poetry and establishing her reputation. He not only encouraged her to become a poet and published her collections, but he was able to read her poetry with precision and perception. R. D. Smith recognised that:

Anna’s poetry was well-respected by Monro for what he called her “rare power of condensing a troublesome problem of social psychology into the form of a lyric.” He liked her “chiefly conversational” style, and the variety in the moods of her work. He noted with satisfaction that “there is plenty here to shock those mild beings who delight in the thrill of a good shock,” but felt that she was certainly more than “a brilliant writer of psychological gossip.” He admired her “frank sensuality,” and advised men, in particular, to read her poems in order to appreciate, “a woman whose intellect controls her senses, and whose love-poems are as natural as daylight or snow.”216

Apart from Untermeyer and Monro, some personal friends such as D. H. Lawrence also sought to publicise her work. In 1915, Lawrence wrote to Edward Marsh that, “I don’t believe you’ve seen these poems by Anna Wickham ... I think some of these poems very good. You may like them for the Georgian Poetry.”217 In the same year, Lawrence also sent five of her poems to Harriet Monroe’s *Poetry* in America; they were finally published in 1917 and helped bring American critical attention to her poetry. Given the incessant effort of her promoters, Wickham was frequently anthologised in her lifetime. For example, John Gawsworth included her work first in

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214 P. 21.
Edwardian Poetry (1937) and then in Neo-Georgian Poetry (1937). Even after her death, she continued to be anthologised, though not as frequently as when she was alive, especially by some important poets. Louis Untermeyer, for instance, included her in his 1962 Modern British Poetry, New and Enlarged Edition; Philip Larkin also included her in his 1973 The Oxford Book of Twentieth-century English Verse.

Wickham’s international reputation is also partly established through her connections with notable poets such as Ezra Pound and D. H. Lawrence. She met with Pound frequently in the 1910s in Monro’s Poetry Book Shop and in Paris in the 1920s. Wickham’s son, James Hepburn, later recalled that, “I remember one morning Anna came back before lunch to the hotel where I had been studying, and told me that she has spent the morning with Ezra Pound on the terrace of the Cafe du Dome.”

Wickham’s close friendship with Lawrence also increased her publicity. Unlike Edna St. Vincent Millay who was constantly attacked by the New Critics, Wickham was actually respected and favoured by the New Critics in 1940s as Jennifer Vaughan Jones notes that, “The applause that met her in 1946 when she walked into a literary party attended by the likes of T. S. Eliot ‘amused’ her, but better was the Empsons’ guest who kissed her hand and called her ‘the most vital and interesting woman in the room.’” The fact that Wickham’s reputation was partly revived by the New Critics in 1940s when poets such as Millay was thoroughly dismissed, says a lot about the Modernist edge of Wickham’s poetics.

3.39 Conclusion:

Wickham was an unusually critical person. If her criticism of her friends such as Monro and Lawrence is ruthless, her criticism of her own personality and work is no less savage. As Smith comments on Wickham’s self-criticism:

This habit of instant self-criticism, of on-the-spot rejection of what had just flowed from

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218 Wickham, The Writings, p. xxi.
219 Jones, p. 273.
her pen persists in her letters, and in her manuscript poems, of which there are over eleven hundred. ‘Bunk’; ‘Rubbish, but there it is’; ‘Not much sense but some rhythm.’ Written of herself, these remarks justify her often savage criticisms of her friends’ unsuccessful poems. Her incisive analytic intellect complemented her tumultuous feelings.\

Few poets have the courage to call their work “rubbish”. Despite her international reputation, Wickham was keenly aware of the problems with her poetry as Smith points out, “she knows most of her work is botched, fine lines, vivid images, original themes, a personal voice, are not brought to completion in the finished poem.”

Eventually, she considered herself a failure and invalidated her lifelong passion and effort for writing: “I have never believed in my art. I have never been interested in it.” Not surprisingly, she blamed other people for her defeat. She told Oswell Blakeston, “Harold Monro ruined my life by encouraging me to be a poet. I should have been a maker of popular mottoes!” She also unjustifiably blamed her father for encouraging her to be a writer as she made clear in the prelude to her autobiography *A Spring Clean*. Perhaps her criticism of both Monro and her father is just a way of releasing her sense of failure. In a poem written in November 1946 to Natalie Barney, five months before she hung herself, Wickham was full of self-mockery:

She is failure, she is folly
She’s the stink of melancholy
She’s the worm that takes the pleasure from the peach.
She’s down among the crabs
Stamping on the scarabs
And she’s quite the chic-est woman
On the beach.

Edna St. Vincent Millay met with Wickham in Paris in the 1920s. In her letter to Edmund Wilson, Millay spoke of her impression of Wickham’s personality and poetry:

I saw a great deal of Anna Wickham while I was in Paris this spring. She’s an awfully interesting person, great big jolly, untidy, scathing, tender and brilliant ... She writes ten thousand poems a day, writes them on the cafe tables, on the backs of menus, on the waiter’s apron, anywhere, many very bad, naturally, but some splendid, and all

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220 Wickham, *The Writings*, p. 3.
221 P. 29.
222 P. 53.
223 P. 18.
224 P. 53.
225 Vickery, p. 173.
Millay was being teasingly dramatic by saying that Wickham wrote ten thousand poems a day, but it does say a lot about one of the reasons behind the rawness of Wickham’s poems, which were poured out like a flood from her uninhibited emotions. No wonder Millay thought “many very bad, naturally” while she was generous enough to say “all interesting”. Contemporary studies of her poetry also tend to weigh her weaknesses over her strengths as Barbara White Sounders summarised:

The strengths of Anna Wickham’s poetry cannot really be said to outweigh the weaknesses. Intimate tone and passionate delivery can never provide an adequate balance for lack of patience and careful craftsmanship. They do, however, win the reader’s interest and sympathy, and almost all of these poems are worth reading, at least, once. Even those so esoteric as to be almost unintelligible to the initiated reader convey a stirring intensity. And, in the final analysis, genuine rousing passion and fierce individualism are rarer characteristics than the ability to write polished and melodious verse.

Sounders’ assessment of Wickham is measured. She pointed out that Wickham’s strengths were her rousing passion and the intensity of her emotion. Unfortunately, her unstoppable emotion was too strong for her to rein in. “Undiscipline” could be a major reason for the blotchiness of her work. It might be arbitrary to associate her “undiscipline” in writing with Wickham’s “uncontrollable temper” in life; we could at least see some connections between her personality and her art.

In her lifetime, Wickham also had an international reputation for being untidy as Millay casually mentioned in her letter. Wickham confessed in her autobiography that housekeeping was simply beyond her for the reason that being untidy had almost become a neurotic necessity to keep her sanity:

For twenty-nine years I have been attempting to order the house; because of the pathological weakness of a betraying untidiness, I have not succeeded. For twenty-nine years I have been putting things away in loathsome sets of drawers. This year I shall conquer the sets of drawers: my self-discipline is complete enough. I shall have every pin, rag, tot and tittle in the villa in its place, and everything will be splendidly clean. But I am finished: I am utterly defeated: there is nothing before me but suicide: I order the villa for my death. When the stove is clean enough I shall turn on the gas.

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227 Saunders, p. 119.
228 Wickham, The Writings, p. 52.
In the 1940s, a picture of Wickham’s kitchen in the newspaper resulted in a letter from a clergyman who was highly offended by Wickham’s housekeeping. Although the state of Wickham’s kitchen was infamous, the kitchen wall, decorated with scraps of poems, was famous. Here lies the interesting contrast of Wickham’s personality. However, it is not just that she was unable to keep her house clean, but that she was also unable to keep herself clean. She also admitted to Natalie Barney in the late 1920s that she had “touched the depths of undiscipline & bad taste.”229 Just as Wickham could not stand living in a clean house, she also could not stand revising most of her unpolished poems. Compared with some feminist scholars such as Jane Dowson and Alice Entwistle who are eager to position her as a “major poet”230 in their versions of British literary history, Wickham had a better sense of her own work as she once said of herself, “I may be a minor poet but I’m a major woman.”231 Wickham’s personality as a woman was no doubt extraordinary. The over 1100 unpublished poems are probably enough evidence to show that writing was just her way of releasing her emotions and feelings. For Wickham, the process was more important than the result.

229 Vickery, p. 159.
230 P. 124.
231 Wickham, The Writings, p. 27.
CHAPTER FOUR AUSTRALIAN POETRY

4.1 Introduction: Australian Literary Scene: 1910s – 1930s

4.1.1 The Status quo of Australian poetry in terms of the period

In *The Oxford History of Australian Literature*, Vivian Smith commented on Australian poetry in general:

Great poets are few and usually far between, and the history of Australian poetry is, broadly speaking, the history of accomplished minor poets, with a few outstanding figures ... Any account of Australian poetry up to the present must begin with an obvious point: no Australian poet has so far had any major impact on world literature. There have been no equivalents to the influence that Poe or Whitman exerted on French literature for instance. There have been no recent figures like Vallejo or Robert Lowell. This is partly due to obvious historical reasons and circumstances but it is also partly in the nature of poetry itself.¹

Smith made the above statement in 1981. However, what he said then is basically true with the status quo of Australian poetry in terms of its international influence.² The relatively low status of Australian poetry, in Smith’s view, is largely due to its overall conventionality:

Australian poetry has always been traditional and deeply derivative. No Australian poet has been responsible for any formal innovations or revolutions in technique; and it is probably true to say that until recently the main struggle of Australian poets has been on the level of content: to accommodate their visions of Australia, its landscape, flora and fauna and the experience of Australian living, to the poetic moulds and patterns inherited from Europe and America.³

Smith’s statement in terms of form and content is applicable to Australian poetry of the period 1910s-1930s. However, the conventionality of Australian poetry was more acutely felt by Frank Wilmot who, after commenting on the Anglo-American Modernist movement, criticised “the rhyme-worn poets of this sunny land” and their “proper sentiments in correct measures.”⁴ He came to the conclusion: “we are the

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² Les Murray has been critically regarded as the best Australian poet up to the present days who has achieved an international reputation in English poetry.
³ Kramer, p. 271.
youngest of the nations, and are rapidly becoming the centre of world conservatism.”

It is this indignation with the conservatism of Australian poetry that drove Wilmot to make it his task to introduce Anglo-American Modernism to Australian literary circles in 1918. In Wilmot’s view, Australian poetry was conventional in both form and content:

> But Australians have always been backward in ideas about verse. Shakespeare, whom we do not read, is good enough for us; we cling to worn-out conventions of style and subject log after they have been abandoned in the countries of their origin. Chaucer immortalized his own period, but the poets from Homer to Rossetti knew nothing of Radio, Electric Trams, Aircraft, the Cinema, nor Motor cars; nor modern advertising, mechanical, artistic, or journalistic. These things, being part of our life, will therefore become part of our literature, and must cause changes in human character and alter our attitude to life.

In form, Wilmot encouraged Australian poets to assimilate free verse; in content, he urged them to adopt modern vocabulary to write about modern subject matter and to capture the spirit of a twentieth century city. It is worth mentioning here that Lesbia Harford was perhaps the earliest poet to adopt a modern vocabulary long before Wilmot introduced Modernism to Australia in 1918. Many of her poem titles indicate aspects of modernity such as “In the Public Library” written in 1912, “The Electric Tram to Kew” in 1915 and “Periodicity” in 1917. Nevertheless, Wilmot played an important part in modernising Australian poetry by introducing Anglo-American Modernism. The poetic debate between two opposing poetic forces started in the late 1910s had everything to do with Modernist poetics.

### 4.12 The clash between old and new

The main drama of the period 1910s–1930s in the history of Australian poetry was the clash between old and new. However, the border was never clear-cut. There were at least three main poetic forces at work. The conservative group was led by David McKee Wright who, as editor of *The Bulletin*, exerted a great impact on younger

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5 P. 123.
poets such as Zora Cross. Wright, as his biographer, Michael Sharkey remarked, “held irrefutable sway as spokesman for conservative, formalist views on literature.” He held the strong belief that certain themes, subjects and ways of expression were inherently poetical. He prized poetical language over colloquial language which, in his view, was not qualified for the status of poetry. His conservative poetic stance also brought him to ridicule free verse. His love of adjectives and use of trite images and classical allusions make his poetry now seem unbearably conventional. As a result of his conservatism, his poetry had very little to do with modern life. Besides, his predilection for adjectives was a sign of Victorianism which was quite prevalent in Australian poetry at the time.

The Sydney Lindsay group, centred on the short-lived magazine Vision, produced by Jack Lindsay, Kenneth Slessor and Frank Johnson in 1923-4, represented a modern trend in Australian poetry. The act of attacking the conservatism of David McKee Wright, especially his Victorianism, displays the modern elements of the Lindsay group. However, the Vision group, under the influence of Norman Lindsay, was in many respects fiercely anti-Modernist in the arts. Modernism was considered by important figures such as artists Lionel Lindsay, Norman Lindsay and J. S. MacDonald “a sickness imported from overseas”. As for subjects for Australian art, they agreed on “nothing ugly or dirty or unhealthy.” Jack Lindsay and Norman Lindsay had a quite different poetics in mind as Michael Sharkey points out:

The founders, Jack Lindsay and his father Norman, hoped to ‘vindicate the youthfulness of Australia, not by being modern but by being alive. Physical tiredness, jaded nerves and a complex superficiality are the stigma of Modernism’. They would do this by ‘responding to the image of beauty, to vitality of emotion’.

Not surprisingly, as a central member of the Vision group, Kenneth Slessor recalled his early dislike of Modernism:

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7 Michael Sharkey, Apollo in George Street: The Life of David McKee Wright (Glebe: Puncher & Wattmann, 2012) p. 265.
8 James Stuart MacDonald was an artist, art critic and Director of the National Gallery of New South Wales from 1929 to 1937.
10 Sharkey, p. 293.
It was not until 1927 that I first came into contact with any of Eliot’s major work, in the second edition of *Poems 1909-1925*. Until then, all I had known of Eliot was a few rather bleak anthology pieces, such as “La Figlia che Piange” and “Sweeney Erect”, which I heartily disliked.\(^{11}\)

Despite the fact that the general attitude of the Lindsay group towards Modernism in the arts was negative it would be wrong to assume that the group was completely opposed to Anglo-American poetic Modernism. The coterie of Norman Lindsay was reputed for its pagan bohemia. For one thing, the group was not against free verse; for another, Norman Lindsay encouraged poets such as Slessor and FitzGerald to explore sexuality in a deeper sense. Also Lindsay preached Nietzscheanism which is “vitalism, earth glorification, the joy of living, the joy of sex, and the eternal value of art.”\(^{12}\) Within the *Vision* circle, while Kenneth Slessor was greatly influenced by Eliot, Ronald McCuaig was well-known for writing about sexuality. However much the *Vision* group kept its distance from Modernism, it was modern enough compared with the dated bush traditions as Dennis Haskell remarks, “*Vision* represents the first decisive break with the *Bulletin* traditions, and its ideas are more relevant to our circumstances today than anything the much better-known *Bulletin* traditions might have to offer.”\(^{13}\) Despite the fact that “Slessor was at pains to protest that he read little of Eliot’s work until the late 1920s”, his letter to Norman Lindsay in the late 1920s “shows that he read Eliot with great interest, and the two men had much in common.”\(^{14}\) In the view of Dennis Haskell, the “restraint” of his poetry is “in keeping with Modernism, the aesthetic which Slessor introduced into Australian verse.”\(^{15}\) Although aesthetically Slessor was turning away from the Lindsay group in the late 1920s, he was still connected with the Lindsays and his work shows influences from Anglo-American Modernism and the aesthetics of Norman Lindsay.

The third force was represented by Frank Wilmot who consciously introduced Modernism to Australia for the purpose of modernising Australian poetry. Wilmot’s

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\(^{12}\) P. 69.


\(^{15}\) P. xii.
endeavour was widely recognised in Australian literary history as Jennifer Strauss comments that, Wilmot “can be seen as connected to a movement consciously dedicated to shifting Australian poetry from a perceived stylistic stagnation, since his advocacy of modernism foreshadowed the brief but ebullient 1940s flowering in Angry Penguins”. Wilmot promoted aspects of Imagism, especially free verse and vernacular language as he remarked, “If everyday life and language have no place in poetry, then poetry has no right to exist.” It is worth notice that Wilmot was more drawn to Pound’s Imagism than to Eliot’s highly intellectual, impersonal and difficult poetics. Simplicity and directness, rather than difficulty and allusion, were his ideal:

Modern poetry gets its effects from an intense simplicity and directness of epithet; it aims at revelation, not inflation. What the public desires is to be allowed to live down to its pretences. It pretends to believe in God, and it pretends to believe in fairies, and it pretends to believe that poetry has a celestial or supernatural origin also. This is pure evasion, the implication being that things so remote as God, Fairies and Poetry can be left to look after themselves.

Wilmot’s comment on modern poetry seems to be the most effective attack on David McKee Wright’s conventional poetics. Among his contemporaries, Harford is closest to Wilmot in terms of politics and poetics. Harford prized simplicity, not intellectuality. She was quite open about poetic form. She wrote mainly in traditional form and occasionally in free verse. She adopted vernacular language; her vocabulary was largely modern but sometimes tinted with archaism. The radicalism of her love and political poetry finds no equal among her contemporaries.

Apart from the three main forces, some important poets of the period did not belong to any group. R. D. FitzGerald, for example, was as influential as Slessor in the 1920s. Although he was almost the opposite of Slessor in that “his poetry has been virtually untouched by modernist techniques”, there were still some modern elements in his work. Given differences of focus in the three forces, it is easy to see that Australian poetry of the period was generally anti-Modernist. David McKee

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17 Wilmot, p. 130.
18 Pp. 130-131.
19 Kramer, p. 361.
Wright was basically anti-modern and the Lindsay group was largely modern compared with the conservative Wright circle while basically anti-Modernist compared with Frank Wilmot and Kenneth Slessor. Also, we can tell that Modernism since its introduction in 1918 might have been widely discussed but hardly assimilated. Even in the cases of Wilmot and Slessor, their assimilation of Modernism was rather selective. Wilmot was not interested in Eliot’s intellectuality and theory of Impersonality while Slessor was against the radicalism of e. e. cummings’s form. In short, Australian followers of Anglo-American Modernism were few. It will not be an exaggeration to say that in the first half of the twentieth century Australian poetry has been consistently resistant to Modernism almost from the very beginning of its arrival and this resistance reaches its climax in the “Ern Malley” hoax in the 1940s.

### 4.13 Modern or Modernist: a debate

As the most influential literary movement in the twentieth century, Modernism has no doubt exerted a profound impact on Anglo-American poetry. Although Modernism was met largely with reticence, indifference and resistance in Australia, the term continues to identify with literary quality and authority in Australian academia. The majority of contemporary Australian scholars prefer “modernist” rather than “modern” in their assessment of poets of the period at issue. Labelling a poet “modern” seems to suggest his or her inferiority in poetic achievement. There is no doubt a certain amount of prejudice involved. In the twentieth century poetic context, modern poets include both Modernists and non-Modernists, but not conservative poets who were writing mainly in a conventional way. Being modern and expressing modernity has been the major concern of twentieth century poets in general. Modernist poets had their distinctive way of being modern; non-modernist poets also explored various ways of expressing modernity. In American poetic history, Marianne Moore has been highly regarded as a Modernist poet, while Edna St. Vincent Millay has been considered an extremely modern poet. The
difference between “modern” and “modernism” here is a matter of poetics. It is easier to tell the difference between poets such as Richard Robinson, Robert Frost, Robinson Jeffers, Edna Millay and Elinor Wylie and poets such as Eliot, Pound, Moore, Williams and Stevens. However, in Australian history of the twentieth century poetry, contemporary scholars seem to identify primarily with Modernist poetics and the majority of them prefer to read the period through the lens of Modernism.

Vivian Smith, Jennifer Strauss, Philip Mead and John Tranter, to name just a few, are representatives of those who hold positive opinions about Anglo-American Modernism. Assimilating Modernist poetics by Australian poets was often considered a salient feature of being modern. Under the circumstances, Kenneth Slessor is widely recognised as a Modernist poet due to his incorporation of Modernist techniques. Differences occur when it comes to Frank Wilmot. Although he plays an important role introducing Modernism to Australia, his position in literary history is more like that of Ezra Pound; compared with Wilmot, Slessor is more like Eliot in Australia. For Vivian Smith, Wilmot is largely a Modernist propagandist. On the other hand, Strauss and Mead are generous enough to consider Wilmot a Modernist in terms of both his role as a Modernist propagandist and his effort to modernise his poetry. Nevertheless, opinions in this group as to how to assess a poet Modernist differ more in degree than in kind. This also explains why John Shaw Neilson, Mary Gilmore, R. D. FitzGerald, though equally influential in the period, have never been considered Modernist by any Australian scholar.

John Kinsella represents a small number of scholars who hold negative opinions about Anglo-American Modernism; accordingly, his comment on Slessor is no less dismissing:

In the Australian condition, Kenneth Slessor is seen as the modernist agent provocateur. He was of the Eliot and Pound placard-waving kind, and his modernism is a materialist dupe. When he witnessed war firsthand it stopped poetry in him. His silence was modernist, not his poetry writing.”

Apart from his prejudice against Modernism, Kinsella’s statement about Slessor in terms of the relationship between war and writing is virtually wrong. When asked about his silence, Slessor replied that, “I suppose I fully expressed the person I was and could never discover another personality in me. What else could I do but stop, or repeat myself?”[^21] It is the Second World War that actually spurred him to write again since he stopped writing at the end of the 1930s. Despite his thorough blackening of Modernism as a functioning movement or poetics, it is astonishing that Kinsella still holds on to the terminology “Modernism” or “Modernist” as a powerful parameter to assess Australian poets. It is obvious to see that Kinsella’s logic is very problematic. After sweeping Eliot, Pound and Slessor out of the door, Kinsella invited his guests into his house of Modernism. Apparently, Kinsella’s definition of Modernism is strictly connected with the First World War so that he includes Leon Gellert, Zora Cross and Lesbia Harford. By this criterion, Frank Wilmot should also be on the list since he published his anti-conscription collection *To God: From the Weary Nations* in 1916 for which he was well known then. I think the reason that Kinsella ignored Wilmot might lie in the fact that Wilmot explicitly introduced overseas Modernism to Australia. In short, Kinsella’s act of associating Australian Modernism with the Great War has little to with aesthetics. Similar to Kinsella, Anne Vickery’s feminist construction of her list of Modernists is largely of a political nature. In her *Stressing the Modern: Cultural Politics in Australian Women’s Poetry*, Zora Cross, for instance, essentially a conservative poet just like David McKee Wright, was abruptly labelled Modernist. In her introduction, Vickery mentioned in passing that Cross “also experimented with free verse,”[^22] however in her chapter of Cross, not a single free verse poem is presented to verify this important connection with Modernism. Furthermore, through the lens of feminism, a largely conservative poet like Zora Cross and a distinctively modern poet like Lesbia Harford are labelled with the same Modernist tag. To say the least, Cross’s salient Victorianism is anti-modern, let alone anti-Modernist.

Another group of scholars prefer to use “modern” rather than “modernist” in

[^22]: Vickery, p.11.
their discussion of the period. Geoffery Dutton, for instance, believes that Kenneth Slessor and Ronald McCuaig are “the two early modern poets of modern Sydney” with the former “celebrated” and the latter “almost forgotten,” and he goes on to claim that McCuaig is “not only a poet of sex. He is Australia’s first modern poet, who came to his modernity through Marlowe and Suckling to T. S. Eliot.” If writing about sex were regarded as a way of being modern in the “sexlessness of Sydney art and literature from the thirties to the fifties,” the same could be said of the earlier Zora Cross and Lesbia Harford who both wrote about sexuality. It makes more sense for Dutton to consider writing about sexuality an act of being modern rather than being Modernist. Harry Heseltine acknowledges in his 1972 *The Penguin Book of Australian Verse* that Furnley Maurice is “distinctly among the first of the ‘Moderns’ for the reason that, “In effect he did for ideas what Neilson had done for the image.” However, he goes on to argue that Kenneth Slessor and R. D. FitzGerald are the two poets “who would work a permanent change in Australian poetry – in the range of themes it could successfully address, in the level of professionalism at which it would conduct itself.” We notice that Heseltine cautiously used the term “Moderns” to talk about Australian modern poetry; when he had to use the term “Modernist,” he used it ironically only to refer to a bunch of Angry Penguins, “the international, deliberately ‘Modernist’ group of the early 1940s.” Heseltine might be one of the rare couple of critics who prefer to use “Moderns” rather than “Modernists” to discuss Australian Poetry. “Modernists”, in his eyes, is a foreign term especially used to refer to a literary movement which has very little to do with Australian poetry of the earlier decades of the twentieth century; Heseltine is more concerned about the inner development of Australian poetry rather than search for affinities with the overseas Modernists. This attitude is more apparent when he comments that, “Yet, even without that catalytic influence or the stimulus of overseas connections, it seems likely that the inner growth of Australian poetry would have moved towards the fruitful fragmentation of those

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23 Dutton, p. 41.
24 P. 49.
25 P. 48.
27 P. 45.
years.”\textsuperscript{28} If all roads lead to Rome, Heseltine believes that Australia’s path is definitely different from that of other countries.

\section*{4.14 Conclusion}

Quite different from both Vivian Smith’s comment that Frank Wilmot was not a Modernist compared with Slessor and Philip Mead’s comment that Wilmot was a Modernist, H. M. Green pointed out that Wilmot was “definitely a poet of the transition”\textsuperscript{29} between the poetics of Brennan and that of Slessor. Green’s comment on Wilmot is also applicable to many poets of the period 1910s-1930s. The transitional nature of the period is something that has been ignored by the majority of Australian scholars. Kenneth Slessor, for instance, though considered a Modernist poet, rejected the formally radical e. e. cummings. Frank Wilmot, though familiar with Modernist techniques, failed to modernise his language and diction. It is in this sense that Vivian Smith considered Slessor a rather conservative Modernist and Wilmot not a true Modernist. As for the two women poets in discussion, things are more complicated. Lesbia Harford was quite radical in terms of her subject matter and was even a little Modernist in her occasional employment of free verse, but she was like the majority of modern poets such as Edna St. Vincent Millay and Robert Frost who preferred to fill new wine in an old bottle. The occasional archaism of her vocabulary also reminds us of the same weakness in Slessor’s first two collections. The archaism of language was a sign of Victorianism which was then prevalent in Australian poetry. In a sense, every poet is shaped by his or her historical period. Having this in mind, we should not jump to a clear-cut conclusion that Harford successfully avoided Victorianism. In the case of Zora Cross, the matter is much simpler. Writing openly about female sexuality is definitely a modern act, however, the way it is written about defines whether a poet is modern or not. Zora Cross employs poetical rather than vernacular language, conventional rather than modern imagery, which makes her overwhelmingly

\textsuperscript{28} P. 49.
anti-modern.

It goes without saying that no poet can express modernity in a complete sense. Each poet can only express their sense of modernity in a certain way. In other words, there is no such thing as a consummate Modernist or modern poet. We see conflicts and collaborations between tradition and innovation in both Modernist and non-Modernist poets of the period. It is as misleading to stick merely to tradition as to prize only innovation. Perhaps we need to see the reciprocal power relations between tradition and innovation. The transitional nature of the poetic activities reflected poets’ subtle ways of being modern.
4.2 Lesbia Harford

4.21 Introduction

In her brief lifetime, Lesbia Harford (1891-1927) was well-known as a political activist, one of the female union leaders, but was largely unknown as a poet except among family members and close friends. Unlike most of her contemporaries, she only occasionally attempted to get her poems published. In 1921, Nettie Palmer, then editor of Birth and Harford’s close friend, published several of her poems while at Harford’s request Palmer kept her identity a secret. In the same year, Harford had five poems published under her own name in The Australian Poetry Annual 1921. Five years later, she contributed to Percival Serle’s anthology, An Australian Anthology, pointing out to Serle that her published poems to date were “no favourites of mine” and that “I take my poetry seriously, and am in no hurry to be read.”

It is safe to say that serious criticism of Harford’s poetry didn’t begin until after her death in 1927. Undoubtedly Percival Serle’s An Australian Anthology, appearing in the same year, helped draw more attention to Harford’s poetry. H.M. Green wrote to Serle in 1927: “Have you seen Lesbia Harford’s ms? What you put in is OK – but she has written some of the best lyrics among today’s and certainly, I would say, the best love lyrics written out there…” Thirteen years after she died, Nettie Palmer put together a slim collection of her poetry. Before its publication, Louis Lavater made positive comments on the manuscript that, “These shy, intimate blossomings of a human spirit are not for the rough surgery of criticism. One reads them – remembers them – returns to them. Certainly they must be preserved.”

A definitive collection of Harford’s poems was published in 1985, edited by Drusilla Modjeska and Marjorie Pizer, which has since spurred increasing critical attention to her writing.

In recent decades, Harford’s poetry has been frequently mentioned in different

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31 Cited by Vickery, p. 260.
32 Cited by Vickery, pp. 260-1.
versions of Australian literary history, but its aesthetic achievement has not been extensively discussed. The mentions come because Harford’s poetry differs from the work of her contemporaries. In 1998, Jennifer Strauss remarked that Australian poetry between the Wars “has commonly been judged as stylistically unadventurous.” Similarly, back in 1922, in his essay “National Poetry”, Frank Wilmot criticised the conventionalism in Australian poetry: “It is the last word in conventional English verse production. It is done to worn-out patterns discarded in the land of their origin. It is more conventional in form and matter than any verse now published in England by English poets.” Harford’s poetry, however, is uniquely modern in that her writing exhibits a combination of tradition and innovation, which contributes to the modernity as well as the variety of her creativity. We see in her poetry the influence of Anglo-American poetic Modernism, modern art and French Symbolist poetry, which verifies a statement made by Vivian Smith on Australian literature: “A study of Australian literary culture shows that there has never been any lack of cultural information at any time; rather the problem has been knowing how to assimilate it and use it in an individual way.” Given the fact that Frank Wilmot formally introduced Modernism to Australia in 1918, there is every reason to believe that Lesbia Harford, Wilmot’s political ally and close friend, was well informed of Modernist poetics. This chapter therefore will discuss Harford’s negotiation with form, the visual and musicality in her poetry. However enthusiastically or indifferently poets of the first three decades reacted to poetic Modernism, its impact on Australian poetry was profound.

4.22 Harford’s Negotiation with Form

In The Cambridge History of Australian Literature, Peter Pierce comments that:

Australia in the first half of the 20th century was one of the most urbanized countries in

33 Bennett & Strauss, p. 112.
34 Wilmot, p.121.
35 Kramer, p. 350.
the world and embraced modernity – city living, new technologies, the mass media – with a passion second only to that of the United States; and yet, without strong literary-intellectual or avant-garde traditions, Australian poetry in this period seems, at first glance, anti-modernist. In face of a period of rapid industrial and technological change, Harford “found the force of change and modernity so great that she felt compelled to write about it.”  In “Into Old Rhyme”, Harford tries to find a way to voice modernity:

Into old rhyme
The new words come but shyly.
Here’s a brave man
Who sings of commerce dryly.

Swift-gliding cars
Through town and country winging,
Like cigarettes,
Are deemed unfit for singing.

Into old rhyme
New words come tripping slowly.
Hail to the time
When they possess it wholly.

Living in an age when modernity is everywhere, “old rhyme” refers to the traditional form and metre that Harford employs in her poetry. Harford’s anxiety with form results in an interesting poetic practice, in which she is inconsistent with her employment of metre. In the first stanza, for instance, she uses a trochee and two accented syllables for the first and the third lines while she mainly employs iambics for the second and the fourth lines. In contrast, Harford’s use of more than one metrical foot in a poem is, in a certain degree, a modern act.

In the first two stanzas, Harford’s “new words” conveys glimpses of modernity: commerce, cars and cigarettes. However, the clash between old form and new content brings Harford unease as well as excitement, which is best demonstrated in her employment of passive words such as “old”, “shyly”, “dryly”, “unfit” and

36 Pierce, p. 199.
38 Harford, The Poems of Lesbia Harford, p. 81.
“slowly” as well as positive words such as “new”, “brave”, “swift-gliding”, “hail” and “wholly”. Harford’s initial anxiety, apparent in the first stanza, is eventually overcome by a more eloquent tone in the third stanza. Quite differently from Anglo-American Modernist poets, Harford expresses her confidence that old bottles can be filled with new wine. However, it is noticeable that Harford uses some old-fashioned words such as “winging” to describe a modern vehicle. It seems true that Harford’s “new words” are tinted with old words and her “old rhyme” is dotted with modern variations. This helps us better understand the transitional nature of Harford’s poetic practice which provides a dynamic interaction between old and new.

Although Harford writes mainly in traditional form and metre, she also experiments with half-rhyme, and even more conspicuously, with free verse. In 1918, she wrote “Sometimes I Think the Happiest of Love’s Moments” in free verse:

Sometimes I think the happiest of love’s moments
Is the blest moment of release from loving.

The world once more is all one’s own to model
Upon one’s own and not another’s pattern.

And each poor heart imprisoned by the other’s
Is suddenly set free for splendid action.

For no two lovers are a single person
And lovers’ union means a soul’s suppression.

Oh, happy then the moment of love’s passing
When those strong souls we sought to slay recover.39

This poem has eleven syllables per line except for the twelve in the first line, and with its lines scanning but irregularly so that it could be considered free verse. There is no direct evidence to show that Harford’s free verse innovation was influenced by Frank Wilmot, who was arguably the earliest to introduce overseas Modernism to Australia. However, given their close friendship as both political allies and fellow writers, they might very possibly have discussed free verse. Also, according to Drusilla Modjeska,

39 P. 102.
“Katie Lush and Nettie Palmer were other sources for discussion about modernist poetry.” Although Harford confessed to Percival Serle in 1926 that she preferred “the old forms”, she was apparently attracted to free verse as a new way of expressing her ideas.

In this poem, Harford expresses her anti-Romantic view about love. In her opinion, the nature of love between a man and a woman is fundamentally oppressive in that it inevitably impinges on individual freedom. Harford even employs a political term “suppression” to indicate the nature of a relationship. In other words, there is no such thing as an ideal relationship between a man and a woman. In the end, she seems to celebrate the passing of love and recovery of individuality. Though she borrows a political term to penetrate the nature of love, her perception is not political but largely universal. Harford’s insight into love is still applicable to contemporary life.

Harford’s free verse practice is apparently not frequent but occasional. She writes more comfortably in traditional forms. However oppressive love might seem to Harford, she, more often than not, is drawn to it. Lesbia Keogh married Patrick Harford in 1920. Five years later, she seemed to have to come to terms with a problem which is frequently seen in a relationship:

When I was still a child
I thought my love would be
Nobel, truthful, brave,
And very kind to me.

Then all the novels said
That if my lover prove
No such man as this
He had to forfeit love.

Now I know life holds
Harder tasks in store.
If my lover fail
I must love him more.
Should he prove unkind,
What am I, that he
Squander soul and strength
Smoothing life for me?

Weak or false or cruel
Love must still be strong.
All my life I'll learn
How to love as strong.  

In this poem, Harford compares romance described in books with reality in which she realises that life is no romance. She seeks to solve the problem of seemingly unequal love by taking the initiative to love more to maintain harmony. Furthermore, Harford does not criticize her husband for being unkind or loving less. Rather, she is appreciative of what he has done for her. Harford’s attitude toward love is quite unusual even in the twenty-first century context. In the last stanza, Harford expresses her belief in love which, tinted with idealism and similar to her political belief, is doomed to fail. In “A Meaning Learnt”, she does not hide her frustration:

I’m not his wife. I am his paramour:
His wayside love, picked up in journeying:
Rose of the hedgerows: fragrant, till he fling
Me down beside the ditch, a drooped thing
Some country boy may stick into his hat.
A paramour has not more use than that. 

Despite her strong belief in love and her effort to maintain the relationship, there seems little she can do when apparently her husband has another lover. Harford’s bitterness is acute to the point of calling herself a paramour rather than a wife. Infidelity and the pressing problem of unemployment of her husband which is indicated by the poem “The Wife”, written at the end of 1925, might finally bring their relationship to an end. A year before her death in 1927, Harford surprisingly wrote another poem in free verse to express her attitude toward mechanical civilization:

I read a statement in a newspaper
That Twentyman, the manufacturer,
Found it was cheaper to deliver goods

\[41 \text{ P. 123.} \]
\[42 \text{ P. 126.} \]
By horse and lorry than by motor-truck
Or motor-van. So he had sold his trucks
To purchase horses. He dismissed those men
Who had mechanics’ minds to re-employ
Drivers of horses, friends of animals.
Then life grew stronger in me because life
Had triumphed in this case and would perhaps
Finally triumph over the machine.
Even such mean commercial victory
Being better than no victory at all. 43

In this poem, Harford employs words such as “newspaper”, “manufacturer”,
“motor-truck”, “motor-van”, and “machine” to present us with a picture of modernity.
This time, however, the tone is different. Harford is actually critical of modernity,
which strikingly contrasts with the positive attitude she had toward modernity in “Into
Old Rhyme”. Oddly enough, in 1917, she embraced modernity in traditional form and
metre, while in 1926 she criticized modernity in free verse. Guido Baracchi
commented on this seemingly contradictory attitude toward Modernity that “her
modernity remained happily married to immemorial nature.” 44 This also dismantles a
common prejudice that free verse is usually connected with a positive attitude toward
modernity, or that employment of free verse itself is an act of modernity. The ideology
behind a poetic form is, more often than not, imposed. At least, for Harford, poetic
forms, traditional or otherwise, serve the same purpose.

4.23 Harford’s language

One salient feature of Harford’s poetry is its colloquial speech. Harford was
an enthusiastic member of the Free Religious Fellowship, a group set up in 1913 by the
socialist Unitarian minister, Frederick Sinclaire. In his “Toward a Living Theology,” he
asked: “How is the religious life of to-day to find a language which shall give it natural
and fitting expression? There seems to be only one way, and that is to let the
imagination play freely upon the most homely and commonplace facts of

43 P. 128.
44 Harford, The Invaluable Mystery, p. 11.
Given Harford’s class stance, Sinclaire’s belief that religion should speak the language of ordinary people perhaps had a profound impact on Harford’s adopting a language accessible to common people, as Modjeska remarked:

Perhaps Frederick Sinclaire’s greatest influence on Lesbia Harford was not in religious philosophy but in language. One of his central tenets was that religion should speak the language of “ordinary people”, that it be easily accessible. This was the case with Lesbia Harford’s poetry which combined the familiarity of rhyme and lyric traditions with the accessibility of vernacular language.

Harford is usually regarded as a political poet because of her unambiguous class stance.

In “A Strike Rhyme”, for instance, she describes the workers’ victory:

The strike’s done.
The men won.
The ships sail the sea
To bring back
What we lack,
Coal, sugar, tea.

And I’m glad,
Though I had
Rather never use
Tea and spice
And what’s nice
Than see the men lose.

This poem was written in 1919. If we compare this poem with Kenneth Slessor’s “Clocks”, included in his 1924 *Thief of the Moon*, we might get a better sense of the modernity of Harford’s poetry.

Who thows he hath Time in his calendars,
Like moonlight in old almanacs, constrained
By graven sun-dials and the march of stars
To frontiers caged by clocks? Thy brazen wheels,
O mad arithmetician, roll disdained.

Stare as thou wilt from domed citadels,
Those bubbles of glass reflect the skies in vain.
Thou canst not chain with astronomic spells
One crack of Time, nor by the stars pin down

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45 Vickery, p. 226.
47 P. 107.
This moment to thy pendulum’s domain.  

It is worth noticing that words such as “hath”, “thy”, “thou” and “canst” are archaic. This is actually a conspicuous flaw of Slessor’s *Thief of the Moon*, in which archaic words were employed frequently. For example, in “Nuremberg”, “A Surrender”, “Thief of the Moon”, and “The Mask”, to name a few, he constantly used “thy” or “thou”. Even in his 1926 collection *Earth-Visitors*, we still notice lines such as “O, hast thou not yet woken?” and “O, Lady, hast thou spoken?” in the poem titled “Music”. But if we compare the differences in language between the two collections, we notice that Slessor was gradually and resolutely moving away from archaic words in the mid-1920s. This comparison is significant in that it may challenge some common knowledge in Australian literary history that Slessor should be considered the first modern or Modernist poet. By the time Harford stopped writing around the mid-1920s, Slessor had just published his first collection which, compared with Harford’s poetry, is largely conventional especially in terms of its language.

Harford’s colloquial speech and usage of “unpoetical” vocabulary distinguishes her from the majority of her contemporaries such as the editorially powerful David McKee Wright who, in Michael Sharkey’s view, “held irrefutable sway as spokesman for conservative, formalist views on literature.” Wright believed that “certain themes, subjects and modes of expression were inherently ‘poetical’ ” and prized poetical language against colloquial language which, in his view, was not qualified for the status of poetry. His conservative poetic stance also brought him to ridicule free verse. The term “Victorianism” which contemporary Australian scholars and critics often employ to criticize the poetry between the Wars is mostly directed at the conventional poetry Wright insisted on. As Sharkey has shown, Wright’s influence over a large number of younger poets, including Zora Cross, should not be underestimated.

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50 Sharkey, p. 265.  
51 P. 269.
Although Harford’s colloquial style, unpoetical vocabulary, irregular use of metrical feet and experiment with free verse should be considered a modern act, she is far from being a Modernist outright. Poetic Modernism initiated by Pound and Eliot is not just about formal innovation, it is essentially a poetics that demands impersonality, intellectuality, and accordingly, difficulty. Harford’s poetry is personal, populist and accessible. As Richard Nile and Robert Darby point out, “Harford was committed to socialist ideals and worked among the people these principles endeared her to. The directness and simplicity of her writing were similarly committed.”

Moreover, Harford’s vocabulary is strikingly modern. Harford was devoted to fighting for the interest of the working class, which enabled her to draw materials directly from her factory life. In “Machinist’s Song”, we get a glimpse of Harford’s factory life:

The foot of my machine
Sails up and down
Upon the blue of this fine lady’s gown.

Images of machinery are abundant in Harford’s factory poems which highlight features of a Machine Age. Harford, as a political activist, is basically a poet of the city:

Today I saw
A market cart going along the road,
High-piled and creaking with a sonsy load
Of cabbages.

The driver sat
Under a little tent himself had made
To give him shelter from the rain or shade
In summertime.

Images of city streets tinted with class difference appear constantly in Harford’s poems. Apart from her plain language, irony is a common feature of her political poetry. For example, in “Skirt Machinist”, she launches relentless attacks against bourgeois women:

54 P. 67.
I am making great big skirts
For great big women –
Amazons who’ve fed and slept
Themselves inhuman.

Such long skirts, no less than two
And forty inches.
Thirty round the waist for fear
The webbing pinches.

There must be tremendous tucks
On those round bellies.
Underneath the limbs will shake
Like wine-soft jellies.\textsuperscript{55}

For one thing, Harford’s political belief drives her to use accessible language to reach the people. For another, Harford draws more from daily life for materials which help avoid “poetical” vocabulary. Taken as a whole, Harford’s vocabulary is strikingly modern. However, if we look closely, we still find residues of Victorianism, even if only occasionally. For example, we notice lines such as “Sense doth she disdain”\textsuperscript{56} and “As thou, my friend”\textsuperscript{57} among her poems written in 1915. However, Harford overcome words such as “doth” and “thou” after 1915. To be fair, Harford’s early archaism is only occasional while that of the majority of her contemporaries such as Mary Gilmore, John Shaw Neilson and Zora Cross it is omnipresent. Les Murray once commented that much of Gilmore’s poetry was “marred by lingering Victorian diction”\textsuperscript{58} and he also pointed out Neilson’s “worst habit of archaism and sentimentality”.\textsuperscript{59} Moreover, Murray acknowledged Harford’s modernity: “In poetry, her political ideals allowed her consistently to avoid the dead Victorianisms which afflicted Australian poetry well into the twentieth century.”\textsuperscript{60} This comment on Harford is just in a large sense. Harford’s language is one of the features that make her a strikingly modern poet in her times.

\textsuperscript{55} P. 90.
\textsuperscript{56} P. 51.
\textsuperscript{57} P. 56.
\textsuperscript{58} Les Murray (ed.)\textit{ Hell and After: Four early English-Language Poets of Australia} (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005) p. 27.
\textsuperscript{59} P. 57.
\textsuperscript{60} P. 99.
4.24 The Visual in Harford’s poetry

In twentieth century, various engagements of poetry with the visual arts are omnipresent, which has become a key question for literary studies. Poets wrote frequently about art and artists for example, Yeats on the Pre-Raphaelites, Pound on Henri Gaudier-Brzeska and Auden on Van Gogh, Harford, too, took an interest in creative arts and began to paint in her teenage years. In 1907, at the age of sixteen, Harford “sent her mother an essay on the Pre-Raphaelite painter, Edward Burne-Jones, in which she demonstrates her love of colour and beauty. Significantly, she compared his work with poetry.”61 In many of her poems, Harford attempted to turn words into paintings, which indicates her wish to create one form of art in the form of another in order to achieve special artistic effects. In another essay written in 1908, she analyses a series of paintings by Mary Ward who, as a radical artist, “had fought for the freedom of nuns to teach and visit the sick or incarcerated.”62 The impact of the radicalism of Mary Ward as an artist on Harford is profound, which helps give rise to her unique poetics: a combination of art, poetry and politics.

A great number of Harford’s poems are strikingly visual. Nettie Palmer once commented on her potential as an artist, “If Lesbia Haford had not found verse as her expression and if she had been physically strong, she might have been a striking decorative artist.”63 Ann Vickery also remarked that both Palmer and Harford “were interested in the influence of modernist painting on representation.”64 Besides, Lesbia Harford and her husband Patrick Harford “certainly shared a love of painting, it seems that Lesbia and Patrick also discussed writing and sometimes wrote playfully together.”65 Harford was apparently appreciative of her husband’s artistic genius and even compared him with the Renaissance masters:

Pat will be old and splendid
A strange god, sombred by beauty

61 Vickery, p. 217.
62 P. 217.
63 P. 217.
64 P. 300.
65 P. 255.
His is as much as a mind as Angelo’s are made with  
Yet it is da-Vinci subtle. He can think without  
Telling his thoughts and brood alone upon  
Mysteries of space to be interpreted  
In terms of colour, and on ecstasies  
To be translated into pattern. Words  
Are delicate stern instruments to him  
For temperate uses as he uses paint.  

Patrick Harford was an experimental left-wing artist. His painting “Strife” depicts a workers’ mass meeting in 1916 or 1917 and shows a strong familiarity with cubism. According to Bernard Smith, Esmond Keogh, Lesbia Harford’s brother, and Patrick Harford “were among the first people in Melbourne talking about modernism in art.”  
This might help explain the impact of modern art on Harford’s poetry. In the following poem, Harford seems fascinated by the colours of green and blue:

Green and blue  
First-named of colours believe these two.  
They first of colours by men were seen  
This grass colour, tree colour,  
Sky colour, sea colour,  
Magic-named, mystic-souled, blue and green.

Later came  
Small subtle colours like tongues of flame,  
Small jewel colours for treasure trove,  
Not fruit colour, flower colour,  
Cloud colour, shower colour,  
But purple, amethyst, violet and mauve.  

Harford’s discovery of the subtle world of green and blue is closely connected with the natural world from which she draws her artistic inspiration. In “The Melbourne Cup”, Harford’s love of colour also extends to horse racing which is a spectacular scene of mass culture:

I like the riders  
Clad in rose and blue;  
Their colours glitter  
And their horses too.  

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66 Cited by Vickery, p. 255.  
68 P.69.
In the first stanza, Harford presents a static and concrete picture of “rose and blue”. However, once the horse racing gets started, her technique is more impressionist:

\[
\text{Delicate, strong, long} \\
\text{Lines of colour flow,} \\
\text{And all the people} \\
\text{Tremble as they do.}\]

In the first few decades of the twentieth century, with the rapid spread of modernity, issues about an increasingly enlarging working class became more striking. As a political activist, Harford not only speaks for the working class, she identifies with them. Drusilla Modjeska commented that Harford was committed to “working class struggles and the representation of the working conditions and life experiences of the poor and powerless.” Harford is a daring protest poet writing at a time of “industrial turmoil and systematic efforts to stamp out left-wing ... ideas.” Anglo-American Modernist poets as a whole were rather conservative in politics; Eliot, in 1928, famously claimed himself “a royalist in politics” and Pound notoriously propagandised fascism. In contrast, non-Modernist poets such as Edna St. Vincent Millay and Arthur Ficke were more active in voicing social justice. Apparently, Harford was more radical than any of them.

In “The Invisible People”, she employs different visual angles to present the landscape of working class life on a macroscopic level:

\[
\text{When I go into town at half past seven} \\
\text{Great crowds of people stream across the ways,} \\
\text{Hurrying, although it’s only half past seven.} \\
\text{They are the invisible people of the days.}\]

In the first stanza, she uses “I” to depict the picture of working class life from the perspective of the proletariat. The image of large crowds streaming across the streets and rushing towards the factories is reminiscent of impressionist painting especially in terms of its presentation of macroscopic effect. In this picture, the individual “I” is
nowhere to be found, entirely buried in the crowds. In the second stanza, the poet shifts her angle from the working class to the bourgeois class:

When you go in to town about eleven
The hurrying, morning crowds are hid from view.
Shut in the silent building at eleven
They toil to make life meaningless for you.\(^{74}\)

In the second stanza, Harford adopts the lens of “you” instead of “I” to capture a different picture of the same locality from the perspective of the bourgeois class. If the first stanza strikes us with a dynamic scene, the second impresses us with a static one. The emptiness of the city streets and silence of the factory buildings is what is captured by the bourgeois “you”. In the last two lines, Harford is especially sarcastic about the oppressive nature of bourgeois life: their life is meaningless and the working class has to sacrifice their freedom and labour to serve this meaningless aim.

Harford not only concerns herself with the daily struggle of the working class in the city, she also addresses sexuality within the working class. In “Street Scene – Little Lonsdale St”, Harford depicts the sexual awareness and attraction between a boy working in the sewing room and a bunch of girls working in the laundry room:

I wish you’d seen that dirty little boy,
Finger at nose,
Peeking and ginking at some girls in rows
Seated on the high window-sills to rest.

One of the girls had hair as bright as corn.
And one was red.
And over their soft forms a glow was shed
From lamps new-lighted in the laundry there.

That boy, beneath them, wheeled a hand-cart full
Of cast-off busts
From sewing rooms. They looked like shells of lusts.
And all the girls around the windows laughed.\(^{75}\)

In this poem, each stanza presents a distinct picture. In the first stanza, there seems to be a camera capturing a shot at a moment when the teenage boy was either rubbing or

\(^{74}\) P. 73.
\(^{75}\) P. 113.
picking his nose while peeking at the working girls above. A series of actions carried out by the boy, “Finger at nose”, “peeking and ginking”, contrasts with the inaction of the girls indicated by the word “seated”; the tension between the boy’s dynamic unease and the girls’ static ease hints at the boy’s growing sexual awareness. In the second stanza, Harford’s love of colour is conspicuous. She uses light colour such as “bright” and “red”, or words which indicate brightness such as “glow” and “new-lighted” to depict the alluring nature of sexuality. Furthermore, different visual angles such as “high” and “beneath” are applied to indicate different levels of work within the working class. In the last stanza, “shells of lusts” and the girls’ laughter more conspicuously disclose the girls’ sexual perception of the boy. Sometimes, Harford employs techniques of line drawing in her writing. In “Inventory”, she presents a picture without colour:

We’ve a room  
That we call home,  
With a bed in it,  
And a table  
And some chairs,  
A to Z in it.  
There’s a mirror,  
And a safe,  
And a lamp in it.  
Were there more,  
Our mighty love  
Might get cramp in it.  

A grey sketch of the room indicates the poverty of the working class while the humour and optimism in the last two lines demonstrate the spiritual richness brought by love. This poem was written in July 1920, a few months before she married Patrick Harford in November. Perhaps at this point of her life, Harford was so optimistic about their “mighty love” that she used no colour at all to highlight the colourful world of their love. The poverty-stricken outside world Harford could see and the spectacular inner world she could feel remind us of the interdependent relationship between poetry and painting. Wallace Stevens comments that, “The world about us would be desolate

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76 P. 110.
except for the world within us. There is the same interchange between these two worlds that there is between one art and another, migratory passings to and fro, quickendings, Promethean liberations and discoveries.”

In the following poem, we can see clearly the interactive dynamic between poetry and painting:

Today when you went up the hill
And all that I could see
Was just a speck of black and white
Very far from me,

It seemed more strange than words can say,
The dot that I could see,
Really was the dearest thing
The world holds for me.

In the first stanza, what Harford can see is a speck which is simply buried in the enormous world. However, in the second stanza, what she can feel suddenly enlarges the speck into an immense world of love which obscures the rest of the world. If the first stanza is painting, then the second is poetry. Furthermore, what she fails to see in painting and what she fails to say in poetry are interactively complemented by the dynamic relationship of the two forms of art. Indeed, Harford is a poet with a painter’s eye.

4.25 The Music in Harford’s poetry

Music is essential to poetry at all times. Walter Pater wrote that, “all art constantly aspires toward the condition of music.”

There is no doubt that, “since the nineteenth-century French Symbolists experimented with the musical properties of language ... no modern poet has been able to ignore the close affinity that exists between these two arts.”

The importance of music in twentieth century English

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80 Nocolosi, p. 192.
poetry was more readily recognised. Katharine M. Wilson commented in 1928 that, “Poetry is almost one branch of music.” 81 Serge Koussevitzky remarked in 1938 that, “Of all the arts, music and poetry are preeminently those that may be brought into closest union with one another.” 82 The union of poetry and music was highlighted by French Symbolist poets who placed music above everything else. The impact of Symbolist poetry on modern poetry is unfathomable. Poets in the twentieth century, Modernist or otherwise, considered music crucial to their writing. Pound once bluntly proclaimed that, “Poets who will not study music are defective.” 83 Edna St. Vincent Millay once wrote in “On Hearing a Symphony of Beethoven” that, “Music is my rampart, and my only one.” 84 T. S. Eliot, while an undergraduate at Harvard, was greatly influenced by Arthur Symon’s The Symbolist Movement in Literature (1899). Several of his early poems before 1920 have titles that suggest short musical genres such as “Nocturne,” “Humoresque,” and “Song.” More conspicuously, Four Quartets bears witness to Eliot’s “avowed passion for Beethoven’s late quartets, especially Opus 132.” 85

French Symbolist poetry has also exerted quite an influence on modern Australian poets. Nettie Palmer and Bernard O’Dowd, for instance, “discussed symbolism and, in particular, Arthur Symon’s The Symbolist Movement.” 86 Palmer was even commissioned by O’Dowd to translate Paul Verlaine’s “Art Poetique”, which was published in 1907 in Heart of the Rose. As Palmer’s close friend, Harford strongly sympathised with Verlaine in terms of the role music plays in poetry, so much so that she translated his “Art Poetique”:

Music then, - music first, -
Unequal music, for choice,
That wanders, melting in air
Without accent or place; no voice.

84 Millay, Collected Poems, p. 629.
85 Nocolosi, p. 196.
86 Vickery, p. 267.
Music will seek out words
Whose meaning is born of sound
Clearest, the cloud song.
Sense-cherished, not reason-bound. 87

Palmer’s translation in prose form, in Vickery’s view, is “far from the haunting quality of Verlaine’s original.” 88 In contrast, Harford’s rendering is much closer to the original poem in both form and music. While the consummate musicality of French Symbolist poetry is achieved sometimes at the expense of meaning, the music of Harford’s poetry is often closely connected to its expression of meaning. In “The Music of Poetry” (1942), Eliot also claimed that “the music of poetry is not something which exists apart from the meaning.” 89 For Harford, meaning is created by music which is subject to emotion, not reason. Sometimes, in order to achieve a special musical effect, Harford uses the same word in each couplet:

I came in touch twice with my younger days,
This happy day

At lunch in town a girl who sat beside me
Remembered me

And called me by name. She’d been to school
At the same school

Later, at work, a point of law cropped up
To be cleared up

The very man who was most sure to know
I used to know.

I rang him up. His voice came back to me
And youth to me. 90

This poem which reminisces about her youth was written in 1927, just a few months before her death. The musicality of this poem is especially resounding. In each couplet, the last word of every line is exactly the same except for the first couplet with a slight

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87 Cited by Vickery, p. 225
88 P. 267.
90 Vickery, p. 259.
difference between “days” and “day”. The music of the poem not only brings together
the past and the present, memory and reality, but creates a trance-like unity of mood.
Sometimes, Harford uses the same phrase in every stanza:

Florene keels down to say her prayers
At night.
I wonder what she says and why she cares
To pray at night.

I think when she kneels down to pray
At night
The names that have been on her lips all day
Are there, at night.  

In this poem, the phrase “at night” is repeated twice in every stanza, which creates an
atmosphere of mystery. Mysticism is also one of the features of Symbolist poetry. Apart from the impact of Symbolist poetry, Harford’s choice of music is also
influenced by her politics and philosophy. Harford’s former lover, Guido Baracchi,
recalled that Harford “got quite hostile to classical music” and preferred the sort of
music that “would reach the people.” This predilection is also reflected in her poetry.

“Street Music”, for instance, is written in the tradition of popular songs:

There’s a band in the street, there’s a band in the street.
It will play you a tune for a penny –
It will play you a tune, you a tune, you a tune,
And you, though you haven’t got any.

For the music’s free, and the music’s bold.
It cannot really be bought and sold.

Harford’s street music is accessible to the working class and it is “bold” because it is
revolutionary. In the equally lyrical “Oh, Oh Rosalie”, Harford expresses a Lesbian
desire:

Oh, oh Rosalie,
Oh, oh Rosalie,
What would you have of me?
Oh, oh Rosalie.

92 P. 32.
93 P. 100.
I have kisses fine,
I have kisses fine.
Will you take kiss of mine?
Oh, oh Rosalie. 94

This poem is especially lyrical in that Harford uses the technique of strong repetition which is very common in folk songs and ballads. Taking Harford’s poetry as a whole, although she wrote free verse from time to time, she wrote the majority of her poems in traditional form and rhyme scheme, perhaps out of consideration for lyrical quality.

4.26 Radicalism: subject matter

Perhaps it is true that Australian poetry of the period as a whole is formally conventional as Vivian Smith comments that “until recently the main struggle of Australian poets has been on the level of content.” 95 As for formal innovation, free verse was imported by Frank Wilmot from America in 1918, which not only stimulated the debate about whether free verse should be adopted in Australian poetry but attracted a small number of poets such as Lesbia Harford to try their hand at free verse. However, it is worth notice that even poets who were quick to embrace the novelty, such as Harford, preferred traditional form. At least from 1910s to the 1920s, free verse, as an imported product, remains a minor form in Australian poetry. However, on the level of content, Australian poets are no less modern than their American contemporaries. Harford, for instance, is more daring and outspoken than Edna St. Vincent Millay in many ways. The radicalism of Harford’s poetry in terms of political struggles is frequently mentioned by contemporary scholars; however, the radicalism of her other poems is often overshadowed by the glare of politics. In effect, Harford’s poems on free love, lesbian love and female sexuality are equally radical in the context of a conservative culture.

94 P. 63.
95 Kramer, p. 271.
If Millay was the spokeswoman of the Jazz Age in America in terms of her free love spirit, Harford should be considered the spokeswoman of free love in the 1910s and 1920s in Australia. As Drusilla Modjeska remarked, “As a young woman Lesbia Harford took a stand for free love and for many years she lived an exemplary independence with various lovers.”\footnote{Harford, *The Poems of Lesbia Harford*, p. 14.} Just as Millay’s free love stance was nurtured by the Suffrage movement in America, we have every reason to believe Harford’s, too, was influenced by the Suffrage movement in Australia. For Harford, having various lovers seems a natural behaviour:

> I have three loves who are all most dear.  
> Each one has cost me many a tear.  
> The one who is dead yet lives in me.  
> I were too poor had I less than three.\footnote{P. 60.}

Though Harford has three lovers, her love for them seems indiscriminately genuine. Compared with Harford, Millay is more of a flapper. In “Thursday”, she pictures a woman who is fickle and careless about love:

> And If I loved you Wednesday,  
> Well, what is that to you?  
> I do not love you Thursday –  
> So much is true.  
> 
> And why you come complaining  
> Is more than I can see.  
> I loved you Wednesday, – yes – but what  
> Is that to me? \footnote{Millay, *Collected Poems*, p. 129.}

By deliberately creating the image of a “bad girl”, Millay seeks to challenge conventional morality on love. If Harford’s way of claiming sexual freedom seems gentle and polite, Millay’s is more aggressive and sarcastic. However, Harford is more daring in articulating a Lesbian love desire:

> I can’t feel the sunshine  
> Or see the stars aright  
> For thinking of her beauty
And her kisses bright.

She would let me kiss her
Once and not again.
Deeming soul essential,
Sense doth she disdain.  

Les Murray commented in 2005: “Lesbia Harford’s poems make no effort to hide her bisexuality.” Expressing a Lesbian desire is a daring act given the conservatism of Australian society in the early twentieth century. In Harford’s eye, it is the oppressive nature of Australian culture that made her lover reject her physical passion. Out of frustration, Harford condemned this conservatism in Australian society:

Would I were Sappho,
Greece my land, not this!
There the noblest women,
When they loved, would kiss.

However, Harford’s Lesbian passion was not always met with frustration. In “Lie-a-bed”, she expressed physical satisfaction with another lover:

My darling lies down in her soft white bed,
And she laughs at me.
Her laughter has flushed her pale cheeks with red.
Her eyes dance with glee.

My darling lies close in her warm white bed,
And she will not rise.
I will shower kisses down on her sleepyhead
Till she close her eyes.

Gioja’s no happier fresh from the South.
But my kisses free
Will straiten the curves of this teasing mouth,
If it laughs at me.

According to the dates of her poems, we can tell that Harford was simultaneously in love with more than one lesbian lover before her marriage with Patrick Harford in 1920. Though her passion is returned by Gioja, she still longs for Katie Lush's

102 P. 54.
affection:

Why does she put me into many indignities,
Shifts to prevent myself thinking upon her,
My golden Katie, who loveth not kisses?

I wear my new dresses and put on silk stockings,
All to prevent myself thinking upon her,
Who is more lovely than fair river-lilies.103

Apparently, Katie Lush, a philosophy tutor at Melbourne University, deliberately kept her distance from Harford. Modjeska comments that, “While the relationship between Katie and Lesbia lasted Lesbia’s lifetime, their affair seems to have been brief. It was intense and passionate but dogged by the social difficulties of a lesbian relationship in a conservative town at a conservative time.”104 However, there is no textual evidence to show that Lush was passionately in love with Harford though the other way around was evident. It is very likely that Lush only agreed they stay friends.

Taken historically, Harford’s poems are not only intensely personal, but almost private and confessional, which reminds us of American confessional poets such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. We seem to better understand why Harford did not attempt to get these poems published in her lifetime; they would not get through the censors upon publication under any circumstances. Although Harford and Millay were both bisexual before the 1920s, for some reason, Millay never expressed her lesbian desire in poetry. In contrast, Harford did not hesitate to break the taboo against all odds.

Apart from her Lesbian desire, Harford, like Millay, also writes openly about female sexuality. In “Periodicity”, she relates the issue of menstruation directly to sexuality:

My friend declares
Being woman and virgin she
Takes small account of periodicity.

103 P. 63.
104 P. 20.
And she is right.  
Her days are calmly spent  
For her sex-function is irrelevant.

But I whose life  
Is monthly broke in twain  
Must seek some sort of meaning in my pain.\(^{105}\)

It is worth special notice that touching upon the very female subject matter of “menstruation” should be considered pioneering in the context of the early twentieth century. Harford is perhaps the earliest woman poet in English poetry to address this biological issue. What’s more daring of Harford is the fact that she wrote about it mainly from the perspective of female sexuality. Menstruation, in her view, is a monthly nuisance which interrupts her sex life.

Meaning must lie,  
Some beauty surely dwell  
In the fierce depths and uttermost pits of hell.

Yet still I seek,  
Month after month in vain,  
Meaning and beauty in recurrent pain.\(^{106}\)

Apparently, Harford is trying to construct some meaning around her recurring pain but eventually claims it meaningless because she sees no beauty in it at all. However, a feminist critic may disagree. Ann Vickery, for instance, might be right when she remarked that Harford’s “Periodicity” was perhaps “the earliest poem in Australia to broach the topic of menstruation,” but she was definitely misleading when she added that Harford “viewed it as part of feminine empowerment.”\(^{107}\) Coincidentally, Millay also wrote a poem relating to menstruation titled “Menses”:

I felt it. Down my side  
Innocent as oil I see the ugly venom slide;  
Poison enough to stiffen us both, and all our friends;  
But I am not pierced, so there the mischief ends.

There is more to be said; I see it coiling;  
The impact will be pain.

\(^{105}\) P. 75.  
\(^{106}\) P. 76.  
\(^{107}\) Vickery, p. 228.
Yet coil; yet strike again.
You cannot riddle the stout mail I wove
Long since, of wit and love.108

Similarly to Harford, Millay does not believe there is any meaning or beauty in menstruation and considers the physical pain quite a disturbance. Differently from Harford, Millay violently condemns menstruation by comparing it to venom. A major difference in their attitude lies in the fact that Harford is more concerned about her sex life while Millay is more worried about the mental disturbance it causes.

Comparing the dates of two poems might yield some interesting results. On the one hand, Harford’s “Periodicity” was written in 1917 while Millay’s “Menses” was published in 1939. On the other hand, Millay is usually considered the first woman poet in English poetry to address menstruation, and this had a great impact on future woman poets such as Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. By comparison, we may be able to say that Harford is perhaps the earliest woman poet in the twentieth century to address this peculiarly female subject.

Harford not only writes about her sexuality, she also revealed the sexuality of the factory girls. In “Machinist Talking”, she depicts the sexuality of a working class girl:

I sit at my machine
Hourlong beside me, Vera, aged nineteen,
Babbles her sweet and innocent tale of sex.109

Compared with Harford, Millay is equally out-spoken about sex, especially in her sonnet collection Fatal Interview, she adopts a celebratory tone to express the joy of consummation:

Olympian gods, mark now my bedside lamp
Blown out; and be advised too late that he
Whom you call sire is stolen into the camp
Of warring Earth, and lies abed with me.110

The radicalism of Harford’s poetry not only lies in her free love spirit, her frankness about lesbian love and female sexuality but also in her political stance. She is not only a passionate spokeswoman of the working class, but is deeply sympathetic with social outcasts including those who are generally despised and condemned by the society:

I choose the friends who suit me (one I found
Shut up in jail) –
Some nuns, some clerks, Anne whose beauty was
Frankly for sale. 111

Harford not only makes friends with political radicals, but with prostitutes. Apparently, she regards prostitution as an evidence of class oppression. Sometimes, Harford even sees beauty in these women:

I open my small store
And tell of a young delicate girl, a whore,
Stole from her mother many months ago.

Fate made the woman seem
To have a tiger’s loveliness, to gleam
Strong and fantastic as a beast of prey. 112

As a spokeswoman for the working class, Harford certainly does not approve of prostitution. She is sympathetic to the women’s fate and appreciative of their beauty. However, “seem / To have a tiger’s loveliness” indicates that Harford’s appreciation of their beauty is not without criticism. In the end, one wonders how Harford managed to avoid creating propaganda when most of her poetry is of a radical nature. Perhaps Harford had the answer when she told Percival Serle in 1926 that Anna Wickham’s polemically feminist poetry was “spoilt as much by its slovenliness as by its propaganda aspect.” 113 Harford was never a polemicist in her poetry the way Wickham was and she was too lyrical to be a propagandist.

112 P. 73.
113 P. 33.
4.27 Modern or Modernist: A Debate

In Australian literary history, Harford’s achievement was not seriously recognized until the late twentieth century. In 1961, H.M. Green commented that Harford “was not much of an artist, and not much of a poetic craftsman”\textsuperscript{114} and that her “contribution to Australian poetry, and in particular to Australian love poetry, is small, but real.”\textsuperscript{115} Serious discussion of Harford’s poetry and poetics did not begin until the publication of the definitive version of Harford’s poetry by Drusilla Modjeska and Marjorie Pizer in 1985. The book’s introduction written by Modjeska offers insightful comments on Harford’s poetic achievement. Modjeska, for instance, remarked:

Lesbia Harford’s poetry is a far cry from the bulk of verse written by Australian women in the 1910s and 1920s which filled the volumes of such magazines as \textit{The Spinner}, and which relied on Victorian rhyme and metre, cosy sentiment and hedgerow descriptions. Viewed historically Lesbia Harford’s poetry is astonishing.\textsuperscript{116}

Modjeska is correct in pointing out that Harford’s female contemporaries tend to express genteel sentiment which is closely related to their predilection for decorative adjectives. Zora Cross’s poetry, for instance, is made pompous with adjectives, which is a sign of Victorianism. Nevertheless, “Victorian rhyme” undoubtedly means traditional form which Harford consciously adopted. Moreover, when Modjeska remarked that Harford’s poetry “looks to popular traditions of song and lyric poetry rather than to contemporary intellectual or modernist poetry, she failed to notice that Harford’s free verse experiment is in the same spirit with the poetic Modernism initiated by Pound and Eliot whether Harford herself was aware of their Modernism or not.

In 1991, Harford was positively anthologized by Robert Gray and Geoffrey Lehmann in their \textit{Australian Poetry in the Twentieth Century}:

\textsuperscript{114} Green, \textit{A History of Australian Literature}, 1961, p. 953.
\textsuperscript{115} P. 955.
\textsuperscript{116} Harford, \textit{The Poems of Lesbia Harford}, p. 32.
She was opposed to what she thought of as elitist forms of art, and for this reason rejected classical music and only valued brass bands. Her attitude to poetry was similar, and many of her poems are simplistic. But some have a bare and aphoristic force. Her political ideals allowed her to avoid, far more consistently than her contemporaries, the Victorianisms then so prevalent in Australian poetry.” 117

Though Gray and Lehmann rightly pointed out that Harford consciously avoided the Victorianisms, their comment that she was opposed to the so-called “elitist forms of art” is contentious. Perhaps, Gray and Lehmann had Anglo-American Modernism in mind when they made the above comment and “free verse”, among other things, must have been one of the “elitist forms” in their thinking. They failed, however, to notice that Harford had actually experimented with free verse from 1918 onward.

In Australian literary history, the use of the term “Modernism” or “Modernist” in literary criticism tends to cause more confusion than otherwise. For the majority of Australian critics such as H. M. Green, Vivian Smith, John Tranter and Philip Mead, to name just a few, the term “Modernism” or “Modernist” is closely related to Anglo-American Modernism. Kenneth Slessor, for instance, is considered by Green the only “modernist in manner and expression”118 largely because his poetry is deeply influenced by “Eliot and the modern generally”119 during the period 1927-32 when he had “abandoned the Lindsay studio for good.”120 R. D. FitzGerald, on the other hand, is not considered a Modernist mainly because his poetry “has been virtually untouched by modernist techniques.”121 Frank Wilmot “knew about Pound and Eliot probably earlier than anyone else in Australia; he knew the work of Stevens, Williams and Marianne Moore ... he makes consistent attempts throughout his poetry at modernity” and he “had a surface technical range greater than that of any other poet of his generation.” However, he was ultimately unable to “make it new” because of “his sense of language and rhythm. His diction is not as modern or as aware as his technique.”122 Eventually, he “stood so awkwardly between the traditional and the

119 P. 857.
120 P.859.
121 Kramer, p. 361.
122 Pp. 312-3.
new in his own poetic practice.”¹²³ The critics mentioned above differ more in degree than in kind in terms of discussion of Australian Modernism. What they have in common is their neglect of poets who did not assimilate Modernist techniques in terms of the period 1910s-1930s. Harford’s poetry on a whole does not strike one as intellectual or impersonal; her formal innovation, without careful textual analysis, can easily slip a critic’s mind.

Another group of critics such as Ann Vickery, Peter Kirkpatrick and John Kinsella, tend to use the term “Modernist” with particular implications. Ann Vickery’s *Stressing the Modern: Cultural Politics in Australian Women’s Poetry* deserves special attention in the scholarship of Australian women’s poetry. Published in 2007, Vickery claimed that it was “the first major study of modern Australian women’s poetry.”¹²⁴ Vickery’s title for the Harford chapter is “Writing Revolution”; however, in terms of form she mentions only Harford’s occasional use of “half-rhymes.”¹²⁵ Harford’s experiment with free verse, let alone her fusion of traditional form and modern content, is not noticed. At the end of the chapter, Vickery summarizes that “Lesbia’s poetry is charged with social critique, combined with a great attention to form. The result was a modernist poetics - that was also politically and ethically charged.”¹²⁶ Although Harford’s “social critique” does contribute to the radicalism of her poetry, especially her political poetry, “radicalism” might make her a rather modern poet, not necessarily a Modernist. Vickery’s definition, or redefinition, of Modernism virtually has little or nothing to do with Anglo-American Modernism. Perhaps we should call it “feminist Modernism”.

In *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature*, published in 2009, Peter Kirkpatrick thinks highly of Harford and comments, “Open to ordinary experience, with a freshness and frankness that eschews Victorian mannerisms, these are perhaps the first unambiguously modernist poems by an Australian.”¹²⁷ Also, he emphasizes

¹²³ P. 350.
¹²⁴ Vickery, p. 3.
¹²⁵ P. 219.
¹²⁶ P. 262.
¹²⁷ Pierce, p. 211.
that her poetry responds to “possibilities for social transformation” unleashed by the breakdown of old power structures during the Great War while elsewhere the reaction “was more conservative and patriotic, focusing on the conflict in Europe and the Dardanelles.” However, avoiding Victorian mannerism does not necessarily make one a Modernist as in the case of English Georgian poetry which is against Victorianism. In a different chapter of the same book, John Kinsella comments that, “The real Australian 20th-century modernists were all poets directly or indirectly associated with the Great War: Leon Gellert, Zora Cross and Lesbia Harford.”

Kinsella’s comment on Harford is problematic in that his version of Modernism, however it condemns Anglo-American Modernism, has virtually little or nothing to do with aesthetics. Zora Cross’s conspicuous conventionalism, her love of adjectives and her poetical language, for instance, do not seem to bother Kinsella at all. In short, Kinsella’s version of Australian Modernism is hardly convincing, nor is his comment on Harford.

In form, Harford not only used traditional form and metre with irregularities, but experimented with free verse, which contributed to the variety, and accordingly, the complexity of her poetry. Moreover, the visual qualities and musicality of her poetry shows influences from modern art and French symbolist poetry. In content, the radicalism of her political poetry and her unconventional understanding of love help voice a unique modernity. Furthermore, her mainly modern vocabulary and her colloquial style are conspicuous. In assessment of Harford’s position in Australian poetic history, I prefer to use the term “Modern” rather than “Modernist”. For one thing, the term “Modernist” usually refers to a poet who consciously assimilates Modernist poetics such as Marianne Moore whose poetry resembles that of Eliot in terms of its formal difficulty, intellectuality and impersonality. In contrast, Harford’s poetry is accessible, populist and personal. Although Harford did write in free verse, the majority of her poetry is written in traditional form. In a way, Harford’s poetic practice resembles that of Edna St. Vincent Millay in that Millay also wrote in free

128 P. 212.
129 P. 475.
verse, poems that were largely ignored because she mainly wrote in traditional form and metre. Millay’s radicalism in her love poetry is as striking as Harford’s in her political poetry. However, radicalism might be considered a major element for being “Modern,” it is seldom a concern for Modernist poetics which is first and foremost formally innovative.

In Australian literary history, Kenneth Slessor is usually considered the first modern or Modernist poet. The Penguin Book of Modern Australian Poetry, published in 1991 and edited by John Tranter and Philip Mead, starts with Kenneth Slessor as the first Modern poet for the reason that it seems to them that “his work best represents the emergence of modern poetry in this country.”\textsuperscript{130} Slessor, is mostly renowned for poetry written from the mid-1920s to the end of the 1930s under the influence of Anglo-American Modernism; Harford’s creative years, however, are focused on the period 1910-1927. Les Murray considers Harford one of the best four poets writing before 1930s, the other three are Francis McNamara (1811-c.1880), Mary Gilmore (1865-1962) and John Shaw Neilson (1872-1942).\textsuperscript{131} Compared with the three older poets, Harford is a real modern poet in many ways. In a large sense, Harford is Slessor’s predecessor. In short, Harford’s negotiation with form, her modern vocabulary and her colloquial style, the visual, musical and radical qualities of her poetry are enough to place her among the earliest pioneers in twentieth century Australian poetic history. In this sense, Harford, rather than Slessor, should be considered the first modern poet in twentieth century Australia. Very recently, a new selection of Harford’s poetry\textsuperscript{132} has been published which not only proves the enduring quality of her poetry but indicates increasing and renewed attention her poetry has been given.

\textsuperscript{131} Murray, Hell and After, p. xi.
4.3 Zora Cross

4.31 Cross and her critics: then and now

Zora Cross made a name for herself as a poet in the late 1910s mainly by the collection *Songs of Love and Life* published in 1917. She was praised by some older poets such as Christopher Brennan and Mary Gilmore. Brennan called her writing “the real stuff of poetry” and despite some “astounding lapses” the sonnets reminded him “without any copying, without any reminiscence – of the best sonnet-writers, from Rossetti back to Shakespeare”.133 I will shortly demonstrate in my analysis that Cross’s poetry is heavily tinted with Victorianism; her use of imagery in particular resembles that of Christina Rossetti in no small degree. Gilmore also lauded Cross as generating “almost a new creation as far as Australia is concerned, for she brings to her work youth, force, heat, feeling, the play of words, form, and a sustained level of execution in a degree unusual to women writers.”134 There may be “youth”, “heat”, “feeling” since her lines were sexually charged, but the way she expressed them was typically Victorian. The fact that both Brennan and Gilmore highly praised Cross’s poetry verifies aspects of Victorianism in their work. According to Robert Gray and Geoffrey Lehmann, Brennan “is essentially a poet of the 1890s.”135 Les Murray also points out that Gilmore’s poetry “is marred by lingering Victorian diction, and her dialect writing ... never escaped from a fatal staginess.”136

Regardless of her unconventional life style, the overall estimation of Cross in Australian literary history has been that Cross is aesthetically an old-fashioned poet. In *A history of Australian Literature*, H. M. Green remarks that Cross’s erotic sonnets “so shocked and allured the readers of its day” that they gave “her a poetic prominence that was not quite warranted...”137 It is worth noting that in Geoffrey Dutton’s *The

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133 Cited from Vickery, p. 181.
134 Vickery, p. 189.
135 Gray & Lehmann, p. 2.
136 Murray, p. 27.

Quite different from the majority of the critics and scholars, Ann Vickery and John Kinsella have thought otherwise about Cross. In Stressing the Modern, published in 2007, Vickery comments that, “in both subject matter and form, Cross’s poetry was subversive” and complains that later critics “overlooked or discounted” Cross’s “originality and radicalism” by the presumption that “she was heavily influenced by David McKee Wright.” Kinsella, in the introduction to The Penguin Anthology of Australian Poetry, advises the readers to find the origins of Australian Modernism in “the love and anti-war poetry of Zora Cross, or….to early Brennan.” Then in The Cambridge History of Australian Literature, Kinsella announces that Cross is one of the “real Australian 20th century modernists.”

From the 1980s to the present time, except for a couple of feminist anthologies, Cross has rarely been included in anthologies. Conspicuously, she was

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139 Pierce, p. 212.
140 Vickery, p. 175.
141 P. 213.
143 Pierce, p. 475.
not included in *The Macmillan Anthology of Australian Literature*, edited by Ken Goodwin and Alan Lawson (1990) and *Australian Poetry in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Robert Gray and Geoffrey Lehmann (1991), while Harford was included in both.

### 4.32 Cross’s Form

In the 1910s and 1920s, David McKee Wright, as editor of the *Bulletin*, became the spokesman of the conservative poetic force. He was quite influential on the young people who were gathered around and “often coached contributors on how they might improve their work.”\(^{145}\) On the other hand, Wright’s opponents regarded him as “a plagiarist and corrupter of the young.”\(^{146}\) As Wright’s admirer and lover, and one of the contributors coached by Wright, Cross was considerably influenced by him. In form, Wright rejected free verse as he “characterised English and American exponents of *vers libre* and other modern trends as deviants from the true path.”\(^{147}\) That Cross never attempted free verse evidences this influence. Cross adopted traditional form and metre, in particular the sonnet and blank verse.

As for the sonnet, she employed the Petrarchan form, following only one rhyme pattern a-b-b-a-a-b-a-c-d-e-c-d-e throughout all her sonnets. Very occasionally she was a little relaxed with the rhyme. For example in the octave of sonnet XXXIX:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{We live .... We know we live ... Our bodies feel;}
\text{Warm, wild desires about our white limbs flee.}
\text{And eyes drink passion from the eyes they see,}
\text{As list’ning lovers hear their shadows steal.}
\text{Life has been ours, such life as wheel on wheel}
\text{Of sunburnt Youth, and softened Age set free –}
\text{Ambition’s fire, Love’s eager revelry –}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^{145}\) Vickery, p. 180.
\(^{146}\) Sharkey, p. 291.
\(^{147}\) Pp. 265-266.
The rose romance that old adventures reel.\textsuperscript{148}

Words such as “free” and “revelry” create a weak rhyme amongst strong, monosyllabic rhymes. Also in the sestet of sonnet LVI:

\begin{verbatim}
He knows not perfect who has found the best, 
Nor worth who would deny unworthiness, 
But mearest flowers are fair as any rose 
When blowing fragrant to our least behest. 
So you are perfect in my heart no less 
For that unworthiness my poor mind knows.\textsuperscript{149}
\end{verbatim}

Apparently, “unworthiness” and “less” are half-rhymed. A frequent use of half-rhyme is a salient feature of the common practice of modern poets as Philip Hobsbaum comments that, “Half-rhyme had been used before in English; though not, it is true, so systematically.”\textsuperscript{150} All through her sonnets, Cross’s use of half-rhyme is only occasional.

It is noticeable that Cross frequently uses ellipses especially in \textit{Songs of Love and Life}. For example, in sonnet XX, ellipses are used in three lines: “Love ... Love! It dies ... The fragile petals droop; /.../ Press closer to my heart ... I would forget / ... / To live ... to die ... like this ... till all suns set.”\textsuperscript{151} In sonnet XXVII, we see the repetition: “You call me wife ... Ah! sweetest name and dear!/ ... / O Love ... my Love! ... Come nearer to my breast /.../ We sleep ... we dream, dissolved in our desire.”\textsuperscript{152} It seems to me that the use of ellipsis can only be explained by her ecstatic cry of happiness. Her happiness may be real, but the way she expresses it is repetitive and old-fashioned. Not surprisingly, H. M. Green remarks that, “…whereas modern love poets intellectualise their emotion Zora Cross is almost purely emotional ... there is no sufficient thought to give it substance; it consists merely of a declaration of adoring love repeated over and over with varying detail.”\textsuperscript{153}

Apart from the Petrarchan sonnet, she also favoured blank verse as in

\textsuperscript{148} Zora Cross, \textit{Songs of Love and Life} (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1917) p. 39.
\textsuperscript{149} P. 35.
\textsuperscript{150} Hobsbaum, p. 300.
\textsuperscript{151} Cross, \textit{Songs of Love and Life}, p. 20.
\textsuperscript{152} P. 27.
\textsuperscript{153} Green, \textit{A History of Australian Poetry}, 1984, p. 481.
“Outside the Gate”:

He has gone home to her ... I must not weep,
He says ... But oh, it rains and rains upon
The road and street, and all the grass is cold ...
He has gone home to her; and she will climb
About his knee deliciously, and kiss
His soft, melodious mouth, and talk to him
Of all the things he did this long, white day.  

As Michael Sharkey notes, in a debate between David McKee Wright and Kenneth Slessor about Cross’s poetry in 1919, Slessor ridiculed Cross’s form, saying that she was “such a disciplined disciple of ‘form’ that her blank verse may be read backwards or forwards without any evident difference in either its beat or its blankness.” This debate, in Sharkey’s words, was “a contest between classics and moderns...”  

Cross and Wright represented the conservative poetics Slessor felt the need to attack.

In Stressing the Modern, Ann Vickery remarks that Cross “experimented with free verse and attempted to incorporate the new rhythms of jazz.”  

Vickery’s comment needs qualification. Cross was a whole-hearted follower and enthusiastic promoter of David McKee Wright who resolutely rejected free verse; there is no textual evidence whatsoever to show the she ever wrote free verse. Not surprisingly, Vickery, in her chapter of Cross, did not give a single example of free verse poem by Cross. Vickery very possibly mistook Cross’s blank verse for free verse. As for the Jazz rhythm, Cross did publish a poem titled “Jazz” in The Spinner in 1924:

Look at Mr. Jackson jazzing with his girl!
Isn’t she a beauty? Isn’t she a pearl?
Whirl! While! Nigger it away!
Black night’s going. Soon it will be day!
Oom! Zoom! Brass up! Brass up, boys!
Girls, twirl! Isn’t jazzing the joys?
Say, say! Who can play? Crash!
There’s another bottle gone ...Smash! Clash!
Brass up, brass up! Blow, nigger, blow!

154 Cross, Songs of Love and Life, p. 119.
155 Sharkey, p. 249.
156 Vickery, p.11.
Jazz was the music of the 1920s which was famously called “the Jazz Age” in the USA. In England Edith Sitwell caused quite a stir by reading *Facade* accompanied by Jazz music in 1923. Although Cross still employed traditional rhyme, her imitation of Jazz rhythm could be considered a modern attempt. Apart from Jazz, Cross also imitated gypsy music in “Spanish Dance”:

> Rattle the castanets ho la!
> With a gipsy revel, hey!
> Crimson and brown we laugh. Ha, ha!
> Let the moon elves out to play.
> By the camp-fire leaping high
> (Ho la Hey!)
> By the red breeze blowing by
> (Guitar, play!)
> Horse bells jingling
> Hot blood tingling
> Caravans at rest in the old brown night
> Ho la hey!^{158}

The use of “ho la” does create an exotic feel. However, Cross paid too much attention to sound effect without giving much attention to meaning. It is worth noting that Cross never experimented with form; her imitation of dance rhythm without abandoning traditional rhyme was an occasional modern pose.

### 4.33 Cross’s Language

Cross’s diction was essentially poetical, which very possibly resulted from the influence of David McKee Wright. Sharkey gives a detailed description of Wright’s conservative stance:

> Intrinsic with his conception of poetry was the belief that certain themes, subjects and modes of expression were inherently ‘poetical’. Acting as his own gatekeeper, he could not allow that his works that diffracted contemporary issues in colloquial language could aspire to the status of poetry, a category reserved in his mind for work such as that which

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^{157} Cited by Vickery, p. 203.

^{158} Cited by Vickery, pp. 203-204.
constituted *An Irish Heart*. His attitude limited poetry’s capacity to speak to contemporary readers in the language of everyday speech. Wright’s prejudice against inclusion of popular culture in what he thought of as ‘serious’ poetry (rather than rhymes or jingles) flew in the face of what was increasingly the practice of Modernist writers in Europe and America.\(^{159}\)

Apparently, Wright’s attitude towards poetry made him both anti-modern and anti-Modernist. Unfortunately, Cross shared his aesthetics. Everyday language has no place in Cross’s poetry. Her imagination was deeply embedded in an ancient world in which gods, nymphs, fairies and Pan once lived; traces of popular culture in the early twentieth century such as public libraries, newspapers, trams, ferries were never present in her best known collection *Songs of Love and Life*. In the early decades of the twentieth century, in face of the expanding modernisation of Australian society, Kenneth Slessor and Lesbia Harford wrote frequently about the city. Images of the city were everywhere in their poetry. However, in Cross’s poetry, the readers may be startled to find themselves walking in a remote world:

> Your hair is all the woods of Arcady,
> Where nymph and satyr in the grasses sigh,
> And every phantom wind that passes by
> Rustles the golden reeds to melody. \(^{160}\)

> “Holloa! Holloa!” I heard a happy shout
> Of nymph and satyr running in the glade,
> To the soft chuckle of a merry maid,
> Who piped in pleasure for the giddy rout.
> “Join in. Join in,” they echoed in and out.
> “The acorns tumble in the hanging shade,
> And Pan is tickling with a lily blade
> The smooth, black bristle of the dead boar’s snout.”\(^{161}\)

Her vocabulary of “Arcady”, “nymph”, “satyr”, “phantom” and “Pan” contributes nothing to our understanding of the modern world. This also indicates that she was writing from her imagination which was immersed in ancient poetry, not from reality. Moreover, her archaism was apparent:

> I, he ... he, I ... and Thou, O Lord, that day

\(^{159}\) Sharkey, p. 269.

\(^{160}\) Cross, *Songs of Love and Life*, p. 11.

\(^{161}\) Cross, *The Lilt of Life* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1918) p. 110.
So near us both, I knew that Thou wast there
Weaving Thy wonders through our bodies fair,
Lord ... Lord ... Thou wast ...

The most salient feature of Cross’s poetry is her predilection for adjectives. Not surprisingly, David McKee Wright, editor of the Bulletin in the 1910s and 1920s, was also criticized for his love of adjectives, as Sharkey points out:

He was to be attacked in propria persona by other writers for his love of adjectives. The matter was a sore one with him, and he never emerges from the encounters with credit. For all his efforts at justification, his poems were characteristically vitiated by this padding to make up marketable lines.

Cross was obsessed with colours. Her favorites are “golden”, “white” and “pure”. For example in lines such as:

And every phantom wind that passes by
Rustles the golden reeds to melody.

I’d trill such songs along the golden dew,
That Pan soft-piping on a reed of glee,

Doubt is imagination’s golden seal,
And memory the lattice of romance.

O, golden was the gown I wore
Of buttercups and air.

And then you kiss me, and your love
Sings of the golden age of song,

“Golden” is the colour favoured by John Keats as he wrote in “God of the Golden Bow”:

God of the golden bow,
And of the golden Lyre,
And of the golden hair
And of the golden fire,

162 Cross, Songs of Love and Life, p. 115.
163 Sharkey, p. 251.
164 Cross, Songs of Love and Life, p. 11.
165 P. 23.
166 P. 37.
167 P. 73.
168 Cross, The Lilt of Life, p. 141.
However, Keats never used it frequently. Similarly, Christina Rossetti also used “golden” in “Golden Glories” written in 1882:

The buttercup is like a golden cup,
   The marigold is like a golden frill,
The daisy with a golden eye looks up,
   And golden spreads the flag beside the rill,
   And gay and golden nods the daffodil;
The gorsey common swells a golden sea,
   The cowslip hangs a head of golden tips,
   And golden drips the honey which the bee
   Sucks from sweet hearts of flowers and stores and sips.  

In sonnet XXVIII, XXXVII, and L, we get a taste of Cross’s love of white:

   Immeasured space of our desire, and cast
   Us breathless to the realms the white gods throng.  

   Time only rivals me whene’er you go,
   Detaining you some white and lovesome hour;  

   White Reason singing to a mighty lyre
   Songs of eternity with earthly call.  

The phrase “white gods” indicates her association of Greek gods. Cross seems to use “white hour” to express pleasure time as indicated by the word “lovesome”. However, “white reason” is simply abstractly baffling. Perhaps Cross tries to describe the colour of eternity. In the whole collection, Cross’s use of “white” seems to be habitual and repetitive. Given her frequent use of “white” to describe almost anything concrete or abstract, “white” does not necessarily signal either a heterosexual or homosexual desire. However, in Stressing the Modern, Ann Vickery associates Cross’s use of the colour white with “a homosexual ethos that is at once pure and distant” To illustrate her point, she gives examples from poems Cross wrote about girls or women such as “Heaven lies beneath a girl’s white lids asleep”, “Rachel has skin as white as fairy milk,” “Blue-veined are Rachel’s wrists, soft warm and white” and “Be to me chaste, 

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171 Cross, Songs of Love and Life, p. 28.
172 P. 37.
173 P. 50.
174 Vickery, p. 191.
white stars and crescent moon.” In effect, Cross’s use of white to describe eyelids, skin, wrists and stars is nothing different from what she does with the above “white bed” and “white limbs”. It is absurd to impose sexuality, heterosexual or otherwise, upon phrases such as “white stars”, “white gods” and “white reason”.

Cross’s predilection for “golden” and “white” resembles one of the Neo-Georgians, W. J. Turner. In his “Romance”, he uses lines such as “I went into a golden land” and “I walked in a great golden dream”. In “Ecstasy”, his love of “white” is obvious as in lines such as “I saw a frieze on whitest marble drawn” and “Their white feet shedding pallor in the sea”. However, the frequency of Cross’s use of “golden” and “white” is astonishing. Another adjective she used with frequency is “pure”. Unlike “golden” and “white”, “pure” is abstract, sometimes tinted with a religious connotation. As the lines indicate:

Filling with love my chalice of pure clay  
From fragrant fountains of your own dear breast.

Living the laughter of that pure surprise  
When you and I to rhapsody were wed.

O, let us not so load ourselves with joy  
That bliss becomes pure habit, and the fire.

Like fountains of pure feeling that inspire  
All that is small in me to swift transpire.

The phrase “pure clay” is closely connected with the Bible. The “pure” in “pure surprise” and “pure habit” seems empty and redundant. In “pure feeling”, the adjective has the similar meaning as “chaste” as indicated in “The Joys of our first parents’ chaste control.” The depiction of love as pure or chaste is largely romantic rhetoric.

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175 Cited by Vickery, p. 191.  
176 Marsh, Georgian Poetry 1916-1917, p. 3.  
177 P. 5.  
178 Cross, Songs of Love and Life, p. 24.  
179 P. 56.  
180 P. 57.  
181 P. 126.  
182 P. 15.
Moreover, Cross tends to use adjectives which not only remind one of Romantic convention but express an insipid Victorian sentiment. Words such as “sweet”, “fragrant”, “scented”, “fair”, “fragile”, “gentle” and “tender” are frequently employed in her sonnets. Georgian poetry was first and foremost criticised for being genteel. Those adjectives are perfectly sufficient to create such a feel. For example, in sonnets XIII, XXV, XL, LVII:

I was beguiled by dreams for many years
List’ning to those who came in your sweet name ----

Filling with love my chalice of pure clay
From fragrant fountains of your own dear breast.

Till at my feet I spilled the fragrant urn
Of my sweet youth where passion ceased to burn
In those fair blossoms that your lips sipped dry

Or winter frost, which on the sweet earth lies
In gentle sleep of snowy chastity.

This is every bit reminiscent of the “genteel tradition” in nineteen century poetry, against which, American Modernists lavished their most relentless criticism. Besides, Cross loves using the superlative form of adjectives. In sonnets XXIII, XXIV, XXXV, for example:

Were I a bird upon the greenest tree
Carolling cadences of love for you,

All that in you most needs me day and night.
“In this alone shall I know fullest bliss.”

But meanest flowers are fair as any rose
When blowing fragrant to our least behest.

Ezra Pound demanded in his “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste”: Use no superfluous word,
no adjective, which does not reveal something. Cross’s obsession with adjectives is a sign of Victorianism which was then prevalent in Australian literature. Her use of superlative adjectives only shows the impoverishment of her imagination and the shallowness of her talent. Cross uses conventional imagery in a conventional way. “Rose” remains Cross’ favourite image and she uses it with extraordinary frequency. For example in sonnets IV, V and VI:

Five threads of fire and five of chastened lore  
I culled from a red rose, adorned with dew.\textsuperscript{191}

I’d have you take a rose from here, from there  
A sprig of jasmine, white and passion-fanned,\textsuperscript{192}

For here, where roses through the lattice twine,  
And odorous white lilies live and die,\textsuperscript{193}

The reader may remember that “rose” is a traditional image frequently employed by Christina Rossetti. For example, in lines such as “Roses and lilies grow above the place” from “Life Hidden”,\textsuperscript{194} “The rose, the perfect rose, be mine.” from “Queen Rose”\textsuperscript{195} and “Rose toward the sun: sunlighted flashed on me” from “Two Thoughts”.\textsuperscript{196} The first two poems were written in 1849 and the last one in 1850. The traditional image was continued by Cross into the Twentieth century.

Other images Cross uses very often are dew, moon, angel, Eden, heaven, Pan, etc. For example, in sonnets VIII, “The New Moon” and “The Rainbow”:

Ruling, wit you, such magic territ’ry,  
Like angels in an Eden, we would dwell.\textsuperscript{197}

High moon, shy moon, drifting your boat  
Into the murk of the world awhile,  
Slim moon, dim moon, adding a smile.\textsuperscript{198}

\textsuperscript{190} Cited by Perkins, A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode, p. 334.  
\textsuperscript{191} Cross, Songs of Love and Life, p. 4.  
\textsuperscript{192} P. 5.  
\textsuperscript{193} P. 6.  
\textsuperscript{194} Rossetti, p. 294.  
\textsuperscript{195} P. 295.  
\textsuperscript{196} P. 299.  
\textsuperscript{197} Cross, Songs of Love and Life, p.8.  
\textsuperscript{198} P. 70.
Creamy-white fairies their curls are unpinning,
Shaking pink pinafores woven of dew.\textsuperscript{199}

It seems that the breakout of the First World War did not have the slightest impact on her dream world in which there is only beauty and pleasure. Cross’s imagery, vocabulary and diction are essentially conventional. Ann Vickery obviously tries to obscure Cross’s salient Victorianism by commenting that, “While Zora uses coy Victorian metaphors such as ‘wings of cupid’ and ‘fragile petals’ to encode the emotions, her sonnets are unusual in their straight-forward details of finger-tips, feet, hair, breasts, ears, and lips.”\textsuperscript{200} As a matter of fact, Cross’s description of body parts is nothing unusual; Christina Rossetti wrote in “A Triad” in 1856:

\begin{verbatim}
There sang of love together: one with lips
    Crimson, with cheeks and bosom in a glow,
    Flushed to the yellow hair and finger-tips;\textsuperscript{201}
\end{verbatim}

While Harford and Slessor showed the reader what reality was like in the 1910s and 1920s by presenting images either of the factory or the Sydney Harbour, Cross simply brought the reader back to the nineteenth century when Robert Burns’s rose was forever red. In her 1922 \textit{Introduction to the Study of Australian Literature}, Cross highly praised Victor Daley: “There is a whole world of imaginative fancy in Daley’s work and his vision soared into happy holy places...”\textsuperscript{202} Cross’s appreciation of Daley is revealing: it seems true that Cross was entirely immersed in her imaginative fancy about holy places.

\subsection*{4.34 Love Sonnets}

As far as her personal life is concerned, Cross was no doubt a “New Woman”. Similarly to her American contemporary, Edna St. Vincent Millay, she defied

\begin{footnotes}
\item[199] P. 90.
\item[200] Vickery, p. 186.
\item[201] Rossetti, p.329.
\end{footnotes}
conventional morality and embraced a free love ethos. She was promiscuous in terms of a series of love affairs with both men and women.\textsuperscript{203} In the 1910s, she was flirting with editors of literary magazines such as *Lone Hand* and the *Bulletin* through letters which were usually attached with the poems she sent with an aim to get her poems published. Most consciously, she wrote to David McKee Wright that she dreamed they “were bathing” together “on the Cairns beach”.\textsuperscript{204} Her seductiveness was criticised by Wright:

> You tell me in your letters you are a good little girl. You’re not. You have played fast and loose with all sorts of things...Now this you’ve got to know. You will do your own work and secure its recognition by your own vital voice not by cleverly winding your way into the sympathies of men. You wrote wildly to me from the first. To how many other men have you done the same? I keep your indiscretions secret; others don’t ... you must stop all that.\textsuperscript{205}

Cross was in no way a conventional woman. She earned a reputation “as a tearaway soubrette and husband stealer”\textsuperscript{206} in the late 1910s. Besides, in an undated article on “Women and Books”, she argued for the intellectual freedom of women:

> Sappho in 600 BC loved her books. Hypatia in the 5\textsuperscript{th} century AD was martyred for hers. Many others loved theirs – before women were free as they are today to pick and choose their own. Women for centuries, it seems to me, have been the listeners and men at evening still seem to look for the listening rather than the thinking woman because man too has an emotional life just a woman has. The time is too soon to expect of woman the capacity of mental detachment which has taken men centuries to acquire but that there is a steady progress towards it is evident [...] more women are feeling that man needs the higher mind in woman and she will meet him in his need. [...] There is no book written that women cannot read and discuss clearly. There is no problem to be met which she is not capable of solving.\textsuperscript{207}

In the context of the twentieth century, Cross was in no less degree a rebel as Millay in terms of her free love spirit and feminist consciousness. There is every reason to believe that she would carve a rebellious “New Woman” image in her love poetry. Unfortunately, there seems to be a huge gap between her life and her poetry.

> I’ll be whate’er you wish, a bird, a flower.

\textsuperscript{203} See Ann Vickery’s *Stressing the Modern* in which she cited a few poems to demonstrate Cross’s same-sex desire. Pp. 190-2.
\textsuperscript{204} Sharkey, p. 202.
\textsuperscript{205} P. 203.
\textsuperscript{206} P. 315.
Gathering through crystal rivers of the air,
Moods of the moon and starry spices fair,
To shed them over you from hour to hour.
I’ll be a little slave without a dower
Sitting, submissive on your palace stair,
Until you lift me up and bid me wear
Jewels of ecstasy and share your power.  

It is hard for the reader to associate Cross’s “New Woman” image in real life with the “little slave” in her sonnet. The submissive, slavish tone is that of traditional women who were entirely untouched by feminism. Green comments that *Songs of Love and Life* “deals with a women’s love for a man, expressed with ecstatic submission and passionate abandonment”.  

Kate Chadwick comments that all though *Songs of Love and Life*, Cross shows “a conservative deference to patriarchal authority.” On the other hand, Cross’s American contemporary, Edna St. Vincent Millay, a well-known “New Woman”, expressed her autonomy in a relationship:

I know my mind and I have made my choice;
Not from your temper does my doom depend;
Love me or love me not, you have no voice
In this, which is my portion to the end.
Your presence and your favours, the full part
That you could give, you now can take away.

While Millay’s modern attitude toward love was apparently nurtured and strengthened by the Suffrage movement in the 1910s, Cross’s stance on love is conventional, one which the first-wave of the Feminist movement was trying to eliminate. Cross’s love poetry is essentially romantic also in that she constantly refers to abstract concepts such as “soul”, “eternity” and “immortality” to describe her idealism of love. Similarly to Elizabeth Browning’s “I shall but love thee better after death” and Christina Rossetti’s “While my soul, love-bound, loitered on its away”, Cross wrote:

Love...Love...There is no death for me and you.
Swooning with aching tenderness we lie
Each within each, breathing eternity...

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210 Cited by Vickery, p. 185.
213 Rossetti, p. 308.
Kiss me to death, my Poet, for the dew,  
Melting our bodies to a scented sigh,  
Will waft our souls to immortality.²¹⁴

Fainting and swooning are common events in Victorian literature. Cross not only inherited this rhetoric in *Songs of Love and Life*, but repeated herself in *The Lilt of Life*:

Listen! I hear a tapping at my soul.  
Can you not hear it, O my Bosom-heart,  
Like leafy tips of summer that o’erdart  
The streaming silence of a shelly shoal?  
O Love, I swoon. I lose your close control,  
Drifting and falling from the world apart,  
Mute to the margins where the life-rills start  
Wakened by Love to fathom Beauty’s goal.²¹⁵

Obviously, Cross does not mind swooning and fainting often. What is more, she makes her lover swoon as well: “Love ... Love ... Your hot lips tremble on my eyes. /You droop. You swoon in silence over me ...”²¹⁶ Once again, Vickery, in her gendered interpretation of the sonnet, gives the lines a Feminist twist:

Here, the subject/object position generally assigned to the sexes (whereby the male speaker addresses a female “you”) is reversed. Although the male addressee occupies a typically dominant stance, he is transformed into a passive figure. So while he leans over the body of the female narrator, he swoons in silence, his lips “tremble,” and his body droops. In contrast, female receptivity is re-envisioned as active and empowered.²¹⁷

When the male love “swoons”, Vickery prescribes that he is transformed into a passive figure while the female speaker is empowered. However, the female speaker also “swoons” in the previous poem; I am wondering whether she is transformed into a passive figure by swooning while the male love is empowered as a result. Apparently, Cross uses “swoon” as a euphemism for orgasm on both sides.

²¹⁴ Cross, p. 32.  
²¹⁵ Cross, *The Lilt of Life*, p. 93.  
²¹⁷ Vickery, p. 186.
4.35 Rise and Fall of Cross’s Popularity

Cross’s immediate popularity upon the publication of her *Songs of Love and Life* was something many of her Australian contemporaries could only imagine. Nettie Palmer, for instance, was envious of Cross’s “meteoric rise to fame.”[^218] Vickery comments on the reason for her popularity: “with its erotic sonnets provided a new register for young Australian women searching for ways to articulate their sexual desire.”[^219] Eroticism is the key reason for her popularity. Apart from her traditional rhetoric such as “I swoon”, “you droop” and “you swoon” to indicate orgasm as mentioned earlier, she also uses other phrases to describe the sexual scenes:

If there should be a moon above the hill
To-night, dip down with me into the sea
Of our first passion, and, with naked glee,
Breathe its ripe wonder to our beings’ fill.
O, as the moonbeams on the violets spill
Rivers of uncontrolled felicity,
We’ll turn our bodies to a melody
And set our pulses to a poet’s thrill. [^220]

Words and phrases such as “dip down”, “naked glee”, “uncontrolled felicity”, “spill” and “thrill” are sexually tantalizing. If Cross still uses the imagery of the sea here as a sexual metaphor, elsewhere she directly describes her sexual desire:

O, press your eyelids closer, Love, on mine.
Bend o’er my slender body ... Lean to me,
While yet a swimming vapour shades our eyes
And Darkness drinks with us a draught divine.
I am your own ... O sting of ecstasy!
Our married breasts sleep, smothered in their sighs. [^221]

Though the diction is still conventional, the sexual invitation from a woman to a man is certainly modern. Besides, her sexual desire could be as savage as that of animals:

Thus do our minds unto our bodies bring
Alluring attributes of all desire,
Until our hearts beat coupled up in fire

[^218]: P. 293.
[^219]: P. 175.
[^221]: P. 16.
Cross frequently describes the scene of orgasm by employing different phrases such as “sting of ecstasy” in the previous poem and “sweet sting” in this poem. By using animal imagery, her sexual passion seems unstoppable. Green also comments on the seductive effect of Cross’s love poetry that, “it involves an exaltation of physical love, but is not so much sensual as sensuous”.223

Despite her language, diction and form being conventional, her eroticism sends out a modern message which is in accordance with the sexual emancipation encouraged by the first wave of the feminist movement. This partly explains her sweeping popularity. However, the brevity of her popularity is also notable. Cross’s popularity as a poet lasted from late-1917 to 1918 when her The Lilt of Life was published quite to the disappointment of its publisher. As George Robertson recalled:

The large sales enjoyed by Songs of Love and Life encouraged the hope that The Lilt of Life, although weighted with ‘Man and Woman,’ would be a success also; but whatever place may be ascended it in after years, it has been a failure – commercially so far.224

Ann Vickery, however, considerably exaggerated Cross’s popularity by comparing her appeal to the reading public with that of Edna St. Vincent Millay: “Zora quickly became one of Australia’s most popular poets, reaching a similar fame in the Antipodes as Edna St. Vincent Millay experienced in the United States.”225 The financial failure of The Lilt of Life already signalled the decline of Cross’s appeal while Millay dominated the American reading public from the late 1910s to the 1930s.

The failure of The Lilt of Life is not an accident. Songs of Love and Life is already heavily flawed with her omnipresent Victorianism. The only thing that attracted the reading public was her high-pitched sexual passion. The nature of her

222 P. 43.
224 Cited by Vickery, p. 194.
225 P. 190.
popularity is more social and cultural rather than literary. Aesthetically, all through *The Lilt of Life*, there is no change of diction or style. Her conventionalism remains intact as sonnet 34 and 39 demonstrate:

"Holloa! Holloa!" I heard a happy shout
Of nymph and satyr running in the glade,
To the soft chuckle of a merry maid,

O Love, I saw a nymph upon a bank
Piping to Pan a reedy roundelay.
With dewy mouth, tongue-merrily in play,
She swooned in rapture of the sound she drank. 226

Cross not only continued to use conventional imagery and diction, but used it with considerable repetition as she did in *Songs of Love and Life*. When she once again expressed her sexuality as a pregnant woman, her rhetoric was similar, as sonnet 13 indicates:

Accept my body, Dearest, as a gift,
A precious casket of the purest pearl,
Flushed with the earth-old ecstasies that curl
From dancing joys and into heaven drift.
My soul for key, I give it glad and swift
To your safe keeping as a guileless girl,
And faint with wonder as my senses whirl
To tender longings that in dreams uplift.227

Her vocabulary, such as “purest”, “pearl”, “ecstasies”, “soul”, “wonder”, “tender” and “dreams”, is of the same nature as that of *Songs of Love and Life*. In particular, she is found to “faint” too easily. Not surprisingly, she also swoons as the nymph did in sonnet 34:

Beloved, I who shall be mother soon
Need mothering myself this tired hour,
As heavily the sweet and precious power
Weighs on my heart till I am near to swoon." 228

Green comments that Cross repeated the love theme in *The Lilt of Life* “so that the total

227 P. 89.
228 P.107.
effect is monotonous”. Slessor also wrote a poem in 1919 to poke fun at the collection in terms of its similarity to *Songs of Love and Life*:

> The loving *lilt* of laughing life
> And the laughing *lilt* of living love,
> All with alliteration rife,
> I could permute as the above,
> And lilt them round about again,
> To the lilting last of factorial *n*.  

On the other hand, Vickery attributes the financial failure of *The Lilt of Life* partly to her belief that, “Australians were less willing to read about sexuality that challenged other cultural paradigms, such as maternal sexuality in ‘Songs of Motherhood’...” Personally, I do not see much difference in Cross’s dealing with sexuality in both collections whether it is called “sexuality” or “maternal sexuality”. Besides, it is highly debatable whether there is a difference between “female sexuality” and “maternal sexuality” since the latter is very much a feminist invention. It is equally confusing when Vickery soon complains that Cross’s sonnets in *The Lilt of Life* were “less successful ... for they fall back into addressing a male lover. Maternal desire is sidelined over sexual desire as Zora is unable to fully articulate a maternal sexuality.”

Apparently, the male lover Cross addressed in both collections is the same person, David McKee Wright. How can she not address a male to express “maternal sexuality” when she is pregnant with the male’s child? It seems that Vickery believes there is a difference between “sexual desire” and “maternal sexuality” but she does not specify the difference.

In *Songs of Love and Life*, Cross appears as a submissive, slavish woman in her love affair; this character has not changed much after she becomes a mother. As sonnet 40 makes clear:

> How like to me, and yet ‘tis you – all you.
> I dare not touch her. Take your soul, My Own.
> Set in my body with your mind, your sight,

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230 Cited by Vickery, p. 198.
231 Vickery, p. 194.
232 P. 197.
Your dreams and thoughts with every promise true -----  
A queen to sit upon a regal throne  
With a man’s soul won out of woman’s right.  

For Cross, the baby girl completely belongs to her father who definitely is of noble blood. Her humility is so much so that she “dare not touch” her daughter. Perhaps only a slave mother would think the same about her child whose father is of nobility. Cross’s submissiveness and self-degradation does not stop there. She pictures her daughter as a queen who is high above herself, mainly because every bid of her soul and mind belongs with the father. I am bewildered as to what kind of “woman’s right” Cross is referring to since she degrades herself simply as a womb. It is hard to associate the slavish woman in the poetry with the image of a “modern-day Currer Bell” with which Vickery tagged Cross.

4.36 Cross’s Anti-War Poetry

An Elegy on an Australian School Boy was published in 1921 and was written in memory of her brother who was killed in the First World War. There is a difference between the elegy and her passionate love sonnets. H. M. Green remarks that, “there is about it something of the charm of childhood reminiscences, as well as restraint and dignity that are not seen in Zora Cross’s other verse.” However, the elegy is largely an occasional poem in the sense that it is centred on the then topical issue of the controversial relationship between England and Australia. Apart from her occasional description of childhood memories, she mainly addresses the theme of womanhood and motherhood, one she has already addressed in The Lilt of Life. At the beginning and end of the poem, she emphasises this gist:

Man that is born of woman may not die  
Through the dear death of One  
Who lived and breathed beneath our happy sky

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234 P. 181.  
Under our warm, sweet sun.
The resurrection and the life are here.
O world, redeemed of pain!
The Son of Woman through the halls of fear
Comes back to live again.

Make of her breast a home of truth and peace,
A place of holy joy,
Till through her mother-sweetness nations cease
To ravish and destroy.
So may she give the everlasting life
Earth hungers for in vain—
Immortal mother and immortal wife
Who heals the whole world’s pain.

Cross’s high-pitched belief that motherhood is able to stop nations fighting against each other is both rhetorical and naive. Her configuration of motherhood is as romantic as her imaginings of love. Moreover, her Victorianism continues. For example, in phrases such as “dear death”, “happy sky”, “warm, sweet sun”, “holy joy”, “mother-sweetness”, and “everlasting life”, the atrocities of the inhuman war and the pathos of unsettled loss seem to have been off-set considerably by the romantic rendering of emotion. In contrast to Cross, Wilfred Owen’s “Anthem for Doomed Youth” presents another picture:

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles’ rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.

When Cross sings highly of immortality, resurrection and redemption of dead young lives enabled by motherhood, Owen virtually points at the plain truth of youth dying like cattle. Words such as “monstrous anger”, “stuttering rifles”, “rapid rattle” and “hasty orisons” force the reader to come to terms with the brutal nature of the War and to reject any romantic or religious imagination of it.

Furthermore, Cross seems to insist on the heroism of men fighting in the war,

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236 Zora Cross, Elegy on an Australian School Boy (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1921) p. 1.
237 P.27.
238 The Norton Anthology of Poetry, p. 1386.
which is consistent with her previous claim that the holiness of motherhood ensures immortality:

The nation and the kingdom roll away
Like dust before the wind;
But over chaos, through the pulsing clay,
Broods the eternal mind.
The ages write their epics on the air.
The stars are as a scroll
Where Man may read in every glimmer fair
The lyric of his soul.  

As in her love sonnets, Cross uses abstract concepts such as “eternity” and “soul” to present a poetical rendering of her brother’s immortality. By contrast, Cross’s dealing with the War is romantic while Owen’s is realistic. As a result, her condemnation of the War is substantially weakened. Moreover, when she is forced to come to terms with her brother’s physical death, she is unable to see through the absurd nature of war; she turns instead from reality to religion for answers:

Why should I weep who know not why God wills
This constant earthly change,
Setting His foot in thunder on the hills
To a note cold and strange?
Poor echo of His dreams, what is my pain
To His, remote, alone?
Perchance you heard His tears like stinging rain----
Tears that I have not known.  

Either in love or in war, God is omnipresent. However, when Cross finds God indifferent to her sorrow, she turns to heroism for consolation, imagining her brother asleep among heroes:

And now you sleep, a sleep that wakens not
With the glad morning sun.
You dream, if dreams may haunt the voiceless spot
Where no live deeds are done.
You sleep. You dream among old heroes tall
Beneath your England’s grass;
Hearing, maybe, the light, blown elm-leaves fall

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239 Cross, Elegy on an Australian School Boy, p. 2.
240 P. 4.
As the dawn breezes pass.  

From her brother’s staunch faith in fighting for England, Cross involves herself in the topical issue concerning the relationship between Australia and England:

England! Her name is as a knell to me
And shall be till I die.
Outside, the gum-leaves whisper wistfully
And the faint night-winds sigh.
Brother, I know how utterly she keeps
The souls of her great men.
And are there greater that her starlight sweeps
Than you by field or fen?  

Her sadness over her brother’s death may impress one as “thoughtful” as Green commented, but her language, though less padded with adjectives compared with her love sonnets, is persistently Victorian:

I can believe that from her heart may flow
The truest human creed.
She sounded one high call of Liberty
That despots heard with dread;
I know not what high purpose to be free
Crowns yet her starry head.  

However ambiguous her stance may appear on the topical issue, her rhetoric is deeply rooted in Victorian sentiment. Her vocabulary such as “truest” and “starry” brings the reader back to her love sonnets where a paradise of conventional vocabulary and trite imagery is fully displayed. When John Kinsella considered Cross a Modernist solely in terms of her *Elegy on an Australian School Boy* without taking its literary quality into account, it is obvious that his purpose is anything but literary.

**4.37 Conclusion**

In contemporary Australian literary studies, the majority of critics and
scholars deem Cross insignificant. From the 1960s to the present day, various versions of Australian literary history have simply bypassed her. Cross’s unrestrained emotion and sexual passion sometimes attract attention from scholars, but the way she rendered her emotion and passion is conventional. In recent decades, Zora Cross has been substantially overrated by two critics, John Kinsella and Ann Vickery. In searching for the origins and triggers of Australian Modernism, Kinsella turned to Zora Cross’ love and war poetry for answers regardless of the form and quality of her poetry. Ann Vickery, on the other hand, in *Stressing the Modern* approached all the women poets, including Zora Cross and Lesbia Harford, from the perspective of cultural politics. In her book, Vickery creates the impression that Cross is as good a modern and experimental poet as Harford, which is misleading. A major difference between Harford and Cross is that the poetics of the former are conspicuously modern while the poetics of the latter are exceedingly conventional. Michèle Barrett points out in *Imagination in Theory*, Feminism is “intrinsically prescriptive – and evaluative – precisely because it is political.” 245 Precisely because Vickery’s approach is intrinsically political, she does not concern herself with the aesthetic quality of women’s poetry, which explains why she did not bother to read Cross’ poetry in terms of either literary Modernism or poetic tradition. Both Kinsella and Vickery create a contradiction for themselves. On the one hand, they are seeking to elevate Cross’s position in Australian literary history; on the other hand, they ignore aesthetics and literary quality. Ultimately, they have tried to create a literary reputation to fulfill purposes which are anything but literary.

245 Barrett, p. 125.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

5.1 A comparative analysis

After a detailed analysis of six women poets in terms of the specific literary circumstances in their own country, it will be more enlightening to give a comparative analysis of the women poets collectively, in relation to the literary period at large. As for form, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Marianne Moore, Anna Wickham, Edith Sitwell, and Lesbia Harford have something in common: their employment of free verse. Zora Cross was the only poet who did not write in free verse, and was strongly anti-free verse. The fact that Wickham started writing free verse poems years before Imagism was started by Pound as a movement in 1912 is a phenomenon that deserves further thinking. It is reasonable to deduce that free verse was something already in the air in the early 1910s. While Eliot modernised his style all by himself, so did Wickham. Imagist poets might have discovered and then encouraged free verse but by no means did they originate the form. Walt Whitman had used it in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, Wickham is undoubtedly a pioneer as far as free verse is concerned. The fact that Harford started writing free verse in 1918 and Millay in 1920 suggests the influence of Imagism. Yet free verse remained a minor form for all six poets. Although Wickham started writing free verse earlier perhaps than any Modernist poet, she was very uncertain about the form. In practice, she mainly wrote rhymed verse and free verse very occasionally. Millay mainly wrote sonnets and rhymed verse. Despite the fact that Sitwell was a conscious promoter of free verse in the 1920s, she seldom wrote in the form until the period 1940s-1960s. Harford wrote mainly in traditional form and metre and only occasionally in free verse. Moore stuck to syllabic verse all through her career and the number of her free verse poems is small. Moore’s attitude toward free verse is a bit complicated. On the one hand, syllabic verse was her determined innovation and she trusted her formal enterprise. On the other hand, the fact that Eliot and Pound told against free verse in the 1910s and 1920s might have contributed to Moore’s reservations about the form. From the 1940s, when she was more relaxed about her syllabic verse, she turned to write rhymed poems more often than free verse. By contrast,
Millay actually wrote the largest number of free verse poems of the six poets. Apart from free verse, what Millay, Wickham, Harford, Moore and Sitwell have in common is their preference for rhyme. These women poets either abandoned traditional stanza and metre or used them with irregularities, but they tended to preserve rhyme in various degrees. These liberations of verse form are one step away from free verse. In the early decades of the twentieth century, rhyme became the last bridge connecting the past and the present, tradition and innovation. Perhaps it is still the case in today’s poetry.

As for diction, colloquialism is a striking feature in the work of Wickham, Millay, Harford and Moore. Wickham’s conversational tone seems to fit quite well in her rhymed poems. Millay’s colloquialism was more obvious in her free and rhymed verse rather than in her sonnets. Harford, as a political activist, was never a literary poet; her colloquialism was closely connected to her political beliefs. In the 1920s and 1930s, Moore’s colloquialism was considerably marred by her rigid syllabic grid. The reader can only get a glimpse of her conversational tone in a small number of free and rhymed poems she wrote. From the 1940s onward, as Moore was more relaxed about her syllabic grid and use of quotations, her conversational tone became more apparent. Colloquialism is usually closely connected with a modern vocabulary. Millay, Wickham and Harford employed a vocabulary that captures the landscape of modern life in the city with its newspapers, cigarettes, taxis, subways, factories, libraries and parks. Despite her conversational tone, Moore’s vocabulary seems distant from daily life perhaps for the reason that her materials come more from books than from real life experience. Sitwell and Cross never seem to be attracted to colloquialism; their vocabulary is rather conventional, especially in terms of their predilection for decorative adjectives.

In subject matter, Millay, Wickham and Harford presented a “New Woman” image in their work especially in terms of their modern attitude toward heterosexual, homosexual love and women’s sexuality which marks a striking difference from that of nineteenth century women poets. The “New Woman” was a direct product of the first wave feminist movement in which Moore also participated in her college years;
however, Moore was quite conservative in terms of her attitude toward sexuality. Sitwell’s conservatism lies in the fact that she simply assumed the role of a prophet and constantly invoked God and religious associations in the bulk of her poetry. Wallace Stevens commented that, “The major poetic idea in the world is and always has been the idea of God. One of the visible movements of the modern imagination is the movement away from the idea of God. The poetry that created the idea of God will either adapt it to our different intelligence, or create a substitute for it, or make it unnecessary.”¹ And modern poetry is supposed to “take the place / Of empty heaven and its hymns.”² Cross was undoubtedly a “New Woman” in life, however, the woman image she presented in her poetry is conventional. Among the six poets, only Moore strikes one as distinctively impersonal, intellectual and difficult. Sitwell might assume an impersonal tone sometimes, but her poetry was seldom intellectual and difficult except for Facade. The poetry of Millay, Wickham, Harford and Cross is essentially at odds with the impersonality, intellectuality and difficulty of Modernist poetics. In their attempt to express a modern voice, the poetry of Millay, Wickham and Harford seems more impressive than that of Moore and Sitwell.

Generally speaking, Australian poetry of the period was more formal than that of the United States and Britain. Although Anglo-American Modernism was introduced in 1918, its assimilation was rather limited. Traditional form and metre were still the dominant style. As a passionate promoter of Modernism, Sitwell’s turn away from experimentalism after Facade also says a great deal about the reception of Modernism in Britain. Millay’s unrivaled popularity and commercial success signal the fact that Modernism was also a minor force in the United States. In the 1940s-1960s, when New Criticism canonised Modernism in America, the assimilation of Modernism was more strongly felt in Australia than in the period 1910s-1930s, which indicates the increasing influence of American culture on Australian life. In Britain, the 1930s and 1940s:

... saw the evolution of a ‘neo-Romantic’ movement ... some critics have found themselves defining Auden as – to some degree at least – a Romantic ... Poets like Day Lewis, Spender, MacNeice and Auden felt morally obliged to register a response that was ... of a

‘political, practical character’... In ideological terms, this meant that the break with Modernism could hardly have been more extreme...

Aesthetically, Auden’s Romantic sensibility and personal tone were appealing especially in terms of his love poetry which is heart-wrenching mostly due to its restrained pathos. The romantic revival in the 1940s led by Dylan Thomas and the New Apocalyptics suggests antagonism against Modernism and Larkin’s much later attack on Modernism demonstrates that poetic tradition was more preserved and respected in Britain. Compared with Australia, Britain was more resistant to American influence especially in the period 1940s-1960s.

5.2 The hegemony of the term “Modernist” in poetic criticism

As discussed above, early twentieth century modern poets, Modernist or otherwise, share some common ground. The similarities in their work do not necessarily result from the fact that Modernist poets influenced other modern poets or the other way around. There is no evidence to indicate that Anna Wickham’s experimentation with free verse has anything to do with the Modernist movement promulgated by Eliot and Pound since she wrote in free verse earlier than Imagism was even started as a movement. Also, the colloquialism adopted by Robinson, Frost, Millay and Wickham does not necessarily result from a Modernist influence. A significant number of modern poets employed a vocabulary that, in various degrees, associates closely with the modernity of the early twentieth century. It is appropriate to say that free verse, colloquialism and modern vocabulary are common features of the literary period at issue. The fact that Modernist poets highlighted and promoted these features does not necessarily mean that these features were essentially and exclusively Modernist. However, since the period has been examined almost entirely through the lens of Modernism, scholars tend to consider anything advocated by Modernist poets as exclusively Modernist. Even features shared by most poets of the period were

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considered Modernist. This ideology tends to designate that a poet is a Modernist in some respects but not in other respects. The judgment may sound reasonable, but it actually indicates that Modernism has become the dominant critical discourse. For example, Edward Hirsch comments on women poets such as Edna St. Vincent Millay and Elinor Wylie that their “pared-down language and the direct way in which they treated their subjects were Modernist, but their work repudiated free verse...”\textsuperscript{4} Despite Hirsch’s apparent neglect of Millay’s free verse poems, his use of “Modernist” to comment on Millay’s language indicates that Modernism has become the dominant discourse in literary criticism. Apparently, Hirsch intended to praise the language of Millay and Wylie, but he was not aware that their use of language was common of many non-Modernist poets of the period. Certainly, the term “Modernist” has become a token of quality and status. Even some feminist scholars adopt the term to argue for women’s position in literary history. For example, British feminist scholar Jane Dowson and Australian feminist scholar Anne Vickery employ the term “Modernist” to label especially non-Modernist women poets such as Millay, Wickham, Harford and Cross, in an effort to elevate their position in literary history.

In Australian literary history, the majority of contemporary critics and scholars tend to identify the period strongly with Modernism. Despite the fact that Modernism was met with more resistance and assimilated much less in Australia than in America and Britain, scholars prefer “Modernist” rather than “modern” to indicate the modernity of certain poets. For example, despite Peter Kirkpatrick’s comment that “Harford’s verse is minimalist, personalised and anti-domestic”, he concludes that her poems are “perhaps the first unambiguously modernist poems by an Australian” for the reason that they are open to “ordinary experience, with a freshness and frankness that eschews Victorian mannerisms”.\textsuperscript{5} The features of Harford’s poems mentioned by Kirkpatrick can only be considered “modern” rather than “Modernist”. Harford’s poems are far away from the hallmarks of Modernism, denying features such as impersonality, intellectuality and difficulty. If eschewing Victorian mannerisms were considered a

\textsuperscript{4} Myers & Wojahn, p. 78.
\textsuperscript{5} Pierce, p. 211.
“Modernist” rather than “modern” act, a large number of modern poets such as Hardy, the Georgians, Robinson, Frost, Millay and Wylie should all be called “Modernists”. Similarly, John Kinsella calls Harford and Cross “Modernists” mainly because of their war poetry. One has the impression that contemporary Australian scholars seem to favour the term “Modernist” in disfavor of “modern” when they argue for the modernity of Australian poets. Nevertheless, the features mentioned by Kirkpatrick and Kinsella to label Harford and Cross “Modernist” are usually considered “modern” in American and the British literary studies. In the introduction to his Penguin Anthology of Australian Poetry, Kinsella comments that, “When it comes to looking at the modernist period, there are in Australian poetry numerous points of connection and comparison with modernist poetries and poetics outside this country.” In Australian poetry of the period, there might be connection and comparison with Anglo-American Modernism, but by tagging the period as “Modernist”, Kinsella has actually created an impression that there was a Modernist movement in Australian poetry as well. Despite the fact that Modernism was introduced at the end of the First World War, it was met with strong resistance in Australia and its assimilation was rather limited. As Dennis Haskell comments on the reception of Modernism in Australia:

Modernism had a celebratory start in Australian poetry with Furnley Maurice (pseudonym of Frank Wilmot) and Slessor. The latter in particular loved everything modern and strongly favoured experiment in poetry. However, this aspect of their work did not receive an immediate following, and the Ern Malley furore of 1944, which made a mockery of Surrealist obscurity but was taken to mock all modernist pretentiousness, set back the acceptance of literary modernism in Australia, especially in poetry.

Kinsella’s claim of a “Modernist period” seems rather awkward given the fact that Modernism was just a minor force in the period. The eagerness of contemporary Australian academics to identify with Anglo-American Modernism might be a potential topic to explore especially in terms of “the increasing influence of the United States on Australian life, including Australian literature.”

Contemporary critics and scholars also tend to make major poets appear more

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6 Kinsella, p. 8.
7 Pierce, p. 458.
8 P. 459.
Modernist by deliberately highlighting some aspects of their work while obscuring others. This tendency can find its roots in the period under discussion when Eliot and Pound tried to get Yeats, Frost and Hardy to contribute to their magazines such as the *Criterion* and the *Dial*. Eliot wrote to Pound in 1922, “I think it is particularly important to reserve the verse contribution to the really first-rate people. For that reason I should very much like to get Yeats.”\(^9\) Eliot was also definitely aware of Hardy’s prestige as he wrote to Scofield Thayer in 1920:

> Hardy and Conrad ... have reached a point of distinction where they do not add to the *prestige* of any paper: simply because they are so well on that they cannot be considered by anyone as associating themselves with the policy or taste of a paper, and only occasionally contribute to any younger paper as a kindness to the editors.\(^{10}\)

Despite all that, Pound wrote to Hardy in 1921 to invite him to contribute to the *Dial*. In his letter to Pound, although Hardy was critical of the elitist nature of Modernist poetry,\(^{11}\) he agreed to contribute to the *Dial*, very possibly out of kindness to Pound who appeared extremely humble to Hardy in his letter.

In contemporary poetic criticism of the period, the tendency to associate major poets with Modernism is apparent. David Holdeman comments on the tendency in terms of the literary studies of Yeats:

> Following the lead of T. S. Eliot, the New Critics and their contemporaries had typically associated modernism with a rejection of Romantic precedents. As champions of modernism who wished to bolster its prestige by bringing Yeats into its ranks, they tended to underestimate his Romanticism while overstating his debt to the French symbolist influences valued by Eliot and his admirers.\(^{12}\)

Not surprisingly, Roger Mitchell, despite Frost’s high-pitched rejection of free verse, tries to praise Frost by associating his poetry with Modernist poetics. He remarks that Frost “may have disliked the formlessness of the new poetry, but he understood its spirit. His philosophic gloom and his antimaterialism are quite typical of what was later to be

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9 Eliot & Haughton, p. 767.
10 P. 440
12 David Holdeman, *The Cambridge Introduction to W. B. Yeats* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) p. 120.
called Modernist writing.”¹³ I am wondering whether it is sensible for scholars to tag Gerard Manley Hopkins, a Victorian, “Modernist” for the reason that his linguistic innovation in his *Poems* (1918), written mostly in the 1870s and 1880s, “has much in common with the experimental writing of the Modernists and especially with that of James Joyce.”¹⁴ Jessica R. Feldman even coined a term “Victorian Modernism”¹⁵ to read the Victorian period through a Modernist perspective. If scholars were to apply Modernism to the reading of previous centuries, they might find themselves making a long list of “Modernists” out of Romantics such as Walt Whitman, Victorians such as Gerard Manley Hopkins and even Metaphysical poets such as John Donne. As far as the Victorian period is concerned, perhaps it is more reasonable to give credit to the period itself by admitting that Victorian poets were not as old-fashioned as generally regarded; some Victorian poets could be formally as well as morally radical. As such, major poets such as Yeats and Frost are sometimes gathered by scholars under the heading of Modernism for the purpose of strengthening the prestige of Modernism. The hegemony of the term “Modernism” or “Modernist” in literary criticism has directly created the impression that Modernism was the most important poetic force of the period. How frequently the reader is led to believe and takes for granted that the period 1910s-1930s was the Modernist period! It is crucial to reiterate a historical fact that it is modern poets such as Yeats, Hardy, Robinson, Frost, Millay, and the Georgians rather than Modernist poets who represented the most important poetic force of the period as far as their contemporaries were concerned.

5.3 Poetry and the reading public

One of the reasons that the period has been read entirely through Modernism concerns the issue of popularity. Poets such as Millay and Frost were popular enough to be able to make a comfortable living out of writing poetry. Some Georgian poets also

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¹³ Myers & Wojahn, p. 35.
¹⁴ Corcoran, p. 10.
enjoyed a sweeping popularity in their times. The issue of popularity is closely connected with views of the reading public. In the early twentieth century, Modernist poets such as Eliot and Pound held a negative view of the reading public. In 1913 Pound wrote to Harriett Monroe, “[S]o far as I personally am concerned the public can go to the devil. It is the function of the public to prevent the artist’s expression by hook or by crook … We’re in such a beautiful position to save the public’s soul by punching its face that it seems a crime not to do so”\(^\text{16}\) Joseph Harrington comments that although Pound’s statement “expresses a rejection of a transitive, social, or audience-oriented notion of poetry”, his words also “evince a desire both to transform and to define the public, to make it safe for poetry as Pound sees it.”\(^\text{17}\) However, it seems to me that Pound was arrogant and condescending enough to consider the reading public an obstacle that has to be eradicated in order to clear the way for the marching of Modernist poetry. In Pound’s view, the soul of the public is corrupted and dusted, and needs a violent jolt to be awakened to the dawning of a new era of poetry. Pound’s anti-public attitude is closely connected with his later embrace of fascism. In 1921, in a letter to Pound, Thomas Hardy also pointed out the fact that Modernist poets ignored the reading public:

As to criticizing the poems you so kindly sent I am afraid I cannot attempt that without knowing more clearly what you are aiming at. It is to be read only by the select few, I imagine? As I am old-fashioned, and think lucidity a virtue in poetry, as in prose, I am at a disadvantage in criticizing recent poets who apparently aim at obscurity. I do not mean that you do, but I gather that at least you do not care whether the many understand you or not.\(^\text{18}\)

Hardy was aware that obscurity was a major tendency in Modernist poetry and that blocked the reading public. In his 1945 essay “The Social Function of Poetry”, Eliot remarked that:

if a poet gets a large audience very quickly, that is a rather suspicious circumstance: for it leads us to fear that he is not really doing anything new, that he is only giving people what they are already used to, and therefore what they have already had from the poets of the previous generation.\(^\text{19}\)

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\(^{17}\) Harrington, p. 44.


Eliot’s statement seems plausible but rather problematic. I am wondering whether Eliot would say the same about Shakespeare and Yeats who were all very popular in their times. By aligning popularity with inferiority, Eliot sought to define his ideal reader: that “a poet should have the right, small audience in his own time is important. There should always be a small vanguard of people, appreciative of poetry, who are independent and somewhat in advance of their time or ready to assimilate novelty more quickly.”

Eliot’s requirements for his targeted audience virtually exclude the majority reading public from the territory of poetry. Words like “small”, “right”, “vanguard” and even “in advance of their time” are demanding and intimidating enough to scare off even well cultivated people. Elitism is the key word of literary Modernism, as is convincingly expounded and displayed by John Carey and Joseph Harrington. Pericles Lewis argues in The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism that he wishes to “correct the impression of modernism as elitist that drove many postmodernist critiques.”

Lewis might be surprised when Eliot made his stance on the public rather clear: “There is no doubt that in our headlong rush to educate everybody, we are lowering our standards … destroying our ancient edifices to make ready the ground upon which the barbarian nomads of the future will encamp in their mechanized caravans.”

The small circle of intellectuals including Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound, Virginia Woolf, Clive Bell, and H. G. Wells, who were greatly influenced by Nietzsche and took the same stance on the mass as Eliot did, “could not actually prevent the masses from attaining literacy. But they could prevent them reading literature by making it too difficult for them to understand – and this is what they did.”

In order to justify the difficulty of Modernist poetry, Eliot claims that the twentieth century “comprehends great variety and complexity.” Which historical period in human civilization does not comprehend “great variety and complexity”? I do not think that the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in which William Shakespeare and John Donne lived were less various and complex than the twentieth century. In 1936, in a discussion with Lady Dorothy

20 P. 21.
21 Lewis, p. xxi.
23 Carey, p. 16.
Wellesley about the trends in contemporary poetry, Yeats commented negatively on Modernist poetry in terms of its difficulty and intellectualism:

This difficult work, which is being written everywhere now ... has the substance of philosophy & is a delight to the poet with his professional pattern; but it is not our road or mine, & ours is the main road, the road of naturalness & swiftness and we have thirty centuries upon our side. We alone can ‘think like a wise man, yet express our selves like the common people’. These new men are goldsmiths working with a glass screwed into one eye, whereas we stride ahead of the crowd, its swordsmen, its jugglers, looking to right & left. ‘To right and left’ by which I mean that we need like Milton, Shakespeare, Shelley, vast sentiments, generalizations supported by tradition.  

Besides, in contrast to Eliot’s definition of an elite readership, Yeats “played a significant role “in keeping his own work before a reading public”. Timothy Webb comments that Yeats “possessed an unusually canny instinct for commercial possibilities”. He also admitted that Poems “for about thirty years brought me ... twenty or thirty times as much as all my other books put together.” It seems true that Yeats was trying to attract a huge public following. Edna St. Vincent Millay knew very well why her poetry was loved by the reading public. When a reporter, Elizabeth Breuer, asked her about the cause of her enormous popularity, Millay answered:

I think people like my poetry because it is mostly about things that anybody has experienced. Most of it is fairly simple for a person to understand. If you write about people who are in love, and about death, and nature, and the sea, thousands ... understand ... my poetry because it’s about emotions, about experiences common to everybody.

Then, too, my images are homely, right out of the earth. I never went to a big city, you know, until I was twenty years old, so that I have an age-old simplicity in the figures I employ. I use the same figures that my great-grandmother might have used, and you can just sit in your farmhouse, or your home anywhere, and read it and know you’ve felt the same thing yourself.

Like Yeats, Millay prizes clarity and simplicity in poetry and makes it clear that the social function of poetry is to express emotions. Eliot seems to express the same when he remarks in “The Social Function of Poetry” that poetry “has primarily to do with the expression of feeling and emotion” and poetry “is the vehicle of feeling.” This actually

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26 Corcoran, p. 11.
27 P. 12.
28 Cited by Timothy Webb, Corcoran, p. 12.
29 Milford, p.335.
makes clear the nature of poetry, a point with which perhaps few poets, critics and readers will disagree. Then he goes on to add that emotion and feeling are “best expressed in the common language of people” to “express the personality of the people which speaks it.”

This statement further confirms that common people are the reading public who read, appreciate and assimilate poetry which is written in the language they daily use and which expresses feeling and emotion that resonates with them and with which they can sympathise. At this stage, you hardly get the impression that Eliot is leading modern poetry astray. However, Eliot wastes no time to give his statement a sudden twist by seeking to clarify a misunderstanding. Despite his initial claim that poetry is concerned with the expression of emotion and feeling, “I do not mean that poetry need have no intellectual content or meaning, or that great poetry does not contain more of such meaning than lesser poetry.”

But since Eliot agrees that the primary function of poetry is to express emotion and feeling, intellectuality of meaning can only play a secondary role in poetry. Despite the fact that Eliot takes it as agreed that “people find the most conscious expression of their deepest feelings in the poetry of their own language”, he suddenly comments that, “This does not mean, of course, that true poetry is limited to feelings which everyone can recognize and understand; we must not limit poetry to popular poetry.” At this point, Eliot has already denied the primary function of poetry by equating poetry which expresses common feelings with popular poetry. By arguing that poetry should not be limited to feeling and emotion, Eliot’s real thesis is that poetry needs intellect which outweighs feeling and which actually replaces feeling as the primary concern of poetry. Now, poetry can be without “feeling” but will not do without intellect. Feeling, the root of poetry, in a traditional sense, not only has been pushed aside but has been uprooted from Modernist poetics. By prioritising intellect, Eliot actually challenges the traditional definition of poetry, attacks poetry which prizes feeling and emotion and virtually establishes an aesthetic which excludes personality from the sphere of serious poetry. By condemning poetry welcomed and enjoyed by common readers as popular and light, Modernist poets dismiss poets who

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31 P. 19.
32 P. 20.
are acclaimed by the reading public as “popular” or “minor”. Pound praises Mina Loy’s poetry for conveying “no emotion whatever”.\(^{33}\) When Modernist poets and critics successfully eradicated “feeling and emotion” from modern poetry, they simultaneously burned the bridge leading to the reading public. In the 1930s, Auden turned against Modernism in the sense that he “impinges on the reader’s sympathies, not as bearer of intimate self-revelation, but as sharer of common feelings and experience.”\(^{34}\) Philip Larkin’s lash that Modernism isolated English poetry from the reading public seems rather pertinent.\(^{35}\) Given the enormous popularity enjoyed by modern poets such as Yeats, Robinson, Frost and Millay, it is clear that popularity is not necessarily connected with “inferiority” and that the word “popular” does not necessarily have the connotation of “traditional” or “minor”.

5.4 A Reflection on Contemporary Poetry

In the period 1910s-1930s when Modernism was still a minor force, poets such as Frost and Millay succeeded in attracting a reading public. During the period 1940s-1960s when New Criticism successfully canonised Modernism and exerted a profound impact on English department in academies, the reading public was gradually shrinking. In the 1990s, poets, critics and scholars found themselves asking the same question: where is the reading public for poetry? Joseph Harrington remarks:

As I have suggested, to those of us in the U.S. academy, it may seem that poetry, at the turn of the century, is “out.” Titles in the 1990s asked “Is Poetry Dead?” “Who Killed Poetry?” or “Can Poetry Matter?” and to many poets and scholars, it seemed that institutional support for poetry, within both academe and publishing, had largely evaporated and that poetry was indeed both dead and irrelevant.\(^{36}\)

Although poetry having become a minority art is a long-time and many-faceted issue, Dennis Haskell points out that “there is no doubt that it was intensified by the complexities introduced into poetry through the advent of modernism just after the

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34 Blamires, p. 145.
35 See the discussion in chapter three.
36 Harrington, p. 170.
Great War. It is not just a problem in Australia, but one that exists in most of the world." In truth, the isolation of poetry from the reading public has become an international issue. Australian poet, editor and publisher Dane Thwaites writes, “The great and glorious art of poetry has been in recession, maybe even depression, for a long time, a century or more” and “the general social irrelevance of poetry is profound”. Haskell comments on the phenomenon that, “This lament about poetry having become a minority art in terms of sales, money and public attention has recurred throughout the period since the 1950s, and it is a central fact about the place of poetry in Australian society today.”

The difficulty of Modernist poetry is undoubtedly a major reason that Modernist poetry estranged the reading public. What contributed to the difficulty of Modernist poetry has therefore been interrogated by contemporary scholars. At first, Modernist poets emphasised “newness”. Eliot once remarked that for a new work of art to “confirm merely would be for the new work not really to confirm at all; it would not be new, and would therefore not be a work of art.” Pound’s “make it new” actually became the launching pad of Modernist movement. The phrase “make it new” indicates originality, progress, break or change, but some major poets of the period such Hardy, Yeats and Frost disagreed. Yeats, who was more sympathetic to Modernism than Hardy and Frost, asserted that, “I must choose a traditional stanza, even what I alter must seem traditional” and declared, “Talk to me of originality and I will turn on you with rage. I am a coward, I am a lonely man, I am nothing. Ancient salt is best packing.” Given Yeats’ deep respect for tradition, his sarcasm about originality is understandable. Some contemporary poets and scholars also question the urge to “make it new”. Australian poet and critic, Chris Wallace-Crabbe, comments on the period that, “the very notion of progress in the creative arts is not only a vague, modern idea but a highly debatable one, perhaps already dead.” With a reading public in mind, Dennis Haskell argues that,

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37 Pierce, p. 452.
39 Pierce, p. 452.
41 Cited by Timothy Webb, Corcoran, p. 16.
42 Bennett & Strauss, p.217
“From the general reader’s point of view, it is not the technically new that matters but vividness and emotional resonance.”  

Modernist emphasis on “newness” or “change” has partly resulted in a phenomenon that contemporary scholars tend to define the period by highlighting or constructing a “break” with tradition. F. W. Bateson commented that, “Literary history presupposes by the fact of its existence a process of change. If the writings of one generation did not differ, in one important respect or another, from those of the next generation it could not exist at all.” However, in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, Eliot seemed to argue for the significance of tradition:

Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense ... and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional.

Despite his rhetoric, one gets the feeling that Eliot’s notion of being “traditional” sounds more difficult than being “new”. I am not sure whether Yeats or Frost would agree with Eliot’s historical sense. James Longenbach finds Eliot’s concept of historical sense beyond comprehension and considers it “the most codified formulation”. Auden did not agree with Eliot as he commented that no European would have said with Eliot: “Tradition cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labor”. Randall Jarrell also expresses his doubt by asking, “But did you actually believe that all those things about objective correlatives, classicism, the tradition, applied to his poetry?” Similarly, Auden also questioned Eliot’s labelling of himself as a

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43 Pierce, p. 466.
“classicist”:

This seems to me misleading because, whatever he may have intended by the term, it inevitably suggests a poet whose work can be viewed as a logical and inevitable step in the historical development of English poetry. To me, on the contrary, he seems one of the most idiosyncratic of poets, both in his subject matter and in his technique.49

Apart from “make it new”, another hallmark of Modernist poetics is the theory of Impersonality. The plausibility of Eliot’s claim that poets should eliminate emotion and escape personality in order to avoid being “personal”50 was considerably challenged when later poets and scholars such as John Berryman found Eliot to be “personal”. Berryman commented on “impersonal poetry” that, “Perhaps in the end this poetry which the commentators are so eager to prove impersonal will prove to be personal.”51 Perhaps the theory itself is a problematic one. Frost seems both personal and impersonal, as does Hardy and, so is Millay in various phases of her career. Drawing the line between “personal” and “impersonal” is forever an arbitrary one. Despite on-going debates about Modernism, Dennis Haskell’s view on contemporary poetry seems pertinent:

In truth, every experienced poet knows that the difficult poems to write are the simple ones, not the abstruse ones, and that the real risks in writing do not necessarily entail technical experiment but exposing your feelings. After modernism, including in postmodernism, the most difficult thing to write about is happiness and the most courageous experiment is to write without irony. In matters of grave importance sincerity, not form, is the vital thing.52

Given contemporary reflections on Modernist poetics, there is a pressing need to re-evaluate the period 1910s-1930s with more appreciation for those who did not necessarily admire or follow Modernist tenets and who have therefore been considerably underestimated by contemporary Modernism-oriented critics. Although non-Modernist poets as a whole have been marginalised in literary studies, the situation of non-Modernist women poets has actually highlighted this marginalisation, given the fact that women poets as a whole were slighted in the period by Modernist poets and critics. Eventually, by presenting a picture of the period featuring modern and Modernist poets and by emphasising the fact that modern poets, rather than Modernist poets, were

49 Cited by Thwaite, p. 43.
52 Pierce, p. 466.
the dominant force, I aim to provide a more plausible picture of literary history of the period. And once again, I agree with David Perkins that literary history, although exasperatingly impossible, is exceedingly necessary.
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