Chapter 4

Gendered modernism

With the exceptions of Marianne Moore and H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), women poets of the modernist era have not fared especially well in accounts of American literary history. Not only has the importance of women modernists often been overlooked by male poets and critics, but it was at times deliberately suppressed by male writers who were threatened by the entry of women into the world of literary high culture. When women poets made a concerted attempt to compete in the literary marketplace, they risked being dismissed as "poetesses" or "sweet singers" rather than treated as serious artists. As feminist critics have argued, the invention of modernist form by male authors was in part an attempt to "rescue" literary writing from what they saw as the "effeminacy" of late-nineteenth-century literature. The effort to distance modernism from the "feminizing" influence of women writers can be seen in Pound's dismissal of Amy Lowell's Imagist poetry as "Amygism" and in Eliot's 1922 claim that "there are only a half dozen men of letters (and no women) worth printing."

In recent years, however, women poets of the 1910s and 1920s have begun to receive a more appropriate share of critical attention. Both Moore and H. D. have been canonized as major poetic modernists, and each has been the subject of numerous critical studies. Gertrude Stein's writing has been recognized as a crucial contribution to experimental modernism as well as an important influence on the postmodern writing of the Language poets and others. The work of women poets such as Louise Bogan, Amy Lowell, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Laura Riding Jackson, Sara Teasdale, and Elinor Wylie – often neglected by anthologists and critics in the past – has been rediscovered by readers and critics less under the sway of high modernist tastes. The writing of African American women poets such as Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Angelina Grimké, and Anne Spencer is now beginning to be explored (see chapter 6). And the work of populist women poets such as Genevieve Taggard and Lola Ridge is at last beginning to attract a greater amount of critical attention.

In this chapter I focus on two main groupings of women poets: the traditionalists, here represented by Millay, and the experimental modernists (Lowell, H. D., and Moore). While the experimentalists engaged in formal and linguistic innovation rivalling and at times exceeding that of their male counterparts, the traditionalists made use of more conventional forms such as the sonnet, within which they could explore their personal experiences as well as their gendered position in society. Alicia Ostriker has contrasted these two distinct styles, arguing that the first group wrote a "formally innovative and intellectually assertive" poetry that avoids direct forms of autobiography, while the second group wrote in a manner that is an "extension and refinement of the traditional lyric style," concentrating their poems on states of "intense personal feeling."[1]

While this distinction is for the most part a valid one, it should not be seen as marking an irreconcilable opposition between two kinds of poetic writing by women of the period. In fact, the concerns of the two groups were by no means mutually exclusive, and there was significant overlap between them. Both groups were clearly concerned with the issue of gender and its implication for the production of literary texts. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar make clear in their comparative study of two such apparently opposite poets as Moore and Millay, even women from very different poetic camps were connected in their attempts to "translate the 'handicap' of 'femininity' into an aesthetic advantage."[2] Poets from both groups also struggled to find precursors at a time when few women poets provided usable models. H. D., Millay, and Teasdale all looked to Sappho for inspiration, and it was largely women poets like Lowell and Taggard who made possible the critical revival of Emily Dickinson in the 1920s. Further, women modernists of both groups sought to reimagine from female perspectives the kind of mythic structures used by male poets like Pound and Eliot: mythic figures such as Cassandra, Medusa, Artemis, Penelope, Helen, and Eurydice became important poetic personae for modernist women poets.

Another unifying trait in the poetry by women of the period was a deep ambivalence about traditional constructions of gender. Women poets turned to various forms of androgyny as a way of negotiating between the narrowly defined cultural space traditionally available to women writers and the desire to be taken seriously as poets in a male-dominated literary world. At various points in their careers, Lowell, H. D., and Wylie all adopted masculinized or androgynous personae as a way of expressing their frustrations with their cultural positioning as women poets in the early twentieth century, and in texts like "Patriarchal Poetry" (1927), Stein exposed the gendered biases built into the very structures of language and thought.

Edna St. Vincent Millay and the feminist lyric

Edna St. Vincent Millay is often read – perhaps unfairly – as the poetic counterexample to more experimental work by women modernists. Millay not only wrote in what was generally considered to be a typically "feminine" manner, but she also publicized her own status as a woman writer in a way Lowell, H. D., and Moore never did. It was no doubt Millay's unique prominence as a literary figure – her gender-identified "star" status within the world of American poetry – that made her the target for sexist critiques such as that of John Crowe Ransom. In a 1937 article entitled "The Poet as Woman," Ransom used Millay to stand for what he saw as a more general tendency of women poets to be "undeveloped intellectually" and to "conceive poetry as a sentimental or feminine exercise." Ransom's attack was unfair: while it is true that Millay remained relatively traditional in her poetic style and wrote in an idiom that was more emotionally expressive than it was intellectually challenging, she was an extremely talented poet and a centrally important literary and cultural figure of the 1920s. Not only was Millay the example to her generation of the hugely successful woman poet – a literary "flapper" whose candle "burned at both ends" – but the popularity of her poems helped to bring the sonnet and other traditional lyric forms into modern American literature.

Millay was born in Rockville, Maine, in 1893. After her parents divorced in 1900, her mother encouraged Millay and her sisters to pursue both reading and music. Millay was extremely precocious, publishing her first poem in 1906; her 1912 poem "Renascence," submitted to a literary contest, was praised by such prominent writers as Louis Untermeyer and Witter Bynner. Millay attended Vassar College, where she studied literature and acted in plays. It was her training in both music and drama (she at one point considered a career as a professional actress) that no doubt accounted for the uniquely lyrical and dramatic sense of her poetry.

In 1917, Millay moved to Greenwich Village, where she participated in the revolutionary mix of politics, modernism, and sexual experimentation that typified that community at the time. Millay was extremely productive during the next half decade: she published her first book of poems, *Renascence*, in 1917; she wrote and directed a play for the Provincetown Players in 1919; and she published several more volumes of poetry in the early 1920s, culminating with the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Ballad of the Harp Weaver* (1923).

Millay's early poem "First Fig" (1918) remains her most famous work, and it contains one of the most memorable first lines in all of twentieth-century poetry:

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

The poem may be dismissed by some readers as sentimental, and it is certainly not a work of modernist sensibility, but it managed better than any other poem of the time to capture the exhilarating sense of freedom characterizing the new era. When the poem first appeared, there was hardly a literate young person who did not have it memorized. To "burn the candle at both ends" is to live life to its fullest potential, a potential only made possible for a young woman like Millay by a new social, sexual, and artistic freedom.

The poem is constructed around a single image, the candle, which clearly serves as a metaphor for the female body. Not only does the conceit of the burning candle refer to the traditional idea of "burning with desire," but the idea of the body as a candle suggests a site of pleasure that can be also consumed by its own flame. The image of the candle can cut in different ways, depending on how affirmatively we choose to read the poem. It can represent Millay's social role as a female poet who packages her body for consumption by a large and enthusiastic public, but it also corresponds to her vision of herself as depleted, brutalized, or objectified at the cost of some genuine sense of self-worth.

Despite the popularity of "First Fig," the poetic form for which Millay is best known is the sonnet; in fact, it was Millay's skillful use of the sonnet that helped restore it to respectability. "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree" (1923) is a sequence of seventeen poems in which a New England farm woman returns to the home of her dying husband, whom she no longer loves. The sonnets are unsentimental and antiromantic, as Millay uses precise imagery to convey the experience of her protagonist with a devastating realism. In the course of the sequence, we learn the history of the woman, who had been betrayed by loneliness and desire into an unfortunate marriage. In style and tone, the sonnets are probably closer to the work of Frost than to that of any other American poet; like Frost, Millay shows an impressive rhetorical dexterity in working with traditional forms and a profound understanding of human relationships. At the same time, we find in these poems a reversal of conventional gendered roles: it is the woman rather than the man who functions without sentimentality, and it is she who is ultimately empowered rather than saddened by her husband's death.

Millay provides a description of a relationship which – far from romanticized – is shown in its most destructive aspect. Though the woman is now an "ungrafted tree" – a subject free from her husband and from her former self – she has developed various neuroses that prevent her from living a happy life.

She is deeply disillusioned with her husband, her marriage and herself, and her days are reduced to a "wan dream." The sequence works through suggestion rather than through explicit explanation: we are never told why the woman left her husband or why she has decided to return to care for him. The reader witnesses her engaging in domestic tasks in a masochistic and seemingly pointless pattern. In poem VII, for example, she fanatically cleans the kitchen until it is "bright as a new pin, / An advertisement, far too fine to cook supper in." The closed sound of the end-rhyme pin/in is a sonic expression of her constricted life. In poem X, we are given a hint as to her ill-fated decision to marry her husband: "And if the man were not her spirit's mate, / Why was her body sluggish with desire?" When the husband dies, towards the end of the sequence, she feels only irritation at having to deal with his dead body: "The stiff disorder of a funeral / Everywhere, and the hideous industry, / And crowds of people calling her by name / And questioning her" (XVI).

In the final poem, she gazes dispassionately at his body laid out on the marriage bed, where "his desirous body" with its "great heat" had once held her:

> Gazing upon him now, severe and dead,
> It seemed a curious thing that she had lain
> Beside him many a night in that cold bed,
> And that had been which would not be again.

Millay's reticent style in these lines – with its monosyllabic iambic pentameter and simple, unadorned diction – captures eloquently the deadened feelings of the woman, who feels no sadness or wifely piety, but only a sense of relief that her husband is "for once, not hers, unclassified." The rhyme of "dead" and "bed" accentuates the changes that have taken place in her attitude toward love and marriage, as she first outgrew her husband's passion and then outlived him.

Amy Lowell and Imagism

The career of Amy Lowell is in many ways representative of the position of women poets during this period. Born in 1874 to an upper-class New England family, Lowell did not begin writing poetry until 1902 and did not publish her first volume until 1912. Lowell's first book, *A Dome of Many-Colored Glass*, was relatively conventional, recalling the style and attitudes of the Romantics and suggesting nothing in the way of an experimental or radically innovative style. Lowell's poetic development was rapid, however,

and by the publication of her 1914 volume *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed* she had begun to deploy more modern techniques. The major cause of Lowell's transformation was the discovery of Imagism. In a poem like "Aubade," we see the influence of the new Imagist style:

> As I would free the white almond from the green husk
> So would I strip your trappings off,
> Beloved.
> And fingering the smooth and polished kernel
> I should see that in my hands glittered a gem beyond counting.

While the poem lacks the concision Pound called for in his Imagist manifestoes or the austerity H. D. had already achieved in her most perfected lyrics, it makes effective use of the single image of the unsheathed almond to suggest the naked body of a lover. Such forthright eroticism had rarely been seen in American poetry since Whitman, and it announced Lowell as a poet willing to take aesthetic and moral risks.

In the summer of 1913 Lowell went to visit Pound, the leader of the Imagist movement, in England. At first, their association was productive: Pound introduced her to the important writers in London, initiated her into the Imagist group, and invited her to become editor of *The Egoist*. Soon, however, Pound decided to move on, abandoning Imagism for Vorticism. Lowell, lacking Pound's desire to remain on the cutting edge of literary vanguardism at all costs, decided to remain in the Imagist camp and soon became its chief proponent, organizer, and fund-raiser. After throwing a party to celebrate Pound's *Des Imagistes* anthology, Lowell proceeded in 1914 to publish her own anthology, *Some Imagist Poets*, including several of the same poets Pound had published. Pound accused Lowell of stealing the movement from him and of watering down the term "Imagist" by including poets whose work failed to adhere to the movement's principles.

From that point on, Pound and Lowell were to remain literary enemies. While Pound scornfully derided Lowell's brand of poetry as "Amygism," Lowell refused to support either the journals with which Pound was involved or the writers with whom he was associated, including such important modernists as James Joyce and Eliot. Although Lowell remained a significant force in American poetry until her death in 1925, she effectively isolated herself from many of the most important developments in the literature of her time. Nevertheless, Lowell achieved more literary fame than that of any other woman poet of the early 1920s. The publicity generated by her reading tours, lectures, and reviews – as well as her prolific production of poems and other writings (including a two-volume biography of Keats) – had made her one of the most celebrated poets in America.

In her poem "The Sisters" (1925), Lowell summarized the sense of marginality shared by all women poets of her generation:

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

Lowell posits three "older sisters" – Sappho, Dickinson, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning – as important predecessors, but she ultimately decides that none of them provides a workable model for a female poet in the modern era. Lowell recognized the double bind in which women writers are placed, between "masculine" ambitions and "feminine" selves:

> I wonder what makes us do it,
> Singles us out to scribble down, man-wise,
> The fragments of ourselves. Why are we
> Already mother-creatures, double-bearing,
> With matrices in body and in brain?

As Cheryl Walker suggests, "The Sisters" was a "major breakthrough," the first "grand attempt by a woman poet in America to situate herself within a feminine literary tradition."[3] Lowell's most famous poem, however, is "Patterns," a work that first appeared in *Poetry* in August 1915. Here Lowell moves beyond the imagistic register of a poem like "Aubade" to a longer narrative form and a fictionalized persona. Like Eliot's "Prufrock," the poem adapts the form of the dramatic monologue, but its setting is historical rather than contemporary. Spoken by an aristocratic woman during the Queen Anne period, "Patterns" uses the female perspective to critique the masculine world of war. The poem's speaker has just been informed that the man she was to marry has been killed in battle, and Lowell's poem reflects the state of shock into which she is thrown:

> I walk down the garden paths,
> And all the daffodils
> Are blowing, and the bright blue squills,
> I walk down the patterned garden-paths
> In my stiff, brocaded gown.
> With my powdered hair and jewelled fan,
> I too am a rare
> Pattern. As I wander down
> The garden path.
> My dress is richly figured,
> And the train
> Makes a pink and silver stain
> On the gravel, and the thrift
> Of the borders.

"Patterns" is an outstanding example of Lowell's skill in the manipulation of free-verse rhythms, and it displays her effective use of image and color to convey emotion. The variable meters and line lengths, combined with the frequent enjambment and irregular rhymes, communicate the despair felt by the woman, who feels that she is herself little more than a "pattern," a "plate of current fashion." By the end of the poem we realize that this walk through her garden, always in her "stiff, brocaded gown," is all she can expect from life. The emotional intensity of the woman's feelings is kept in check until the final lines, where Lowell allows a single exclamation to represent the powerful emotions trapped below the woman's finely decorated surface:

> And the softness of my body will be guarded from embrace
> By each button, hook, and lace.
> For the man who should loose me is dead,
> Fighting with the Duke in Flanders,
> In a pattern called a war.
> Christ! What are patterns for?

The poem expresses very effectively the tragic fate facing women in wartime; the woman is incapable of breaking the "pattern" of her life, and she realizes that the war, and the structure of society that makes war possible, are also patterns that cannot be broken.

Lowell's imagery and symbolism are central to the poem: the stiff brocaded gown, the garden paths, the changing seasons, and the war itself are all part of the larger social pattern of life that makes women the victims of men's folly. In her gender-marked use of imagery, Lowell conveys the idea of patterns as particularly tied to the circumstances of women's domestic lives; patterns may be beautiful to look at, but they can also function as repressive structures that hold women "rigid." The technique of "Patterns" can be seen as halfway between symbolism and Imagism. Lowell makes use of concrete, vivid images that give the poem a visual precision unlike that found in most symbolist poems; however, like both Frost and Eliot, she moves away from the limits of Imagist doctrine towards a symbolic register that allows for more flexibility in her approach to her subject.

Aside from "Patterns," Lowell's most enduring work as a poet can be found in her love lyrics addressed to Ada Dwyer Russell, a divorced actress who became Lowell's partner in 1912 and who served as the primary inspiration for her poetry until her death. Russell appears as a figure in many of Lowell's poems, which include some of the most original love poems of the period: "Two Speak Together," "Wheat-in-the-Ear," "The Weather-Cock Points South," "Madonna of the Evening Flowers," "Opal," and "Venus Transiens."

In "Venus Transiens" (1919), Lowell imagines her lover as Venus, the Greek goddess of love, and compares herself as artist-figure to the Italian Renaissance painter Botticelli, whose famous painting *Birth of Venus* depicts the goddess rising from the ocean astride a large scalloped seashell. For a woman poet in the early twentieth century to compare her lesbian love poem to one of the great masterpieces of Western art was in itself an audacious move. Here, Lowell refers to the tradition of male artists representing women subjects, declaring her own ability as a woman to describe her female lover, and then proceeding to do so in concise yet highly evocative terms:

> Was Botticelli's vision
> Fairer than mine;
> And were the painted rosebuds
> He tossed his lady,
> Of better worth
> Than the words I blow about you
> To cover your too great loveliness
> As with a gauze
> Of misted silver?
> For me,
> You stand poised
> In the blue and buoyant air,
> Cinctured by bright winds,
> Treading the sunlight.
> And the waves which precede you
> Ripple and stir
> The sands at my feet.

Here we find an economy and precision of language that recalls the original tenets of Imagism. In a final twist, Lowell enacts a play of perspective in the final lines by which the poet is suddenly made to appear in the scene with her lover. The waves rippling and stirring the sands at the poet's feet suggests a sexual encounter between the two lovers, a level of intimacy Botticelli never achieves in his painting.

H. D.'s revisionist mythmaking

Where Lowell's brand of Imagism tended to produce poems that were more overtly personal and less rigorously crafted, it was H. D. who perfected the form of lyric Pound recognized as the ideal Imagist poem: a poem at once emotionally austere and highly concentrated in its use of language. H. D. and Lowell first met in 1914, and their literary paths were to cross on several other occasions: Lowell's *Tendencies in Modern Poetry* (1917) contained one of

the first critical assessments of H. D.'s poetry, and H. D.'s companion Bryher (Winifred Ellerman) wrote an early critical study of Lowell's work. But as opposed to Lowell, whose literary sphere became increasingly American, H. D. was to become truly international in her life and contacts. Beginning in 1911, when she first sailed to London, H. D. spent most of her life in Europe. She gained her pen-name in a London tea-shop in 1912 (where Pound famously signed her poems "H. D., Imagiste"), she became a British citizen through her marriage to the poet Richard Aldington, and she had friendships at various points with such literary figures as Pound, Lawrence, Stein, Djuna Barnes, Sylvia Beach, Nancy Cunard, Dorothy Richardson, and Edith Sitwell in Europe, as well as Lowell, Moore, and Williams in the United States. She was psychoanalyzed by Sigmund Freud in Vienna (in 1933–34), and she died in Switzerland in 1961.

Though much of the critical attention that has been paid to H. D. has focused on her late long poems *Trilogy* (1944–46) and *Helen in Egypt* (1961), I will focus my discussion on her early poetry, especially that collected in her first volume, *Sea Garden* (1916). The poems of *Sea Garden* exemplify the Imagist mode at its most successful. For the Imagists it is the visual image that is privileged above all other modes of representation. Despite Pound's various directives about rhythm, word choice and subject matter, the main focus of the Imagists was on finding the closest possible connection between the words used and the objects being described. If poetic language was ever to become capable of a concrete description of the world, the Imagists believed, it would need to show the world to the reader in terms that are free of all abstraction, banality, or sentimentality, and the most effective way of doing this was to present clear, unadorned visual images. H. D. grasped more clearly than any other Imagist (and perhaps more than any other modernist poet) the possibilities of the visual imagination, the faculty Pound called "phanopoeia." In the images of sand, bark, roots, wild flowers, leaves, and twigs that we find throughout the volume, H. D. conveys an "almost hallucinatory specificity"; in each natural fact she finds "the trace of a spiritual force."[4]

This suggestion of a spiritual force behind natural objects indicates the second level on which the reader can approach the poems in *Sea Garden*. The poems are evocations not simply of natural landscapes, but of a classical world inhabited by the gods, goddesses, and other human and mythological characters of ancient Greece. Like Pound, H. D. was strongly attracted to the Greek myths; but for her, it was the lesbian lyrics of Sappho, rather than the epics of Homer, that served as the central source of inspiration. As has often been noted, H. D. evokes Sappho as a mythic presence within the poems, adopting the Greek poetess as the authorizing muse whose example empowers her to write her own lyrics. The "sea garden" itself can be read as

the island of Lesbos, Sappho's native land and a place from which H. D. feels freer to engage in what Alicia Ostriker has called "revisionist mythmaking."[5]

Revisionist mythmaking has been one of the primary strategies used by twentieth-century women writers to challenge patriarchal traditions and cultural standards. As Elizabeth Dodd puts it, revisionist mythmaking offered H. D. a method "whereby she could both rely on the cultural, literary foundations provided by mythology, and also provide a new – her own, female – view of those very foundations."[6] Unlike the male modernists, women modernists like H. D. had no sense of nostalgia about the past as a repository of truth or of ideal social structures. The very myths that might connote heroism and moral strength to a male poet could be seen by women poets in light of their patriarchal narratives and their victimization of women.

The poems in *Sea Garden* can be read as early examples of the feminist strain that would be found throughout the writing of women modernists. In "Sheltered Garden," for example, H. D. uses the extended image of the garden to suggest two very different aesthetic choices for the woman artist. On the one hand, the "sheltered garden" of traditional femininity ("border-pinks, clove-pinks, wax-lilies") supplies "beauty without strength" and "chokes out life," while on the other hand the wild garden of "some terrible / wind-tortured place" can serve as the basis for a newer, more innovative, and more daring aesthetic. As Susan Stanford Friedman notes, H. D.'s "distaste for the 'sheltered garden' and her celebration of the wild, scraggly, stunted sea rose were images of escape into a modernist green world beyond the confines of Victorian respectability and femininity."[7] H. D.'s persona "gasp[s] for breath" in the sheltered garden, which is also figured as a kind of hothouse enclosure for growing "fruit under cover." Instead, she chooses the more active, even violent world of the wild garden, where flowers are broken and borders are transgressed. Here, we move from a traditionally feminine ideal of beauty (sheltered, contained) to a more androgynous aesthetic in which categories are confused in the jumble of natural objects:

> I want wind to break,
> scatter these pink-stalks,
> snap off their spiced heads,
> fling them about with dead leaves –
> spread the paths with twigs,
> limbs broken off,
> trail great pine branches,
> hurled from some far wood
> right across the melon-patch,
> break pear and quince –
> leave half-trees, torn, twisted . . .

The upheaval of nature in these lines suggests the turmoil in the poet's own psyche as she seeks a poetic vision less dependent on inherited models of femininity.

The poem "Garden" is a good example of this more challenging aesthetic. Here, H. D. uses the image of the rose – a traditional symbol of beauty – in order to subvert the flower's usual associations.

> You are clear
> O Rose, cut in rock,
> hard as the descent of hail.
>
> I could scrape the colour
> from the petals
> like spilt dye from a rock.
>
> If I could break you
> I could break a tree.
>
> If I could stir
> I could break a tree –
> I could break you.

H. D.'s rose is an object that is at once inaccessible to the speaker ("cut into rock") and ambiguous in its physical properties. This ambiguity is conveyed by the very unusual similes used to describe the rose: it is described both in terms of an extreme event in nature ("hard as the descent of hail") and in comparison to an artifact of human production ("like spilt dye"). The speaker (here a thinly veiled version of the poet herself) wants to seize or possess the image, but is unable to do so. The attempts to capture the image or in some way control it become increasingly conditional and ineffectual. The speaker first imagines that she could "scrape the colour from the petals," but to do so would be to destroy the rose itself, to take only one part of the image – its "spilt dye" – rather than its entirety. She then realizes – using the conditional form of "If I could" – that breaking the rose would require superhuman strength ("I could break a tree"), and this realization in turn brings her to the point of admitting that she cannot stir herself enough to attempt such a powerful act of appropriation.

It is in this sense of powerlessness before the image that we see H. D.'s particular version of the Imagist aesthetic. As Eileen Gregory puts it, "poetry is the evocation and reenactment of the experienced power of the image," yet poetry cannot completely capture the desired object, which remains "beautiful but unyielding."[8] The second half of the poem emphasizes once again the almost unbearable nature of the creative process: here the speaker implores the wind to "rend open the heat" which oppresses her. Yet it is the visceral force of the heat itself, and not the wind, that produces the most exquisite lines of the poem:

Fruit cannot drop
through this thick air –
fruit cannot fall into heat
that presses up and blunts
the points of pears
and rounds the grapes.

In opposition to the cold, clear image of the rock-rose, we find here an image of the overheated garden where the air is so thick that the fruit cannot fall. Yet at the same time that the heat makes the world insufferable for the protagonist, it also gives form to the objects which become the poem's images: the blunted pears and the rounded grapes. The poetic process can only result from the intense pressures represented by such oppressive forces as the rock in the first half of the poem and the heat in the second half.

In the two volumes H. D. published in the early 1920s, *Hymen* (1921) and *Heliodora and Other Poems* (1923), she stretched her highly controlled Imagist idiom into longer narrative poems, many of them based on mythic female figures. In these volumes, H. D. revisits the lives and myths of such personae as Leda, Phaedra, Evadne, Demeter, Helen, Circe, Calypso, and Cassandra. These heroines – creators of life, consorts of mythic heroes, legendary beauties, sorceresses, and visionaries – are often transformed into works of art in H. D.'s poems and thus deprived of their power as living women. Helen, for example, in the poem "Helen," is imagined not as the mythic symbol of sexual beauty and illicit love, but as a wan, white, and static figure.

All Greece hates
the still eyes in the white face,
the lustre as of olives
where she stands
and the white hands.

all Greece reviles
the wan face when she smiles,
hating it deeper still
when it grows wan and white,
remembering past enchantments
and past ills.

Greece sees, unmoved,
God's daughter, born of love,
the beauty of cool feet
and slenderest knees,
could love indeed the maid
only if she were laid,
white ash amid funereal cypresses.

The lines "Greece sees, unmoved, / God's daughter" function to present both a voyeuristic Greek populace, unmoved by Helen's fate, and the fetishized mask of a woman who can only be loved in a state of virginal death. H. D.'s poem rewrites the myth of Helen, rejecting the adoring gaze projected onto the figure of Helen by male poetic tradition. In Edgar Allan Poe's famous poem "To Helen," for example, Helen is presented as a "statue-like" figure who can be contemplated almost voyeuristically by the poet, who praises her "hyacinth hair" and "classic face." Poe begins with a simile comparing Helen's beauty to ships carrying a voyager home to his native land, thus inserting Helen's myth into a more general structure of literary and cultural tradition. H. D.'s poem offers no such metaphorical construct, immediately challenging the reader with the powerfully direct assertion of the first two lines: "All Greece hates / the still eyes in the white face." That Helen is hated and reviled by "all Greece" (repeated twice) suggests that Helen's fate is also a more universal one: just as she was blamed as the cause of the Trojan War, all beautiful women are seen as threatening to a male-dominated society which fears that their beauty may bring about "enchantments" and "ills." Helen can be safely contained only in the form of "white ash" strewn on a graveyard. The progression of the poem's three stanzas enacts a movement from life to death: in the first stanza, Helen is surrounded by the "lustre of olives," an image of vibrant life; in the second, her smile is replaced by a "wan and white" countenance, symbolic of an absence of vitality; and in the final stanza she is reduced first to her separate body parts ("cool feet / and slenderest knees") and then to "white ash."

Just as Lowell's "Venus Transiens" was a challenge to the male tradition of depicting women in art, "Helen" is is an implicit attack on the masculine literary tradition of using women as symbols. Helen is silenced in this poem just as she is in Poe's, but here she is silenced by the hatred of society rather than by the poet's controlling male gaze. The female poet is powerless to invest the figure of Helen with any kind of redemptive significance, since she herself shares Helen's fate as a woman.

Marianne Moore and the poetics of gendered modernism

Of all the women modernists, only Marianne Moore was able to occupy a secure position within the male-dominated literary world. Moore exerted an important influence on the development of modern poetry through her poems, her extensive correspondence with other writers, and her position from 1925 to 1929 as editor of *The Dial*. She was also able to establish and maintain significant literary relationships with most of the important male modernists of her day (Pound, Eliot, Stevens, and Cummings, for example),

as well as with women poets such as H. D., Bogan, Sitwell, and Elizabeth Bishop.

Moore was born in 1887 and grew up with her mother and brother, first in Missouri and later in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. She attended Bryn Mawr College (where H. D. was also a student) and graduated with a bachelor of arts degree in 1909. By the time of her graduation, Moore had decided to attempt a career as a writer, but it was several years before she was able to begin placing her poems in little magazines. In 1918, she moved with her mother to New York City, where she worked as a tutor before taking a job as an assistant librarian at the New York Public Library. During these years, Moore continued to develop her tastes in literature and the visual arts: by 1916, she was reading the work of Pound, Eliot, H. D., Stevens, and Williams, while also paying attention to current trends in painting and sculpture. The publication of her poems during the late 1910s and early 1920s in magazines like *Poetry*, *The Egoist*, *The Little Review*, *Others*, and *The Dial* placed Moore squarely in the center of the burgeoning poetic avant-garde. Her first volume *Poems* (1921) was published in England by The Egoist Press, and her second book, *Observations*, was published by The Dial Press in 1924, winning the press's second Dial Award for achievement in poetry (the first having gone to Eliot in 1922). Moore also wrote a number of influential reviews of modernist works, including Williams' *Kora in Hell*, H. D.'s *Hymen*, and Stevens' *Harmonium*. In July 1925 she was appointed acting editor of *The Dial*, and she became the permanent editor the following year, holding that position until the magazine closed in the summer of 1929.

Despite her close ties to Imagist poets such as Pound and H. D., Moore was not herself an Imagist. Her poetic style was highly idiosyncratic, and owed little to the influence of any particular poet or movement. What Moore shared with the Imagists was a clarity and precision of language, a highly evocative use of visual imagery, and a desire to make a strong break from post-Romantic conventions of poetic style. Moore may have been more closely allied with Imagism than with the symbolist strain in modernist poetry, but her use of stanzaic forms, end rhyme, and syllabically regular lines marked her style as distinct from Imagist practice. Moore felt "oversolitary" at times in "not being able to be called an 'Imagist.'" Yet it was this very freedom from the constraints of a given poetic school that allowed Moore to establish her unique poetic style, one that was almost universally appreciated by the major poets of her generation.

According to Cristanne Miller, it was Moore's poetic response to the three modes of poetry available to her – the post-Romantic, the male modernist, and the sentimental – that created her "anti-poetic mode of expression." Moore rejected the mode of Romantic and post-Romantic poetry during her college years; she also rejected early in her career the "voice of female

experience" characteristic of many women poets of her generation, seeking instead a poetic voice "divorced from openly personal experience." Finally, she rejected the impersonal and culturally hierarchical poetic of male modernism, forging in its place a poetry that was "distinctly gender-conscious and distinctly new."[9]

Moore was less interested than either Lowell or H. D. in finding a female poetic tradition in which to ground her own work. Though clearly a feminist in the most general sense – as a woman determined to express herself as an individual within a male-dominated literary world – Moore preferred not to identify herself overtly as a "woman poet." As Miller puts it, Moore spoke "for herself, as woman, rather than for [all] women": instead of writing poems that were overtly feminist or female-identified, she attempted to write poems "in which the female writer may assertively articulate diverse feelings and beliefs, appealing to and invoking a strong sense of (largely female) community."[10] While Moore does not deal explicitly with questions of gender or gender-relations (with the notable exception of her 1923 poem "Marriage," which I discuss below), Moore conveys messages about gender through the style, structure, and voice of her poems.

One way in which Moore's poems differ strikingly from those of her male modernist counterparts is in her use of a first-person speaker to establish a voice that is neither ironically distanced from his subject (in the manner of Pound or Eliot) nor lyrically expressive (in the manner of Crane or Millay). We see this characteristic voice in one of her earliest anthologized poems, "Critics and Connoisseurs" (1916):

> There is a great amount of poetry in unconscious
> fastidiousness. Certain Ming
> products, imperial floor-coverings of coach
> wheel yellow, are well enough in their way but I have seen
> something
> that I like better – a
> mere childish attempt to make an imperfectly ballasted
> animal stand up,
> similar determination to make a pup
> eat his meat from the plate.

This first stanza exemplifies several aspects of Moore's poetic style. First, we see the highly prosaic quality of her poetry: Moore's language here, if taken out of its form as poetic lines, could easily be that of a prose essay. The first sentence, for example, is in the form of a declarative statement: "There is a great amount of poetry in unconscious / fastidiousness." Even here, however, Moore plays with language in interesting ways. The relatively straightforward syntax and simple diction of the first part of the sentence play

against the more unusual and somewhat ambiguous expression "unconscious fastidiousness" with which the sentence ends.

Moore's wide-ranging diction is one way in which she expresses her non-hierarchical approach to poetic language: in many of her poems, she moves freely from an erudite and precise vocabulary to a style that is either journalistic or conversational. Similarly, her syntax ranges from the very simple to the highly complex, making it difficult for the reader to find any sense of a traditional lyric elegance in her poetry. Moore also uses sound (alliteration, assonance, and rhyme) as well as the rhythms created by lines and line-breaks to disrupt normal reading strategies. Here the breaking of the line between "unconscious" and "fastidiousness" emphasizes the syntactic relationship between the two words (one is the modifier of the other) as well as their sonic resemblance. The line break also introduces a level of humor or irony into the poem: just as the image of making "a pup eat its meat from a plate" undermines the aesthetic dignity of "Certain Ming products" later in the stanza, the splitting of "unconscious" from "fastidiousness" helps undercut the dignity of such an epithet. Moore's catalogue of examples of "unconscious fastidiousness" further emphasizes her playfully ironic intent: beginning with "Ming products" (Chinese porcelain tiles appreciated by the "connoisseurs" of the title), she moves to several humorous examples the observant viewer might find in everyday life: a children's game of trying to make a toy animal stand up; the attempt to make a puppy eat from his plate; and an ant's repetitive activity of carrying a stick back and forth on the lawn.

If the ant becomes Moore's emblem for "unconscious fastidiousness," it is a swan that represents its alternative, "conscious fastidiousness":

> I remember a swan under the willows in Oxford,
> with flamingo-colored, maple-
> leaflike feet. It reconnoitered like a battle-
> ship. Disbelief and conscious fastidiousness were
> ingredients in its
> disinclination to move. Finally its hardihood was
> not proof against its
> proclivity to more fully appraise such bits
> of food as the stream
>
> bore counter to it; it made away with what I gave it
> to eat.

When describing the swan, Moore elevates her diction – relying heavily on latinate words (reconnoitered, ingredients, disinclination, proclivity) and compound words (flamingo-colored, maple-leaflike, battleship) – and she heightens the musicality of the language through the use of assonance and repeated vowels ("leaflike feet"). But as the description progresses, both

the sound and the diction reveal the swan to be a stubborn, greedy, and somewhat unpleasant creature: the close-lipped vowel sounds of "its . . . proclivity . . . bits . . . it" emphasize the swan's artificially stiff demeanor, while the term "made away with" suggests an almost guilty bearing. What begins as a magnifying appraisal of the swan ends as a diminishing one: the modulation of tone from nostalgic reminisence to suspicion reflects the mind's changing view of reality, and sets up the analogy Moore wishes to draw.

> I have seen this swan and
> I have seen you; I have seen ambition without
> understanding in a variety of forms.

If the "unconscious fastidiousness" was that of the connoisseur, the "conscious fastidiousness" is that of the critic, who exhibits "ambition without understanding." Moore plays with the two distinct meanings of "fastidious": on the one hand the more positive sense of careful, exacting, or meticulous (the connoisseur and the ant), and on the other hand the more negative sense of overcritical and difficult to please (the swan and the critic).

The ant – Moore's example of "unconscious fastidiousness" – is introduced very differently from the swan:

> Happening to stand
> by an ant-hill, I have
> seen a fastidious ant carrying a stick north, south,
> east, west, till it turned on
> itself, struck out from the flower-bed into the lawn,
> and returned to the point
>
> from which it had started.

Moore makes a skillful use of the stanzaic form to reenact the visual movement of the ant, turning back on itself and then returning – across the stanza break – to where it started. At the same time she uses a far less pretentious diction than she did in describing the swan, employing everyday language to create a tone that is sympathetic rather than ironic. The language used to describe the actions of the ant is straightforward – it "turned," "struck out," and "returned," rather than "reconnoitered" or "appraised" – and the entire event is presented as a casual observation ("Happening to stand . . .) rather than as a self-consciously remembered scene ("I remember a swan under the willows in Oxford"). While there is no elegance about the ant, there is also no falseness or hypocrisy: it simply does its job, carrying the stick until it proves useless, and then abandoning it to try "a particle of whitewash" instead.

"Critics and Connoisseurs" can also be read as a poem about writing poetry – an *ars poetica*. Like the ant, Moore suggests, the poet simply tries

different materials – different ideas, themes, or combinations of words – until she finds the right one. The form of the poem itself plays with its own fastidiousness: on the one hand, it is exacting and meticulous in its rhythmical pattern – the lines of each stanza conforming to the same syllabic count – yet on the other hand it breaks formal rules about rhyme, line endings, and even the coherence of stanzas. The poem is constructed rather like the "imperfectly ballasted" animal of the first stanza: it stands, but its imperfections are allowed to show and become part of its charm.

Moore ends the poem by returning to the examples of the swan and the ant, using a rhetorical question to challenge the attitude of (male) critics more interested in "dominating" the literary world and "proving" their worth than in the kind of unselfconscious experimentation necessary for real poetry:

> What is
> there in being able
> to say that one has dominated the stream in an attitude of
> self-defense;
> in proving that one has had the experience
> of carrying a stick?

Moore's attack expresses her distrust of the world of male power, a world in which she was forced to struggle to find acceptance in the early part of her career. Moore's speaker in the poem is not strongly identified with the poet herself and is not explicitly identified as female; instead, the voice is that of a fictionalized speaker who is educated, witty, and intensely engaged with the physical world. Moore's poetic voice can be contrasted with the typical post-Romantic speaker who attempts to harmonize with some greater being or force, or who refers to intense moments of personal feeling or experience.

Moore's 1923 poem "Marriage" is a satire in which she calls into question the central institution of patriarchal culture. Though Moore insisted that the poem was not an expression of her views on the subject of marriage, this disclaimer is difficult to accept at face value. The poem is, as Miller suggests, "the climax of Moore's exploration of the relationships between poetry, gender and power" and a "tour de force of the various poetic strategies that Moore has been perfecting for the last ten or more years."[11] Moore may have written the poem in response to the difficult marriages of couples she knew, or she may have been speculating about the possible effect marriage would have on her own work. "Marriage" presents an extended portrait of relationships between the sexes, using the mythical couple of Adam and Eve to represent the typical man and woman. A collage-poem which draws on various sources – from articles in *Scientific American* and *The English Review* to books by Anthony Trollope, William Hazlitt and Anatole France – "Marriage" is Moore's longest poetic work, and given its date and ambitious

length it can be read at least in part as a response to the production of such poems as *The Waste Land* and *The Cantos*.

Moore does not idealize either sex in the poem, but criticizes both sexes for their failure to see beyond their own vanity and selfishness. While the man "loves himself so much, / he can permit himself / no rival in that love," the woman "loves herself so much, / she cannot see herself enough– / a statuette of ivory on ivory." Still, Moore is somewhat more sympathetic to her female protagonist, and she analyzes the relationship in ways that can be read as feminist. Moore overturns the biblical story by having Eve come first in the poem and by giving her a linguistic ability that is at least the equal to Adam's. Eve is presented as a polyglot who is able to "write simultaneously in three languages . . . and talk in the meantime." Adam is also highly verbal ("alive with words"), but his speech is stiff and uninspired: he "goes on speaking / in a formal, customary strain" of "everything convenient / to promote one's joy." In the modern world, Moore suggests, the woman's position is more difficult than the man's. For women, marriage is an institution "requiring all one's criminal ingenuity / to avoid." As a woman in conventional society, to refuse marriage is to be seen not simply as eccentric or marginal but as "criminal." When she does marry, the woman can only be "the central flaw / in that first crystal-fine experiment, / this amalgamation which can never be more / than an interesting impossibility." While the woman is objectified as a object of beauty who can never be perfect enough, the man is portrayed as hopelessly awkward in his approach to love and marriage: he "stumbles over marriage," a "trivial object" which has "destroyed the attitude / in which he stood– / the ease of the philosopher / unfathered by a woman." Marriage is a constant reminder to the man that he cannot exist apart from the physical world of biological process.

The poem concludes with a quotation taken from a statue of Daniel Webster, one of the most famous American orators and statesmen of the nineteenth century, and a quintessential representative of the form of patriarchy Moore seeks to critique.

> the statesmanship
> of an archaic Daniel Webster
> persists to their simplicity of temper
> as the essence of the matter:
>
> 'Liberty and union
> now and forever'
>
> the Book on the writing-table;
> the hand in the breast-pocket.

Webster, a United States senator, attempted to preserve the Union at a time when some Southern states favored separation, but in order to do so

he helped pass the Compromise of 1850 which allowed the spread of slavery to the Western territories. Webster's "Union" symbolizes the more private union represented by marriage in the poem, a union which is similarly believed to be permanent: "now and forever." Moore makes ironic use of the famous quote to suggest that if one must compromise one's most deeply held values in order to remain in any union, such a union may not ultimately be desirable. The poem voices a deep cynicism about marriage as both a public and private enterprise. The radically juxtaposed statements that make up most of the poem suggest that Moore will not take the kind of settled stand represented by Webster. Her stance is not that of the orator, more interested in appearing statesmanlike than in upholding moral or personal principles. Instead of expressing a fixed or authoritative position ("the Book on the writing-table / the hand in the best pocket"), the poem suggests the impossibility of achieving positive knowledge about human relationships. Love is both a "mystery" and a "science," worthy of careful scrutiny but ultimately beyond the reach of human understanding.

In the late 1920s, Moore's work at *The Dial* left her little energy for her own writing, and she published no new poems between 1925 and 1932. Moore's poems of the 1930s and 1940s are often considered to be less strikingly original than those of the 1910s and early 1920s, but they continue to display her unique poetic talents. Her most famous and most commonly anthologized poems are those which take as their ostensible subject different creatures from the animal world: in poems like "The Monkeys," "The Frigate Pelican," "The Plumed Basilisk," "The Pangolin," and "Elephants," Moore displays her keen powers of observation, giving emblematic and moral significance to the animals she describes. Moore's predilection for the form of the fable is clear in her verse translation of the complete *Fables of La Fontaine* (1954).

Moore's voice is unique among the women poets of her generation. Her characteristic speaker is neither the intensely personal "I" of a poet like Millay, nor the dramatized persona adopted by Lowell or H. D. Instead, we find a speaker who is able to express opinions and ideas while remaining somewhat abstracted from them: the speaker adopts political, aesthetic, and intellectual positions without conforming to what we normally think of as a "personality." Moore is a decidedly didactic poet, but she illustrates her points through example rather than simply by making statements. Most often, she reveals the play of her own mind around the complexities of a subject and then leaves it to the reader to put the pieces into a coherent whole. Even when the primary argument is relatively clear, the complexity lies in the poem's wealth of detailed observation and description.