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The Emergence of the Modern: Amy Lowell, H.D., Gertrude Stein, Marianne Moore, and the Imagists

> It may be said that the self-conscious awareness of a break with the past may be felt in two main ways: as emancipation, a joyful release from the dead hand of convention, from stale pieties and restrictions; or as a disinheritance, a loss of tradition, belief and meaning.
>
> —Monroe Spears, *Dionysus and the City*

When "the modern" happened, no one is quite sure. Literary historians have argued that the "transition from Romantic and Victorian to 'modern' modes of poetry is one of the fundamental shifts in all the history of art."[1] That transition involved a major shift in the consciousness of Western civilization. From the idea that the poetic expression of human experience required the order of traditional verbal forms like the sonnet, the iambic pentameter line, the rhymed quatrain, the balanced and purposeful stanza, there emerged a counteridea that gathered force throughout the nineteenth century and exploded in the early twentieth century, its fallout affecting all the major art forms. That counter-idea asserted that traditional formal values were too restrictive and were no longer viable in the vast, complex, chaotic, urban world of modernity.

Some of the key changes in modern thought can be traced to the ideas of Darwin, Marx, Freud, and Einstein, who were reassessing the relationship of human beings to the world around them and the worlds within them. From Darwin came the idea that the emergence of human forms was a natural, not supernatural, event that occurred over millions of years, the result of random forces and natural selection. Chance, not divine will, seemed the

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governing principle of what appeared to be an increasingly accidental universe. From Marx came a view of human society as perpetually engaged in class struggle. In Freud's work the inner world of humanity was depicted as dominated by unconscious drives and motives, accessible only through dreams and deep exploratory analysis. And from Einstein came the revolutionary principle that time and space, the psychic and physical environment of humanity, were relative, not absolute, entities, subject to continuing alteration and redefinition as the mysteries of the cosmos unfolded.

In American poetry these radical reconceptions of the inner and outer worlds of humanity emerged in strikingly different ways in the work of the poets who began searching for new modes of verbal expression that would set their work apart from the literary traditions they inherited. Modern poetry was necessarily a difficult and complex poetry, reflecting the difficulties and complexities of life in the twentieth century. Yet modern poets were acutely aware of a sense of loss and lack of certitude that this separation from the past implied. To compensate, some early twentieth-century writers sought to revive classical and religious myths in new formal configurations. Others sought "to purify the language of the tribe," as Ezra Pound put it—to use words as exactly as the terms of a mathematical equation. Put another way,

> The modernists have been as much imbued with a feeling for their historical role, their relation to the past, as with a feeling of historical discontinuity. . . . Modern writers, working often without established models and bent on originality, have at the same time been classicists, custodians of language, communicators, traditionalists in their fashion.[2]

This paradoxical quality of modernism—its simultaneous assertion and rejection of literary and historical traditions—appears in the work of nearly all the avant-garde American poets of the early twentieth century. Amy Lowell, Hilda Doolittle (H.D.), Gertrude Stein, Marianne Moore, T.S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound are the major figures of this period, and all of them redefined poetic values. Although they were aesthetic revolutionaries—that is, appreciation of their work required a radical change in literary values—they were also, for the most part, classicists in the sense defined by British poet and critic T. E. Hulme.

The Reaction to Romanticism

The theoretical "speculations" (as his most important book was titled) of T. E. Hulme helped to define the new international dimensions of twentieth-century American poetry and the new emphasis on visual rather than purely literary values: "A man cannot write without seeing at the same time a visual signification before his eyes. It is this image which precedes the writing and makes it firm."[3] In his famous essay, "Romanticism and Classicism," published in 1924 but written at least a dozen years earlier, Hulme defined what he saw as a newly emerging classicism in poetry, a counter to the romantic excesses of the nineteenth century. For Hulme the terms *romantic* and *classical* applied not merely to particular periods of literary history but rather to ways of seeing the world, to philosophical concepts that alternated in various epochs of human history. The root of all romanticism, he argued, was the idea "that man, the individual, is an infinite reservoir of possibilities; and if you can so rearrange society by the destruction of oppressive order, then these possibilities will have a chance and you will get Progress."[4] Romantic poetry for Hulme was inherently political; it regarded human potential as nearly unlimited if only the prevailing social order could be changed.

The classical he defined as "quite clearly the exact opposite to this. Man is an extra-ordinarily fixed and limited animal whose nature is absolutely constant. It is only by *tradition* and *organization* that anything decent can be gotten out of him" (Hulme, 116). For Hulme, as well for Pound, Eliot, H.D., and others of their generation, the modern meant a reassertion of tradition and a discovery of the modern poet's relation to it. Poetry did not emerge from the privacy of an individual soul; it was an art form that had evolved over centuries, and modern poets needed to become students of the literary past in order to express their modernity. This idea was developed to its fullest by T. S. Eliot in his seminal essay of modernism, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (see chapter 5), but for Hulme it meant primarily a jettisoning of the excesses of a highly personalized romantic poetry that he felt was characterized by poets' "moaning and whining" rather than concentrating on the art of poetry as well as its craft. "I object," he wrote, "to even the best of the romantics. . . . I object to the sloppiness which doesn't consider a poem is a poem unless it is

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moaning or whining about something or other. I always think in this connection of the last line of a poem of John Webster's which ends with a request I cordially endorse: 'End your moan and come away' " (Hulme, 126). Modern art, in all of its generic manifestations, was to involve a basic change in the terminology by which we express appreciation for aesthetic achievement. "Instead of epithets like graceful, beautiful, etc., you get epithets like austere, mechanical, clear cut, and bare, used to express admiration" (Hulme, 96).

These same terms could well be used to describe much of the new visual art that was beginning to alter modern consciousness of the physical world. Poets particularly were cognizant of developments in other art forms, especially the visual arts, and they attempted, however covertly, to find parallels for the radical experiments of the impressionists, the cubists, the surrealists, and the futurists in their poetry. To understand modern American poetry, it is important at least to glance at the changing view of the modern world as it was being depicted by artists, in both America and abroad.

Developments in the Visual Arts

Artists, said Ezra Pound, are the "antennae of the race," and although the work of Darwin, Marx, Freud, and Einstein crystallized and epitomized the newly emerging worldview of the twentieth century, writers and visual artists of the late nineteenth century had already begun to revise the cultural expression of the modern world. In the visual arts, these changes became manifest in the remarkable canvases of the French impressionists where the previously static and orthodox landscape is shattered into a fluid array of dots, colors, and vigorous brush strokes that create a sense of the transitory and shifting environment of the modern world. Claude Monet's *Sunrise, An Impression* (1872), the painting that named the movement, renders its physical scene not as landscape but as "the sensation produced by a landscape."[5]

Even more pertinent is Vincent Van Gogh's famous *Starry Night*, a canvas of swirling, electrified colors and textures conveying the humility of the human world in relation to the immense energy of the cosmos. The dazzling night sky nearly overwhelms the little town, which only softly asserts its fragile presence into the mystery

above it. The dominant feature of the earthly world is a tall, swirling tree, which assumes a much more central and significant position in relation to marvelous and mysterious sky than the puny human landscape around it.

In the United States, these developments in the arts appeared in the work of the New York realists of the turn of the century—a group of painters who came to be known as the Ashcan School because of their affinity for offbeat, urban subjects and their concentration on the less picturesque aspects of American life. This group included Robert Henri, John Sloan, William Glackens, Everett Shinn, and George Luks, and their work is perhaps best epitomized by Sloan's *The Wake of the Ferry* (1907), a rough, off-center canvas depicting a lone, shadowy figure on the back deck of a ferry bobbing in the waters of the New York Harbor. Here is an image of humanity isolated, caught off-balance, and set adrift in the dark, dense, impenetrable atmosphere of modern urban life.

The visual manifestations of the modern did not take root in America until 1913, the year of an exhibition of international art in New York organized by the Association of American Painters and Sculptors. The Armory Show, so called because it was mounted at the Sixty-ninth Infantry Regiment Armory in New York, linked developments in American art to the vigorous and experimental continental scene where innovative movements were flourishing. The cubist and expressionistic painters of the early twentieth century—Picasso, Braque, and Kandinsky, for example—were displayed along with the even more avant-garde work of Francis Picabia and Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912) became the symbol of the exhibit.

At the opening of the exhibit, John Quinn, an American lawyer and patron of the arts (Quinn was to become T. S. Eliot's primary financial backer) announced that "this exhibition will be epoch-making in the history of American art. . . . Tonight will be the red-letter night in the history not only of American, *but of all modern art*" (Dunlop, 163). In retrospect, few would disagree; the Armory Show created a sense of an international community of artists who shared an awareness of the revolutionary and distinctive newness of twentieth-century life and culture. The parochialism of nationality and regionalism was superseded by images of the rapidly changing urban, industrial, and fragmented twentieth-century world. This world could be expressed only in radically new

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images that departed from the formally structured, natural or supernatural images of the art of previous times. The new art was an art of motion, speed, urbanity, machinery, and the accelerated pace of life. Duchamp's *Nude* was an appropriately representative piece for the exhibit because it presented the human form as a succession of lines and planes in motion, a quintessential expression of the wedding of human and machine.

The Imagist Movement

Although there is a long history of related developments in the visual and verbal arts, the congruence of American poetry and painting established itself clearly in that most "painterly" of literary movements, imagism, the dominant trend in American poetry in the second decade of the century. Its main practitioners—Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, Hilda Doolittle, and William Carlos Williams—though differing in many of the particulars of their aesthetic views, were agreed on the importance of finding a verbal equivalent to the transformations of the visual image occurring in painting. They sought also to imitate the exactness of science in rendering their interpretations of the physical world. The imagist movement had a relatively short life, but it is important because of the attention it directed to the sensuous qualities of poetry. It emphasized the fact that language, when used precisely, should appeal to the senses of readers and evoke a response as close as possible to the response generated by whatever is being described.

In March 1913 Ezra Pound and F. S. Flint enunciated the principles of imagism in *Poetry* magazine. Flint observed that the imagists were concerned with conveying in poetry a "direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective." He emphasized their concern for precision: "To use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation." And he stressed their interest in metrical innovation: "As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of a metronome" (Coffman, 9). Pound further defined an image as the new school was to use the term: "An 'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" (Coffman, 9). Here is the crux of the new conception of imagery as it is to be used in much modern poetry: images are not merely physical description but containers for ideas and feelings.

This definition of the image is well illustrated by Pound's best-known imagist poem, a tight, compact lyric of two lines called "At a Station in the Metro." Pound had been thinking about this poem for over a year after he saw in the "jostle" of the Paris underground "a beautiful face, and then turning suddenly, another and another, and then a beautiful child's face, and then another beautiful face." For days and weeks afterward he tried to make a poem from the experience but could "get nothing but spots of colour. . . . If I had been a painter I might have started a wholly new school of painting."[6] After many attempts to convert the experience into words, it occurred to him "that in Japan, where a work of art is not estimated by its acreage and where sixteen syllables are counted enough for a poem if you arrange and punctuate them properly, one might make a very little poem which would be translated as follows":

> The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
> Petals on a wet, black bough.
>
> (Stock, 136)

Here are two contrasting images that can be explicated intellectually as an implied metaphor comparing the appearance of a mass of faces in the Paris subway to something far removed from it: the fragility of petals on a wet branch. Human life is as tenuous as that of leaf or flower. But the poem resists paraphrase, though its images are haunting and carry something of the force of a painting of the same objects. The language is used as exactly as brush strokes. Though Pound's association with the imagist movement was short-lived, his continuing association with painters and sculptors underscored his contention that "one's *contemporaries* in the full sense of the term, are nearly always artists who use some other medium" (Coffman, 18).

Amy Lowell

In 1913, the year of the Armory Show, news of experimentation and innovation in the international art world permeated the poetry scene as well. Harriet Monroe's recently established *Poetry* magazine (founded in Chicago in 1912) had just published the Pound–F. S. Flint imagist doctrine in its March issue, and Pound was busy

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in London promoting the new movement and collecting material for *Des Imagistes: An Anthology*, which was to be the first gathering of the new poetry.

Amy Lowell (1874–1925), a New Englander from the illustrious Lowell clan, had just completed her first book of poems, a rather conventional collection called *A Dome of Many-Coloured Glass*, and was anxious to take her poetry in new directions, to infuse it with the modernity of distinctively twentieth-century forms and techniques. She arrived in London with a letter from Harriet Monroe introducing her to Pound, and although their initial contacts were amiable and stimulating, it was not long before their clash of egos made it impossible for them to remain friends. As Louis Untermeyer put it, "Amy Lowell 'invaded' England, met Pound head on, convinced his conferes that she was an even more pugnacious dictator than Pound, and 'captured' the group—with the obvious exception of Pound."[7] Lowell returned to the United States to disseminate the ideas of the imagists on this side of the Atlantic, and the announcement for her second book of poems, *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*, described her as "the foremost member of the 'Imagists,' " a designation that made Pound so angry he threatened a libel suit (Coffman, 26).

In her own anthology of imagist poets, published in 1915, Lowell included a list of six "rules" that attempted to redefine the principles by which the imagist poets wrote:

1. To use the language of common speech and employ always the *exact* word which fits the description.
2. To create new rhythms in poetry. We do not insist upon free verse, but we believe that a poet's individuality is better expressed in this form.
3. To allow absolute freedom in the choice of subject.
4. To present an "image" (hence the name: Imagist). Poetry should render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities. We oppose the "cosmic poet" who shirks the real difficulty of his art.
5. To produce poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred nor indefinite.
6. Concentration is the essence of poetry.
(Coffman, 28–29)

This emphasis on exactness, conciseness, free inquiry, and opposition to vague generalities and cosmic expansiveness echoed

Hulme and mirrored the precision of the scientific method. It also rejected the dominant voice in nineteenth-century American poetry, Walt Whitman, America's poet of the "Kosmos." The new poetry was to be "hard and clear," as Lowell put it, "never blurred or indefinite." These principles were not at variance with Pound's earlier definition, but so alienated had Pound become from Lowell's assertive leadership of the movement in America that "he dissociated himself from the American publications of the Imagists and always referred to the group as the 'Amygist' movement" (Untermeyer, xxiii).

Lowell herself became impatient with the rigid confines of almost any poetic doctrine. In her lifetime, she published eleven volumes of poetry, including over 650 poems in a vast array of genres, forms, techniques, styles, and voices. She wrote poetry with a fiery intensity unmatched by that of any of her peers. "I do not suppose," she ventured, "that anyone not a poet can realize the agony of creating a poem. Every nerve, even every muscle, seems strained to the breaking point. The poem will not be denied; the refusal to write it would be a greater torture. It tears its way out of the brain, splintering and breaking its passage, and leaves that organ in the state of a jellyfish when the task is done" (Untermeyer, xxviii). She was a relentless experimenter and an indefatigable ambassador for poetry. Eliot referred to her as the "demon saleswoman of poetry." It is easy to imagine her hefty physical presence (she was just under five feet and weighed over 200 pounds for much of her adult life) intimidating rooms filled with poetasters, as she smoked one cigar after another and read what were then shockingly suggestive poems.

One of her unique innovations was the development of what she called polyphonic prose, essentially a precursor of the contemporary prose poem, which ignores traditional line breaks but utilizes other poetic elements, such as metaphor, alliteration, repetitive sound patterns, and particularly striking images, often creating a surrealistic effect. "The Basket," a long poem in five polyphonic prose sections, is an excellent example of this form. It begins

The inkstand is full of ink, and the paper lies white and unspotted, in the round light thrown by a candle. Puffs of darkness sweep into the

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corners, and keep rolling through the room behind the chair. The air is silver and pearl, for the night is liquid with moonlight.

See how the roof glitters like ice! (Untermeyer, 58)

The poet's vision in "The Basket" materializes from the "white and unspotted" paper that begins the poem into a drama of lovers, Peter and Annette, drawn inextricably toward one another, surrounded by the recurrent imagery of a silver-blue moon, geraniums, an ice-covered roof, and bellying clouds. Each section of this increasingly passionate poem concludes with a variation of this pattern of images framing the dialogue and lovemaking of Peter and Annette until it nearly literally explodes in the irrepressible passion of the fourth section:

How hot the sheets are! His skin is tormented with pricks, and over him sticks, and never moves, an eye. It lights the sky with blood, and drips blood. And the drops sizzle on his bare skin, and he smells them burning in, and branding his body with the name "Annette."

The blood-red sky is outside his window now. Is it blood or fire? Merciful God! Fire! And his heart wrenches and pounds "Annette!"

The lead of the roof is scorching, he ricochets, gets to the edge, bounces over and disappears.

The bellying clouds are red as they swing over the housetops. (Untermeyer, 59)

The poem's final section is a denouement following the expense of passion in a gathering of the recurrent images that are now transformed to convey a sense of emptiness and loss. The house aflame has become a remote and unapproachable "palace of ice":

The air is of silver and pearl, for the night is liquid with moonlight. How the ruin glistens, like a palace of ice! Only two black holes swallow the brilliance of the moon. Deflowered windows, sockets without sight.

A man stands before the house. He sees the silver-blue moonlight, and set in it, over his head, staring and flickering, eyes of geranium red.

Annette! (Untermeyer, 59–60)

"The Basket" shows how effectively Lowell makes use of patterns of imagery to convey emotional states. It is not surprising that her most famous poem is called "Patterns." It contrasts the "stiff brocaded gown" worn by the narrator with the soft, pas-

sionate womanhood that flows beneath it. "For my passion / Wars against the stiff brocade," she writes, and "Underneath my stiffened gown / Is the softness of a woman bathing in a marble basin" (Untermeyer, 75). This aristocratic young woman is strolling along the garden paths of a vast estate thinking about her lover, Lord Hartwell, who is apparently about to return from war to marry her. She is daydreaming about the future patterns of their life together when the reader is startled to learn she has just received a letter informing her that Lord Hartwell has been killed in battle. The patterns of her life rigidify, epitomized by the stiffness of the brocaded gown she wears, and she can now contemplate only a life of perpetual grief and formalized mourning:

I shall go
Up and down,
In my gown.
Gorgeously arrayed,
Boned and stayed.
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 war.
Christ! What are patterns for?

(Untermeyer, 76)

The final couplet converts what could be a sentimental, almost maudlin expression of personal loss into a tough-minded political expression of the futility of war, the most destructive of human patterns because it shatters all others.

No discussion of Amy Lowell's work would be complete without some mention of her importance as a critic of poetry. Her first biographer correctly observes that her book *Tendencies in American Poetry* (1917) "was the most important critical work produced in the United States for many years. It gave a structure and a meaning to our modern poetry, which hitherto had been aimless and confused in the minds of the public."[8] In it, Lowell divided the new directions in American poetry into three groups: evolutionists, revolutionists, and imagists. She chose two of her contemporaries to represent each group. Edwin Arlington Robinson and Robert Frost, with their roots in nineteenth-century metrics and poetic

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forms, were evolutionists in the sense that they were adapting those forms to the new realities of twentieth-century life and language. Edgar Lee Masters and Carl Sandburg she described as revolutionists, primarily because of their liberation from the metrical constraints of their precursors and their focus on both the urban and rural dimensions of modern life. Hilda Doolittle and John Gould Fletcher represented the imagists, the most avant-garde tendency and the model for future directions in American verse. Notably missing in her assessment was any consideration of Pound and Eliot—Pound because of the imagist-Amygist controversy and Eliot because his most important work had not yet appeared. However, in "A Critical Fable," a long satirical poem modeled after her distant relative James Russell Lowell's famous "A Fable for Critics," she made her views on the two most influential poets of the modern period abundantly clear. She ultimately thought Eliot a more important writer than Pound but had little use for either:

> Eliot's mind is fixed and alert;
> Pound goes off anywhere, anyhow, like a squirt.
> Pound believes he's a thinker, but he's far too romantic;
> Eliot's sure he's a poet when he's only pedantic.
> But Eliot has raised pedantry to a pitch,
> While Pound has upset romance into a ditch.
>
> (Untermeyer, 430)

The invective continues for dozens of lines—more than enough to make Amy Lowell's position in relation to what she regarded as the pedantic and academic thrust of Eliot's work and the pretentious intellectualism of Pound an unequivocal one. While literary history has not concurred in her judgment and the work of Pound and Eliot has been far more influential than her own, it seems equally clear that her contribution to the development of American poetry has been largely undervalued and is in need of reassessment.

Lowell was a pioneer in the development of the prose poem, in the startling and innovative use of surrealistic imagery, in evaluating the major new tendencies in twentieth-century poetry, and, like Pound, in bringing concepts derived from her close study of Oriental poetry into the poetry of the English language. (Two

of her books, *Pictures of the Floating World* and *Fir-Flower Tablets*, are loose adaptations rather than translations of Chinese verse.) One other distinction is worth noting: on 8 September 1922, on radio station WGI she read her poems on the air to an estimated audience of 50,000 listeners, probably the first broadcasting of free verse in America (Damon, 615). Louis Untermeyer called her "not only a disturber but an awakener. Her exhilarating differences invigorated the old forms while affecting the new techniques. Her pioneering energy cleared the field of flabby accumulations and helped establish the fresh and free-searching poetry of our day" (Untermeyer, xxix).

H.D.

When Hilda Doolittle (1886–1961), who signed her poetry with the initials H.D., published a book of poems with Oxford University Press in 1944, an author's note on the page proofs described her as "at one time well known to all lovers of verse as one of the earliest 'Imagists.' " On the corrected proofs returned to the publisher, she crossed out "at one time" and replaced it with a bold "IS."[9] This incident illustrates her continuing identification with a movement that had long since become dispersed and defunct, although it has had continuing influence on the poetry of the entire twentieth century. The term, however, is certainly inadequate to characterize the substantial body of work she produced beginning with her first appearance in the January 1913 issue of *Poetry* magazine and ending with the long classical verse epic, *Helen in Egypt*, published in the year of her death.

This last work, as one critic has noted, made her "the first American woman to publish a major epic poem and the first American to create a female epic protagonist."[10] The sources and inspiration for this large body of work are threefold. First there are her imagist beginnings, greatly influenced by her early connection to Ezra Pound (they were engaged to be married, and he was a tireless champion of her poetry, promoting it especially through Monroe in his capacity as foreign correspondent for *Poetry* magazine). Second, there is her deep and intense absorption in Hellenic culture. Her poems are saturated with allusions to Greek gods and goddesses, but she modernizes the mythic dimensions of that world by blending mythology with an imagistic conception

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of the natural world and by connecting it to the events of her personal life. And third, there is the personal life, a truly remarkable one, characterized by intimate relationships with some of the great innovators of the twentieth century—Pound, D. H. Lawrence, and a year-long analysis with Sigmund Freud that infused her later work with a self-revelation that points toward the extremely personal, "confessional" poetry of the 1950s and 1960s.

H.D.'s early imagist poems, some of them classics of the genre, embody the basic principles of the movement. The most famous of these, "Oread," the title referring to a mountain nymph of Greco-Roman mythology, conveys a sense of the correspondences inherent in nature—the sea described in terms of the land, the land described in terms of the sea, and both evoked in terms of their imagistic impact:

> Whirl up, sea—
> whirl your pointed pines,
> splash your great pines
> on our rocks,
> hurl your green over us,
> cover us with your pools of fir.[11]

Kenneth Fields correctly observes that "it is pointless to ask whether this poem is about a pine forest seen in terms of the sea, or the other way around, for the standard ways of metaphor no longer apply. The poem is about both at once, both interacting: it is an instantaneous complex."[12] The last phrase recalls Pound's definition of the image as an "emotional and intellectual complex in an instant of time." The sea is solidified in terms of its shape, movement, and color, while the pine forest is liquefied by the active verbs that begin all but one line: *whirl, whirl, splash, hurl,* and *cover.* Motion, shape, color, and form interact in a dynamic, single vision.

This description of one entity of nature in terms usually applied to another underscores the density of H.D.'s imagistic method. Her imagism is not merely visual but textural as well, fully involving the reader's senses so that he or she seems transported into a palpable world of physical sensations. The second section of her early poem "The Garden" may be the most evocative

description of a hot late summer day we have in all of American literature:

> O wind, rend open the heat,
> cut apart the heat,
> rend it to tatters.
>
> 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.
>
> Cut the heat—
> plough through it,
> turning it on either side
> of your path.
>
> (H.D., 25)

The human longing for a cool breeze to "cut apart" and "plough through" the heat frames the middle stanza in which the heat itself frames and shapes the fruits of nature, outlining their contours and preventing them from falling. The breathy, plosive sounds of the stanza—the alliterative f's, th's, and p's—combine with the visual imagery to create a sense of suffocation and breathlessness.

From this evocation of the physicality of nature, it is but a short step to the second major characteristic of H.D.'s verse: its insistent renewal of the myths of the ancient world that embody the opposing forces of nature in a symbolic drama composed by the human imagination. In Greek religion, nature is charged with divinity; gods and goddesses represent natural elements in conflict. It is a pantheistic world, and the ritualistic events represented in Greek epics and dramas are enactments of universal mysteries made coherent by their presentation in human terms. The industrialized world of the early twentieth century had long lost touch with the cyclical sense of nature as reflected in Greek mythology, and many of the poets of the period—H.D., Pound, and Eliot particularly—lamented that loss and sought to revive the classical spirit by infusing their work with allusions to and reinterpretations of the Greek myths.

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This immersion in Hellenic culture is evident throughout H.D.'s work and culminates in her last major poem, *Helen in Egypt*. But the sense in which she tries to relate it to the exigencies of the modern world is perhaps best illustrated by a poem written much earlier. "The Tribute" was initially published in *The Egoist*, a magazine she edited in London in 1916 before T. S. Eliot took over that position the following year. It is a long poem written in eleven sections contrasting the squalor of the marketplace, representing the commercial, power-driven, and military obsessions of the modern world, with the transcendent power of nature as embodied in the poetry, myths, and songs of the ancient world. The word *squalor* recurs nine times in the poem's first two sections, personified as an ox cart, a serpent, a jackass, trampling and overwhelming the natural physical beauty of the landscape that inspires poetry and myth. The poem begins:

> Squalor spreads its hideous length
> through the carts and the asses' feet,
> squalor coils and reopens
> and creeps under barrow
> and heap of refuse
> and the broken shards
> of the marketplace—
> it lengthens and coils
> and uncoils and draws back
> and recoils
> through the crooked streets.
>
> Squalor blights and makes hideous
> our lives—it has smothered
> the beat of our songs . . .
>
> (H.D., 59)

The poet's function in this squalid modern world is to restore a sense of sanctity and sanity to the blighted urban landscape, doubly blighted by the horrendous destruction of World War I, an event H.D. obliquely refers to at the end of section 2 by reminding her readers that "the boys have gone out of the city, / the songs withered black on their lips" (H.D., 60). And how is the poet to accomplish this transformation? In section 3 she enters the "temple space" of the city "to cry to the gods and forget / the clamour, the filth" (H.D., 61) She recalls the origins of the modern city in ancient Athens, an urban civilization capable of retaining its connection to nature through the intervention of its deities:

> We turn to the old gods of the city,
> of the city once blessed
> with daemon and spirit of blitheness
> and spirit of mirth,
> we cry;
> what god with shy laughter,
> or with slender winged ankles is left?
>
> (H.D., 62)

And though she searches everywhere for the gods of antiquity in the modern city, she finds that but one god has survived, "one tall god with a spear-shaft, / one bright god with a lance" (H.D., 61). This warrior god epitomizes the spirit of an age of worldwide devastation, a god of death rather than a deity of light, beauty, and life:

> and we know his glamour is dross,
> we know him a blackened light,
> and his beauty withered and spent
> beside one young life that is lost.
>
> (H.D., 62)

But some in the city cannot accept this vast diminution of the human spirit; some cannot sing to or celebrate the god of the lance. She notices a "few old men," a "few sad women," "a few lads" "their white brows / set with hope / as light circles an olive-branch" (H.D., 63). With and for this meager handful she implores again the spirits of antiquity to revivify the modern world, to "heal us—bring balm for our sickness" (H.D., 63).

The final stanzas are a paean to whatever beauty may yet be recovered from a world that has substituted a devotion to money and power for a devotion to the miracle of life, the mystery of nature. "Beauty," Ezra Pound was to write much later in *The Pisan Cantos*, "is difficult." Here H.D. finds it difficult as well, but in the last lines of the poem she offers hope for its continual renewal

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in the youth of the world, who may yet transcend its modern depravity:

could beauty be sacrificed
for a thrust of a sword,
for a piece of thin money
tossed up to fall half alloy—
then beauty were dead
long, long before we saw her face.
Could beauty be beaten out,—
O youth the cities have sent
to strike at each other's strength,
it is you who have kept her alight.
(H.D., 68)

"The Tribute" begins in squalor but ends with an assertion of beauty, a continuum in the human experience that endures despite massive human efforts to trample it underfoot.

Although imagism and Greek mythology are continuing sources of H.D.'s poetic energy, it is also true, as Louis Martz has observed, "that by 1916–17 H.D. was beginning to create a strongly personal voice, breaking out of the Imagist confines, breaking through the Greek mask" (H.D., xviii–xix). The beginning of this voice can be experienced in poems like "The Islands," written during her travels in Greece in 1920, and in many of the poems in her collection *Red Roses for Bronze*, published in 1931, shortly before her year-long psychoanalysis with Sigmund Freud, an experience that was to have an immeasurable impact on her later life and work. One feels in these late poems the palpable presence of the poet in the words on the page:

No poetic phantasy
but a biological reality,

a fact: I am an entity
like bird, insect, plant

or sea-plant cell;
I live; I am alive;

take care, do not know me,
deny me, do not recognise me,

shun me; for this reality
is infectious—ecstasy.
(H.D., 584)

The word ecstasy derives from the Greek *ekstasis*, a being put out of its place, and suggests a consciousness that has transcended its bodily habitat to cohabit instead with the natural world. As her biographer puts it, in much of H.D.'s work, "the human drama and the stage of nature upon which or in which it is enacted fuse into one perceptual whole."[13] This perceptual wholeness links the early work and the late and gives H.D.'s poetry an integrative fullness that sets it apart from the work of almost all the other modernists. As a poet of myth, the self, nature, and the modern urban world, she connected the elements that her peers saw as fragmented, dissonant realities.

Gertrude Stein

The place of Gertrude Stein (1874–1946) in the history of twentieth-century poetry is difficult to determine. Her major books, *Three Lives* (1909), *Tender Buttons* (1914), *The Making of Americans* (1925), and *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1932), are essentially prose works, although whether Stein wrote prose, poetry, or "wrote writing" as she would have it is still open to question. Our preoccupation with genres and with classifying writers according to the genres they produce has caused her work to be ignored in many histories of modern and American poetry until recently. Her literary reputation seems to have equally vocal proponents and detractors. The negative critical view of her work is best summarized by Kingsley Widmer, who views her as a "shrewd self-publicist" and an "*avant*-kitsch writer."[14] On the other hand, it is equally possible to argue, as David Antin has, that she was the most radical of the modernists because more than any of the others, she realized that a truly revolutionary modern art needed "to begin from a radical act of definition or redefinition of the domain of the elements and the operations of the art or of art itself."[15] Put another way, Stein raised basic questions in her work about the nature and properties of language, or "more specifically, American English and how *else* its words might be used."[16]

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The imagist movement, despite its emphasis on redefining poetry in the modern age, used words in essentially the same ways they have always been used—as signifiers of the people, things, and events they actually represent. Although most literary modernists retained this crucial mimetic function of the word, Stein did not. The primary concern of her work is not so much what words represent but rather with language itself and how words interact with one another to create their own aesthetic pleasure. As Kenneth Rexroth noted, "Gertrude Stein showed, among other things, that if you focus your attention on 'please pass the butter,' and put it through enough permutations and combinations, it begins to take on a kind of glow, the splendor of what is called an 'aesthetic object' " (Kostlanetz, xiv). The creation of aesthetic objects made out of words is in one sense a central definition of poetry, yet in another sense it seems a minor endeavor, sacrificing deeper emotional and intellectual possibilities for elaborate and sometimes highly technical wordplay that severs language from its personal and social moorings. As e.e. cummings put it, Stein "subordinates the meaning of words to the beauty of the words themselves," and as Sherwood Anderson observed, she lays "word against word, relating sound to sound, feeling for the taste, the smell, the rhythm of the individual word" (Kostlanetz, xx).

Stein's experiments with the disassembling and reconstruction of language unhinged from its conventional referential or narrative associations, has its most explicit source in her lifelong association with the major visual artists of her time, particularly the cubist painters. According to Richard Bridgman, "In spite of her voracity as a reader, Gertrude Stein remained remarkably free of literary influence in her writing, barren even."[17] She was, however, a passionate collector and patron of modern art, and her apartment in Paris, where she settled with her brother Leo in 1903, became a densely crowded gallery of modern paintings, as well as a salon for a generation of American writers and intellectuals living abroad in the first three decades of the twentieth century. It was Gertrude Stein who named this generation a "lost generation" for the disillusionment they faced following the devastation of World War I. In fact, Stein is probably better known for her memorable phrases than for her poetry or prose. Her description of the city of Oakland, California ("There's no there there"), has remained a staple evocation of American urban anonymity, and her famous "A rose is

a rose is a rose is a rose" may be one of the most often-quoted lines ever written by an American.

Yet it is her contribution to twentieth-century poetry that interests us here, and that contribution was a substantial one, not so much to the poets of her own generation but to the vigorous linguistic experimentation that emerged later in the century in the innovative work of writers like John Ashbery, Robert Creeley, Jackson McLow, and David Antin. Stein gave these writers a sense of the fluidity and flux of the language, how loosely it held together compared to the static and traditional structures characteristic of its British counterpart. "Think about American writing," she told her students at the University of Chicago during a lecture tour of the United States in 1934–35,

> from Emerson, Hawthorne, Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Henry James, myself, Sherwood Anderson, Thornton Wilder and Dashiell Hammett and you will see what I mean, as well as in advertising and in road signs, you will see what I mean, words left alone more and more feel that they are moving and all of it is detached and is detaching anything from anything and in this detaching and in this moving it is being in its way creating its existing. This is then the real difference between English and American writing and this then can then lead to anything."[18]

Words detached from anything can lead to anything, and in Stein's poetry they almost always do. They are, in John Ashbery's phrase, a "hymn to possibility."[19] Here are the opening lines of "New":

> We knew.
> Anne to come.
> Anne to come.
> Be new.
> Be new too.
> Anne to come.
> Anne to come.
> Be new
> Be new too.
> And anew.
> Anne to come.
> Anne anew.
> Anne do come.

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Anne do come too, to come and to come
not to come and as to
and new, and new too.
(Kostlanetz, 153)

While many readers dismiss this sort of self-generated wordplay as gibberish, the very playfulness of the language interacting with itself creates a sense of newness that gives the poem its title. *Knew, new,* and *anew* interact throughout, and all rhyme with *to, too,* and *do. Anne* and *and* have a close vocal affinity, as do *we* and *be.* Most of these words recur in the final lines, which parodistically allude to "to be or not to be," transforming the question of being into a question of turning repetitive events into novel ones and adding as well a comic sexual pun. Rendering life meant repeating words again and again in different contexts since "language itself is a complete analogue of experience because it, too, is made of a large but finite number of relatively fixed terms which are allowed to occur in a limited number of clearly specified relations, so that it is not the appearance of a word that matters but *the manner of its reappearance*" (Perloff, 86).

Stein herself differentiated between mere repetition and what she called "insistence." "Is there repetition," she asks, "or is there insistence? I'm inclined to believe there is no such thing as repetition. And really how can there be."[20] Stein argues that no event in life recurs exactly the same way; there is always some difference in emphasis. In "New," Anne appears and reappears anew, and even exact recurrences carry different connotations because of the context. For example, the repetition of "Anne to come" in lines 2 and 3 carries alternate possibilities of predictability, on the one hand (because the first occurrence is preceded by "We knew"), and hopeful anticipation, on the other hand (because the second occurrence is followed by "Be new"). *Anne* goes through various permutations and transformations in the poem until she seems almost to emerge from the insistent pattern of recurrence as a momentary physical presence:

Here.
Anne Anne.
And to hand.
For a while.

And to come.
In half or dark.
In half and dark.
In half a dark.
As to it.
In a line.
As fine a line.
Bestow.
Anne Anne
And to hand
As a while
For a while
Anne.
(Kostlanetz, 157)

We seem to be spending some actual time with Anne and of course we actually are, because Anne exists only "In a line," which Gertrude Stein has bestowed upon us, "As fine a line" as she could write.

Though Stein's writing is idiosyncratic and tedious to read in substantial doses, no other American writer in the twentieth century has called more attention to the process of composition itself and therefore drastically revised the way in which a great many contemporary American poets think of their art. Writing for Stein meant transforming the flow of language in the mind into the exactitude of language on the page. Composition itself is the subject of much of her writing in at least two senses. First, the attention of the reader is directed not to the meaning of the words themselves but to their interactions; hence questions raised about Stein's poetry are almost always compositional. Why is this word here? What is its relationship to the line before it? How are puns, echoes, rhymes, rhythms, and so on interrelated within the work? She is in this sense a poet's poet rather than a reader's writer. Second, the emphasis on composition roots her work in what William James called the "continuous present"—the idea that "all knowledge (whether of the present or the past) is held within the experience of the present. This is what is real. Reality is *now,* and this present is in continual flux."[21] This second sense of composition means that the only "real" or "live" subject for a writer is the internal state of his or her mind at the moment the writing is taking place.

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Only if the traces of the moment can somehow find their way on to the page will the writing be "real."

This sense of flux, of word-to-word and line-to-line determinations, creates in her work what John Ashbery describes as "an all-purpose model which each reader can adapt to fit his own set of particulars" (Perloff, 105). From this perspective, it is usually fruitless to try to paraphrase or extract particular meanings or themes from Stein's work. Despite the voluminous critical literature that has recently surrounded that work, taming it and domesticating it like a white picket fence, the work remains stubbornly itself, impervious to explication that reduces it to the banalities that it raises to the status of high art:

> Anyone being one is one. Anything put down is something. Anything being down is something and being that thing it is something and being something it is a thing and being a thing it is not anything and not being anything it is everything and being that thing it is a thing and being that thing it is that thing it is that thing. Being that thing it is that thing and being that thing it is coming to be a thing having been that thing and coming to be a thing having been that thing it is a thing being a thing it is a thing being that thing. (Hass, 143)

It seems fitting that Gertrude Stein's last words, spoken on her deathbed to her lifelong companion, Alice B. Toklas, capsulize the exactitude and directness of so much of her work. As her biographer describes the scene, "She turned to Alice and murmured, 'What is the answer?' Alice, unable to answer, remained silent. Gertrude said, 'In that case, what is the question?' " (Mellow, 468).

Marianne Moore

Although she is sometimes associated with the imagists because she attended Bryn Mawr with H.D. and her poetry is certainly strewn with imagery, Marianne Moore (1887–1972) had little use for literary movements, and she thought *imagism* was a questionable term since images are central to almost all poetry (Gould, 183). Of the innovative poets of the first part of the century, she certainly had the greatest humility. Her first book, *Poems*, was published by H.D. and her friend Bryher Winifred Ellerman in 1921 without Moore's knowledge or permission. She later told an

interviewer about her reaction to her friends' zeal: "To issue my slight product—conspicuously tentative—seemed to me premature. I disliked the term 'poetry' for any but Chaucer's or Shakespeare's or Dante's."[22] The originality of her work commanded immediate attention. A year after the publication of *Poems*, Harriet Monroe published a "Symposium on Marianne Moore" in *Poetry* that recognized that a clearly new and distinctive voice had appeared on the American scene.

The components of that voice are not easy to identify, though they include a meticulous attention to precise detail, a new kind of metric based on syllables rather than stresses or accents in a line, unorthodox line breaks, with lines often ending on unemphasized words like *a* and *in* and *the*, and a penchant for unfashionable subject matter—exotic animals, real and imagined, strange flowers and herbs, and even baseball. She endlessly revised her poems, even after book publication, and her critics and biographers have their hands full trying to determine which version of a Moore poem is the definitive version. The most conspicuous case of this is her famous and often reprinted poem "Poetry," which appeared as a poem of twenty-nine lines in *Poems*, a drastically revised and trimmed version of thirteen lines in her second collection, *Observations* (1925), a return to a slightly modified version of the original in the *Selected Poems* of 1935, and an unmercifully truncated version of only three lines in the *Complete Poems* of 1967. That last volume appears with a characteristically terse and understated "Author's Note": "Omissions are not accidents."

In the case of "Poetry," while the omissions are clearly not accidental, they are certainly detrimental and demonstrate that Moore's humility and uncertainty about her work did not always serve her well. The first version of the poem is quintessential Moore. Here are the first stanza and part of the second:

> I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important
> beyond all this fiddle.
> Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one
> discovers in it after all, a place for the genuine.
> Hands that can grasp, eyes
> that can dilate, hair that can rise
> if it must, these things are important not because a

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high-sounding interpretation can be put on them but because they
are
useful.[23]

The direct and surprising statement of the first phrase identifies the poet with every reader who has had difficulty enjoying poetry, and it is one of the reasons that the poem is so popular with students at all levels who tend to groan when they hear the word *poem*. The slangy informality and self-deprecating modesty of the second phrase heightens that identification and leads to another surprise in the second line, which contrasts "a perfect contempt" for poetry with discovery and "the genuine." The reluctant reader of poetry is in a sense seduced by the poem. This seduction, which continues for the remainder of "Poetry," is true of much of Moore's other work. It is a poetry of genuine discovery and is important "not because a / high-sounding interpretation can be put on [it] but because it is useful."

The "use" of Marianne Moore's poetry is to make the reader more attentive to the surprising peculiarities of the world of things, objects, people, animals, and plants that surrounds us. It is a poetry, as a recent critic has observed, of "sincerity and gusto," the object of which is "to keep the mind alert and free, the world large and abundant."[24] "The Mind Is an Enchanting Thing" is the title of one of her most memorable poems. The first line of it modifies the title to indicate that the mind is capable not only of casting a spell but of being itself enchanted:

is an enchanted thing
like the glaze on a
katydid-wing
subdivided by sun
till the nettings are legion.[25]

In response to a question about how she begins poems, Moore told an interviewer, "A felicitous phrase springs to mind—a word or two, say—simultaneous usually with some thought or object of equal attraction: . . . 'Kattydid-wing [*sic*] subdivided by *sun* till the nettings are *legion*.' I like light rhymes, inconspicuous rhymes and unpompous conspicuous rhymes" (Tomlinson, 28). That a

poet so admired by the literary avant-garde of her time should be so concerned with rhyme is surprising, but as the remark indicates, Moore's rhymes are distinctly her own. *Thing* and *wing* in this passage is an "unpompous conspicuous" rhyme, while *sun* and *legion* is clearly "inconspicuous." And the *a* that ends line 2 is lightly rhymed with a *the* in the next stanza:

like the apteryx-awl
as a beak, or the
kiwi's rain-shawl
of haired feathers, the mind
feeling its way as though blind,
walks along with its eyes on the ground.
(Moore, 134)

The reader may not know what an apteryx is upon first reading this stanza, (or what a katydid is, for that matter), but these exotic creatures certainly enchant the mind and make us want to find out. An apteryx, it turns out, is just another name for a kiwi, so the apteryx-awl is the kiwi beak, characteristically poking along the ground as it walks; the bird's haired feathers are its rain shawl, a protective and comforting garment. The entire stanza, a single image of a kiwi walking along, beak and eyes facing the ground, is likened to the mind enchanted by the objects before it.

The spritely and playful sense of language in Moore's poems makes them often appear perilously close to light verse, a genre that most "serious" poets eschew. But her poetry is also infused with a moral and aesthetic sense that rises above the play of words like a steeplejack viewing the broad expanse of the physical landscape below and discovering a certain calm and order in the contours of the human and natural world. This order and tranquility provide for Marianne Moore an essential "reason for living." I am describing here the opening lines of the first poem in Moore's *Complete Poems*, "The Steeplejack":

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.
(Moore, 5)

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To observe the world as a visual artist must—fascinated by its particulars, intrigued by its correspondences and relationships, noticing patterns and connections that most of us are oblivious to—is for Moore the role of the poet as well.

> 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
>
> (Moore, 5)

It is awkward to end a quotation with *the,* but Moore ends her stanzas with such nondescript articles, giving the images an interconnectedness that mirrors the connections between the things she observes in the world. Everything in the poem is connected to something else by actual rhymes or parallel images, and these correspondences evoke the sort of etched landscape that Dürer himself might have drawn. The "eight stranded whales" form a pattern; the motion of the "sweet sea air" ripples along the water, creating a repetitive sense of movement that is "as formal as the scales / on a fish." The quiet, floating movement of the seagulls over the town clock echoes the drowsy progression of time "in a town like this," where the smallest movement—"a slight quiver of the body"—is recorded. Gradations of the sea's color are observed, as well as its motion, and these in turn are likened to the way Dürer "changed / the pine green of the Tyrol to peacock blue and guinea / gray." Both the sea and the pine trees (as in H.D.'s "Oread") are seen in terms of one another, both have the spectacular variety of peacock feathers, and both are manna for the artist's imagination, which transforms nature merely by observing the correspondences among its particularities. For the poet, the very act of naming the things of nature differentiates and particularizes the surface confusion of the natural world by setting

things in their proper place. The next four stanzas of "The Steeplejack" are a naturalist's catalog of the abundance of the physical world:

> 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
>
> trees are favored by the fog so that you have
> the tropics at first hand: the trumpet vine,
> foxglove, giant snapdragon, a salpiglossis that has
> spots and stripes; morning-glories, gourds,
> or moon-vines trained on fishing twine
> at the back door:
>
> cattails, flags, blueberries and spiderwort,
> striped grass, lichens, sunflowers, asters, daisies—
> yellow and crab-claw ragged sailors with green bracts—toad-plant,
> petunias, ferns; pink lilies, blue
> ones, tigers; poppies; black sweet-peas.
> The climate
>
> is not right for the banyan, frangipani, or
> jack-fruit trees; or for exotic serpent
> life. Ring lizard and snakeskin for the foot, if you see fit;
> but here they've cats, not cobras, to
> keep down the rats.
>
> (Moore, 5–6)

These stanzas reveal Moore's fascination with exotic flora and fauna. They evoke not only what can be seen in a town like this but also things that "The climate / is not right for." And words like *salpiglossis, spiderwort, lichens,* and especially *frangipani* (a tropical American shrub with large fragrant flowers) are a pleasure to roll across one's tongue. Moore makes her readers feel that it is "a privilege to see so / much confusion" because her artful enumeration of specifics is a momentary stay against that confusion. She reminds us that language is the human instrument by which we give shape, order, and meaning to both the physical world that surrounds us and the imaginative world that lives within us.

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Her poetry connects these two worlds. There is no better terse description of its genuine originality than her own famous phrase from the original version of "Poetry." Hers is a body of work that presents for our inspection "imaginary gardens with real toads in them."