

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC

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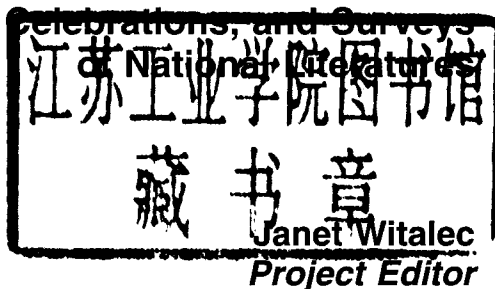
TOPICS VOLUME

Volume 122

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

Topics Volume

**Criticism of Various Topics
in Twentieth-Century Literature, including Literary
and Critical Movements, Prominent Themes and
Genres, Anniversary**



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GALE



Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Vol. 122

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Preface

Since its inception more than fifteen years ago, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC) has been purchased and used by nearly 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. TCLC has covered more than 500 authors, representing 58 nationalities and over 25,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as TCLC. In the words of one reviewer, “there is nothing comparable available.” TCLC “is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own.”

Scope of the Series

TCLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1999 and to the most significant interpretations of these author’s works. Volumes published from 1978 through 1999 included authors who died between 1900 and 1960. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of the period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and reprinting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, TCLC helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in TCLC presents a comprehensive survey on an author’s career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Every fourth volume of TCLC is devoted to literary topics. These topics widen the focus of the series from the individual authors to such broader subjects as literary movements, prominent themes in twentieth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers.

TCLC is designed as a companion series to Gale’s *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, (CLC) which reprints commentary on authors who died after 1999. Because of the different time periods under consideration, there is no duplication of material between CLC and TCLC.

Organization of the Book

A TCLC entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by the Gale Group, including *TCLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

A **Cumulative Nationality Index** lists all authors featured in *TCLC* by nationality, followed by the number of the *TCLC* volume in which their entry appears.

A **Cumulative Topic Index** lists the literary themes and topics treated in the series as well as in *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, and the *Contemporary Literary Criticism Yearbook*, which was discontinued in 1998.

An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *TCLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual paperbound edition of the *TCLC* cumulative title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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William H. Slavick, "Going to School to DuBose Heyward," *The Harlem Renaissance Re-examined*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (AMS, 1987), 65- 91; reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, vol. 59, ed. Jennifer Garipey (Detroit: The Gale Group, 1995), 94-105.

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Exile in Literature

INTRODUCTION

The theme of exile has engaged the imagination of many writers in the course of literary history, either because they experienced having to leave their native country for political reasons, or because they felt a disaffection with their society and consciously chose to live elsewhere. In fiction, as in life, there are many kinds of exile, as individual as the people experiencing and writing about it.

Martin Tucker, Celeste M. Schrenck, and Edward W. Said, among many other scholars, have written about the general characteristics and implications of exile. Schenck focuses on the special displacement experienced by women writers in exile, while Said emphasizes the personal and literary repercussions of exile—in his own case, as a writer from Palestine. Discussing the generation of American expatriate writers who lived in Paris in the 1920s, J. Gerald Kennedy comments on some of the reasons why, for them, Paris “inescapably reflects the creation of an exilic self.” Many scholars have also dealt with the theme of exile in fictional works, linking a writer’s treatment of that theme with the writer’s own situation. For example, Samuel Lyndon Gladden has discussed Oscar Wilde’s writings following the completion of his prison sentence and move to France; Leo Gurko has written about Joseph Conrad’s experience as a Pole living in England and writing in English; and Kennedy has focused on F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Tender Is the Night* (1934) as it reflects Fitzgerald’s temporary self-exile in France.

Sometimes historical circumstances dictate that a number of a nation’s leading intellectuals and writers leave in order to seek personal as well as artistic freedom. Such was the case in Germany just before and during World War II, for example, when many liberals and anti-Nazi writers left the country in protest, creating a parallel body of German literature written outside of Germany during that period. Wm. K. Pfeiler, Thomas A. Kamla, and Egbert Krispyn have analyzed the general historical climate that led to the German writers’ exodus and have highlighted some specific cases, like those of Konrad Merz, Thomas Mann, and Arthur Koestler. Günter Berghaus has written about the community of German writers and artists living in Great Britain during the war years and beyond, noting their contribution to intellectual life in their new environment.

REPRESENTATIVE WORKS

Djuna Barnes
Nightwood (novel) 1936

Samuel Beckett
Molloy (novel) 1951
En Attendant Godot [*Waiting for Godot*] (drama) 1953

Béla Belász
The Theory of the Drama (criticism) 1922

Joseph Conrad
Lord Jim (novel) 1900

e. e. cummings
The Enormous Room (prose narrative) 1922

F. Scott Fitzgerald
Tender Is the Night (novel) 1934

Joris-Karl Huysmans
À rebours [*Against the Grain*] (novel) 1884

James Joyce
Dubliners (short stories) 1914
A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (novel) 1914-15
Exiles (drama) 1919
Ulysses (novel) 1922
Finnegans Wake (novel) 1939

Arthur Koestler
Spanish Testament (autobiography) 1937
Scum of the Earth (autobiography) 1941

Thomas Mann
Die Geschichten Jaakobs [*Joseph and His Brothers*] (novel) 1934
Lotte in Weimar [*The Beloved Returns*] (novel) 1939

Konrad Merz
Ein mensch fällt aus Deutschland (novel) 1936

Czesław Miłosz
Ziemia Ulro [*Land of Ulro*] (poetry) 1977

Vladimir Nabokov
The Real Life of Sebastian Knight (novel) 1939

Anäis Nin
The Diaries of Anäis Nin (diary) 1966-80

Saint-John Perse
Eloges [*Eloges and Other Poems*] (poetry) 1911
Anabase [*Anabasis*] (poetry) 1924

Isaac Bashevis Singer
Shosha (novel) 1978

Oscar Wilde
Sebastian Melmoth (prose) 1904

Stefan Zweig
The World of Yesterday (autobiography) 1943

OVERVIEWS AND GENERAL STUDIES

Celeste M. Schenck (essay date 1989)

SOURCE: Schenck, Celeste M. "Exiled by Genre: Modernism, Canonicity, and the Politics of Exclusion." In *Women's Writing in Exile*, edited by Mary Lynn Broe and Angela Ingram, pp. 225-50. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989.

[In the following essay, Schenck discusses the poetry of female modernists in terms of their state of being exiled from the political, cultural, and social mainstream.]

When I first mapped out an essay on what I'd like to call modernist women's exiles, I envisioned an article on the exchanges between gender and genre, raised exponentially to include geography in the case of those triply exiled expatriate women poets. The task has been more difficult than I imagined for two reasons: first, my perfectly sonorous third—gender, genre, geography—collapsed under pressure of a less concordant trio—race, class, and sexual preference; second, because Gilbert and Gubar's observation that "verse genres have been even more thoroughly male than fictional ones" (*Madwoman*, 68), with its corollary that women writers able to make themselves at home in the house of prose were exiles when it came to poetic genres, simply did not hold up as a theory in a period that willingly consigned poetic forms into the hands of genteel poetesses, keeping the "new poetry" safe for the experimenters, the form-breakers, and the vers-librists—that is, the men.

It may seem odd that I take up the banner of genre at a moment when Modernists were doing all they could to dislodge it as an evaluatory criterion of poetry, but in fact the debate raged in periodicals of the day in a manner I find chillingly gendered. In a 1914 polemic against that "decorative straight-jacket, rhymed verse," a *Little Review* essayist asks us: "Suppose I were a Bluebeard who had enticed a young girl into my dim chamber of poetic-thought. Suppose I took the little knife of rhyme and coolly sliced off one of her ears, two or three of her fingers, and finished by clawing out a generous handful of her shimmering, myriad-tinted hair, with the hands of meter"

(Bodenheim, 22). Although the butchered victim in this fantasy is poetry, the hostility generated by rhymed verse extends metonymically to her largely female practitioners. For example, John Crowe Ransom, in "The Poet as Woman," an essay in condescending praise of Edna St. Vincent Millay, quibbles with her choice of the indeterminate word *comfort*, shortened to keep meter. Accusing Millay of obedience to "the mechanical determinism of metrical necessity," he turns the Procrustean metaphor back on her by ending his essay with an image of female dismemberment, once again, ostensibly, of poetry: "Procrustes, let us say with absurd simplicity, finds the good word *comforter* too long for the bed. So he lops off her feet" (110).¹

But in the foregoing examples I have only described the woman poet's Charybdis. She is equally censured, often out of the other corner of the male critic's mouth, for being inadequately formal, that is, ill-suited to mastery of poetic genres by temperament and education. In the same essay quoted above, Ransom calls Millay "not a good conventional or formalist poet . . . because she allows the forms to bother her and to push her into absurdities. I imagine there are few women poets of whom this is not so, and it would be because they are not strict enough and expert enough to manage forms,—in their default of the disciplines under which men are trained" (103). William Archer says, apparently in praise of Alice Meynell:

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

(Quoted in Schlack, 112)

It is little wonder, given the prescriptive nature of Archer's praise, that Meynell wrote a poem called "The Laws of Verse" in which she invites the erotic embrace of a controlling prosody and rhyme.

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

(*Poems*, 173)

The double bind of the woman poet, as I redefine it for the female Modernist, her simultaneous exile *from* and *to* poetic form, almost makes comprehensible Edith Sitwell's defensive *ars poetica* in this peevish letter to Maurice Bowra:

Women's poetry, with the exception of Sappho . . . and . . . "Goblin Market" and a few deep and concentrated, but fearfully incompetent poems of Emily Dickinson, is *simply awful*—incompetent, floppy, whining,

arch, trivial, self-pitying,—and any woman learning to write, if she is going to be any good at all, would, until she had made a technique for herself (and one has to forge it for oneself, there is no help to be got) write in as hard and glittering a manner as possible, and with as strange images as possible—strange, but believed in. Anything to avoid that ghastly wallowing.

(*Letters*, 116)

The ample quotation from Sitwell is intended to illustrate that this debate over genre not only installed itself along gender lines, inscribing itself in a familiar binary opposition between male Modernists and female poetesses, but cut across gender lines to enforce differences among women poets. In an essay titled “Some Observations on Women’s Poetry,” for example, Sitwell praises Rossetti’s *Goblin Market*—“the perfect poem written by a woman” (59)—and censures Barret Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*—“Mrs. Browning used a technique and a manner which is only suitable to a man,” that is, she avoids versification and the control it implies. The result, according to Sitwell, is a kind of ill health in Barrett Browning’s poetry that is emblemized by the vision of her “horsehair sofa”: “She is always prostrated and never in fine fighting trim—the pink of condition for a poet” (59). The issue for Sitwell, who, like Meynell, feels “we cannot dispense with our rules,” is to achieve a glittering hardness that will compensate for the sickliness/softness of what Sitwell would call, excepting Sappho, Rossetti, and herself, “women’s poetry.” In drawing out the implications and undertext of Sitwell’s judgment on Barrett Browning, I mean to expose the bind she is caught in. She is committed *both* to a separate tradition of women’s poetry—“it is of a different kind altogether, needing different subjects and a different technique” (59)—and to outdoing male poets in fashioning a poetics that is anything but wallowing and soft. Her recourse to form, then, was both prescribed and understandably defensive.

Why might women poets be especially susceptible to the (contradictory) criticisms of being too strong/too weak, too rigid/too flabby, too hard/too soft?² Theodore Roszak, in an early discussion of the sexual politics of Modernism, “The Hard and the Soft,” points to the sexual imagery in the discourse of the period more generally, to its obsession with male impotence, sterility, and fears of castration in the face of female strength; that is, he views the contrast of a male and female Modernism in terms of the familiar opposition of his title. Gilbert and Gubar destabilize this binary scheme at the end of their “Tradition and the Female Talent” by suggesting that the “female half of the dialogue is considerably more complicated than the male” because women writers respond to male anxiety with guilt of their own rather than with the heightened competency men fear (204). I would suggest, framing the problem in Sherry Ortner’s now famous anthropological terms, that women are always subjected to competing stereotypes: they are both “beneath” culture—too mired in nature to master the codes or poetic forms—and (notably in and after the Victorian period) “upholders of” culture—hence, rigid, conservative, form-bound, repressive of spontaneity

and experimentation. The whole idea of the “genteel” against which Modernism defined itself seems to be inextricably bound to these contradictory, even schizophrenic, notions of femininity. One wonders, for example, which of the two Max Beerbohm is censuring in his faint praise of Virginia Woolf’s writing for its likeness to her father’s: “If he had been a ‘Georgian’ and a woman, just so would he have written” (quoted in Gilbert and Gubar, “Tradition,” 183). If gentility in poetry carries the disparaging connotation of soft and female, or worse, not male enough, it can also bear the opposite meaning of conservative and rigid, rhymed, and therefore masculine and hard. Given the impossibility of separating the two valences of the term, it is no wonder that women poets found themselves divided in the debate over genre.

Not only, then, must we contextualize the notion of poetic form during the period known as Modernism—conventional form, although alive and well in genteel Georgian verse, was the *bête noire* of the Modernist movement in poetry, and therefore, although devalued, comparatively open to women poets. I will also ask that we attend to the differences between the female voices of rear-guard and avant-garde modernism. If we listen to the more traditional meters of Anna Wickham, Charlotte Mew, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Alice Meynell, and even Edith Sitwell (not to mention the some five hundred British women who wrote strong war poetry during the years around 1914) as attentively as we now hear the daring verbal experiments of H.D., Stein, and increasingly Mina Loy, we must renounce, I believe salutarily, any hope for a unitary, global theory of female poetic modernism.³

My polemic must be taken in the context of the ongoing project of Modernism’s revisionary history, that is, the critique of the ideology of Modernism from the vantage point of all the new politics—Marxist, feminist, neohistoricist. I could not argue for a reconsideration of Modernism’s foreclosed archives, except after and in light of Georg Lukács’s essay on Modernist ideology in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, Lillian Robinson’s and Lise Vogel’s 1971 polemic *against* the detachment of culture from history in Modernist art and *for* the study of race, class, and sex as factors of exclusion, and, finally, feminist critical salvaging of H.D., Stein, and Loy from the overwhelmingly masculine domination of the period. Without the work of Susan Stanford Friedman, Rachel DuPlessis, and Cyrena Pondrom on H.D., Catharine Stimpson, Marianne DeKoven, and Shari Benstock on Stein, and Carolyn Burke, Virginia Kouidis, and Roger Conover on Mina Loy, it would not be possible for me to argue for further opening of the canon to women poets. After all, H.D. had to be carried out of the burning city on the shoulders of her literary daughters if Robert Graves’s dismissive censure of her is to be considered typical: “The only excuse to be made for those who once found H.D. ‘incomprehensible’ is that her work was so thin, so poor, that its emptiness seemed ‘perfection,’ its insipidity to be concealing a ‘secret,’ its superficiality so ‘glacial’ that it created a false ‘classical atmosphere.’ She was never able, in her tempo-

rary immortality, to reach a real climax in any of her poems. . . . All that they told was a story of feeble personal indecision; and her immortality came to an end so soon that her bluff was never called" (Riding and Graves, 122-23).⁴

But my business is not with the now safely restored H.D., or with Stein, or with Hugh Kenner's canonized Six, on which Modernist board only the sanitized Miss Moore sits as representative female (49-61),⁵ nor even with what Virginia Kouidjis calls, making a place for Mina Loy, the "Stein—Pound—Williams—Moore current of modernism" (24). In fact, the hard question I would like to pose is whether we feminist critics, in privileging those female poets who broke form with the boys (even if, as it turned out, they broke form *for* the boys), have reproduced the preferences of dominant critical discourse and extended the hegemony of an exclusive, in this case antigeneric, prejudice which consigned most women poets to debased use of tired forms. Shouldn't the canonizing of Stein and H.D., like that of Dickinson at the behest of the elegant deconstructors, give us pause, if it is accomplished at the expense of striking poets like Wickham and Mew, Wylie and Meynell, from the Modernist register? Furthermore, linking poetic practice to politics, might our collusion with the aesthetic Aryanism of the Modernist canon and its inevitable tendency to produce elite readers, even when we open that canon to women, amount to an enforcement of its exclusionary politics? Sonia Saldivar-Hull's reading of Stein in another essay in this volume poignantly forces us to confront a Chicana reader's alienation before Stein's racism and classism. How shall we choose to address those moments when Stein—formally and politically—has more in common with William or Henry James, Picasso, or for that matter Jacques Derrida, than with Ma Rainey⁶ or Melanctha? Will the motley multiple determinants of literary modernism—gender, genre, geography, class, race, and sexual preference—finally force us to abandon a specious and essential, although for a time useful, difference between male and female Modernism?

My project here will be to isolate a few instances that roughen up the history of literary Modernism and present a paradox: if, as both Lukács and feminist critics have demonstrated, the radical poetics of Modernism often masks a deeply conservative politics, might it also possibly be true that the seemingly genteel, conservative poetics of women poets whose obscurity even feminists have overlooked might pitch a more radical politics than we had considered possible? I wish, in short, to question the equation both conservative Modernists and radical theorists have made between radical form and radical politics—even a critical theorist like Julia Kristeva might conspire in a Modernist hegemony that fetishizes formal experiment. The situation of marginalized modernists such as Wickham, Mew, Townsend Warner, Meynell, and Sitwell has much to tell us not only about the dispersive underside of the Modernist monolith but also about the politics of canonicity and even about inadvertent feminist adherence to a politically suspect hierarchy of genre.

"EXILE BEGINS AS AN APPREHENSION VISITED IN
SECRET"

The female affinity for fixed forms has been explained variously—in terms of the woman poet's reproduction of the struggle against cultural containment, of her need to "rein in her strong, unruly feelings" by recourse to formal strictures like the straitjacket of rhyme mentioned above (Fried, 2), finally of formal counter to very real social and sexual marginality. Marianne DeKoven explains female reticence to engage in experimental writing by arguing that "women writers, until, literally, now [with Stein], have been struggling to gain the position which male writers have been free to see as false" (*Different Language*, xx). Elaine Marks, Susan Gubar, and Elyse Blankley all note the coincidence of Renée Vivien's exotic sexuality with her self-exile into rhymed Alexandrines in an expatriate tongue of a century before, and others suggest that her incarceration in sentimental, imitative verse parallels her bodily anorexia or her imprisonment within the "doomed lesbian" image of the nineteenth century (Faderman, 268). Similarly, Louis Kannerstine, in a massive dismissal of all of Djuna Barnes's early verse, considers that her "conventional use of metre and rhymes was perhaps intended to provide a neutral ground to counter the strain" of her sexual preference (23). I would argue that recourse to convention does not always constitute a desire for constriction—Debra Fried's stunning reading of Millay's sonnets, for example, demonstrates that the freeing-by-binding trope might very well prove more explanatory of male than female formal experiment. Although certain of the vague pastorals sandwiched between stories in Barnes's *A Book* might have merited Kannerstine's disdain, the rhymed, "matched accentual lines" (Field, 70) of *A Book of Repulsive Women* do not in my view function as a safety valve or counter to the transgressiveness of the subject matter, nor are they the result of pure "stylistic excess" (Kannerstine, 32). Mina Loy's formal experiments with "Pig Cupid," "rooting erotic garbage"—sans commas, sans rhyme—seem tame next to the sexual radicalism of Barnes's unnervingly regular, rhymed syllabic verse:

Someday beneath some hard
Capricious star,
Spreading its light a little
Over far,
We'll know you for the woman
That you are,
See you sagging down with bulging
Hair to sip,
The dappled damp from some vague
Under lip,
Your soft saliva, loosed
With orgy, drip.

("From Fifth Avenue Up." 1-2)

In short, an alternate sexual politics is surprisingly announced in the *Repulsive Women* "rhythms"—a politics that would both impose exile and profit by it, a politics that would defiantly set itself up in the conformity of rhyme and meter, a politics that would challenge the het-

erosexism and homophobia of the dominant Modernist discourse in perfectly rhymed verse. Still, Barnes would shortly, largely as a result of her prose, achieve canonicity among the avant-garde, and her place in the feminist canon will be assured by the publication of Mary Lynn Broe's forthcoming revaluation of Barnes, *Silence and Power*.

Whereas Barnes's lesbian eroticism may no longer provoke surprise, it does startle to find the following lines in Charlotte Mew's "On the Road to the Sea": "We passed each other, turned and stopped for half an hour, then went our way, / I who make other women smile did not make you" (29). The achieved smile by the end of the poem is associated with dying climactically: "Reeling,—with all the cannons at your ear." In "The Fête" female sexuality receives equally delicate but nonetheless explicit treatment:

At first you scarcely saw her face,
You knew the maddening feet were there,
What called was that half-hidden, white unrest
To which now and then she pressed
Her finger-tips; but as she slackened pace
And turned and looked at you it grew quite bare:
There was not anything you did not dare:—
(Warner, 6-7)

"Absence," perhaps more than any other Mew poem, evokes both delight in female sexuality and conflict over its homoerotic expression. As anatomically suggestive of female anatomy as Sappho's imagery, Mew's adumbration of hooded female pleasures safe from the destructive beat of masculine hooves eases the traditional sapphic concern for a lost maidenhead, trampled by shepherds until only a purple stain remains upon the ground.

In sheltered beds, the heart of every rose
Serenely sleeps to-night. As shut as those
Your guarded heart; as safe as they from the beat, beat
Of hooves that tread dropped roses in the street.
(Warner, 47)

But the cost to the post-speaker of answering the call of her female lover's eyes is conveyed in an arresting image of silencing at the hands of Christ:

But call, call, and though Christ stands
Still with scarred hands
Over my mouth, I must answer. So,
I will come—He shall let me go!

Even more unsettling is the morbid but fascinating exploration of enveloping female eroticism in "The Forest Road" (Warner, 20-22), a poem pronounced pathological by a contemporary physician. It is, no less than Shelley's *Alastor*, a quest for what the speaker thinks is other and learns is in fact same. By the close of each, a binding love tryst gives over to death, as the poet-speaker confronts his/her own soul in the figure of the other. But whereas Shelley's poet's pursuit of an elusive maiden brings him to the grave, "The Forest Road" explores the contours of a fe-

male symbiosis that reads simultaneously as ecstasy and death. The poet knows she "could go free" if only she could separate from the other's enlacing hair: "I must unloose this hair that sleeps and dreams / About my face, and clings like the brown weed / To drowned, delivered things." Trying to quiet her female other, to "hush these hands that are half-awake / Groping for me in sleep," at the last she cannot separate from her. The image of double suicide that closes the poem marks a mutual female climax as well: as the "dear and wild heart" of the one has been broken in its breast of "quivering snow / With two red stains on it," the other determines to "strike and tear / Mine out, and scatter it to yours." In spite of its exploration of the dangers of giving in to the "poor, desolate, desperate hands" of the other, the poem ends ecstatically: "I hear my soul, singing among the trees!" Although Mew's biographers agree that her love for women remained to the end of her days a locus of conflict and psychic pain, her appreciation of female sexuality, in both benign and threatening manifestations, is at the heart of her best poetry.

The violence of "The Forest Road" is balanced by the delicate evocation of autoerotic pleasure in Mew's magnificent "Madeleine in Church." These lines fairly exult in the capacity for female self-enjoyment apart from the determining sexual presence of an other.

I could hardly bear
The dreams upon the eyes of white geraniums in the dusk,
The thick, close voice of musk,
The jessamine music on the thin night air,
Or, sometimes, my own hands about me anywhere—
The sight of my own face (for it was lovely then) even the
scent of my own hair,
Oh, there was nothing, nothing that did not sweep to the high seat
Of laughing gods, and then blow down and beat
My soul into the highway dust, as hoofs do the dropped roses
of the street.
I think my body was my soul,
And when we are made thus
Who shall control
Our hands, our eyes, the wandering passion of our feet
(Warner, 23).

This long poem of over two hundred lines, Mew's best poem, is composed of both varying rhyme schemes and stanza structures; each movement of this dramatic monologue is accompanied and marked by elaborate formal variation. In this section in particular, the incantatory rhythms and the sexual content of the lines invite enormous variation in length and emphasis, whereas other, less dreamlike and more conversational sections call for greater regularity in meter and line length. As a whole, "Madeleine in Church" should be seen as the culmination of a genre, a revision of the Victorian Fallen Woman poem, which Mew appropriates to champion rather than punish female sexuality, a revision informed as much by her own sexual conflicts as by her impatience with traditional mythologies of the "pécheresse" (Mizejewski, 283, 301): Mew gives her modern magdalen both a voice—of which the canon, pre-

ferring to describe her, had deprived her—and entitlement to full sexual enjoyment, autoerotic, heterosexual, or lesbian.

Although Virginia Woolf once wrote to Vita Sackville-West that she had just met “Charlotte Mew, (the greatest living poetess),” critics have only begun to revalue the corpus that Mew’s contemporaries, Woolf and Thomas Hardy among them, and even some followers, most notably Marianne Moore, so admired. Val Warner’s 1981 reissue of Mew’s *Collected Poems*, accompanied by her complete prose, and Penelope Fitzgerald’s tasteful but forcibly limited biography, *Charlotte Mew and Her Friends*, praised by Brad Leithauser in a kind but still somewhat patronizing review essay on Mew in the *New York Review of Books* (called “Small Wonder”), have brought her work back to light. Although a number of critics, most notably Leithauser, have singled Mew out for her “indigenous originality” (25), her distinctive voice, they tend to censure her at the same time for her small, unoracular formalism—“her pitch is refined and her scale is modest” (31). When they do attribute to her some “nervy bravado,” they do so for the Hardy-esque roughed-up rhythms, the ventriloquistic experiments with dialect, the perseverance of repeated rhyme which Marianne Moore would later make famous and acceptable (Leithauser, 26). In fact, “Madeleine in Church” is anything but regular in rhythm, anything but conventional in line length and stanza form—its enormous formal variety marks its dramatic and sophisticated shifts in tone. Additionally, in their haste to excuse her “measured and unspectacular” production aside the form-shattering norms set by a masculinist Modernism, these critics fail to read beyond what they see as rhythmical familiarity and rhyme to a strikingly unconventional content (Leithauser, 25). But the sexual radicalism of this untypically formal corpus has been overlooked even by feminist critics attuned to Mew’s revisionary impulses. Even Linda Mizejewski’s sensitive reading of the *Fallen Woman* poems stops at Mew’s poetic protest against heterosexual inscription into femininity. Beyond Mew’s personal and idiosyncratic voice, beyond even her occasional generic daring, is an elected erotic politics belied by the shape of the poems.

Not just the experimental female modernists, then, but a good number of those faithful to meter and rhyme as well wrote a poetry of marked sexual preference: Anna Wickham, married mother of four, who developed a passionate attachment to Natalie Barney late in her life, freely admitting to her “biting lust” (*Writings*, 46); Charlotte Mew, pictured in her *Collected Poems* in full cross-dress, a would-be lover of novelist May Sinclair; Sylvia Townsend Warner, who copublished *Whether a Dove or a Seagull* with her lover, effacing the distinction of authorship from the face of the poems in a perfect emblem of their symbiosis (Marcus, 59); and even Edith Sitwell, probably asexual but certainly galvanized by her intense relationship with her governess, Helen Rootham. Each shares a politics with the more critically fashionable Barnes, coding in what we have learned to call conventional poetry the secret exile of sexual preference.

“ONE STEPS ABOARD; / THE BOAT SLOWLY /
ABANDONS THE PORT / AND NOTHING HAS
CHANGED”

Anna Wickham, like her contemporary Charlotte Mew, has lapsed into obscurity for reasons that have everything to do with the form of her verse and the manner of her dress—Harold Acton, for example, found her poetry as unfashionable as her person (Smith, 2). Unlike Mina Loy, whose elegance after four babies was continually remarked, Wickham was large and haphazard in appearance (gypsylike if the critics were feeling kind). She once deliberately wore a wool jumper to an affair at which Edith Sitwell was sure to show up in gold brocade. Charlotte Mew always wore a tweed topcoat over her often frankly masculine dress and sported a “felt pork-pie hat put on very straight” (Monro, viii). Wickham was prolific (nearly four hundred poems in twenty years) where Mew was spare (her first book came out in 1916, when she was nearly fifty), yet both wrote overtly feminist poetry that was highly recognized in its day. Thomas Hardy called Charlotte Mew “far and away the best living woman poet—who will be read when others are forgotten” (quoted in Fitzgerald, 174), and Anna Wickham had by 1932 an international reputation—anthologies of the day printed more of her poems than those of Walter de la Mare, Robert Graves, and in some volumes, even William Butler Yeats (Smith, 23). Neither Wickham nor Mew had anything like a formal education and no formal study of poetry, although Wickham’s father apparently made her promise to become a poet. Mew destroyed everything that might constitute a record of her life except for the few pieces that make up her *Collected Poems* and some stories, and most of Wickham’s papers and letters were lost during the 1943 bombing of her Hampstead home. Both Wickham and Mew questioned the church, but whereas Wickham’s revisionary supplication of the feminized deity poignantly redresses banishment—“In nameless, shapeless God found I my rest, / Though for my solace I build God a breast”—Mew’s resignation, in “Madeleine in Church,” is complete—“I do not envy Him His victories, His arms are full of broken things” (Warner, 26). Finally, both Wickham and Mew committed suicide. The indignity of Mew’s death by the ingestion of disinfectant was matched only by the carelessness of her obituary: “Charlotte Mew, said to be a writer” (Monro, xii). Wickham’s fate is as banal: The London *Picture Post* did a feature on her in 1946 called “The Poet Landlady” (Smith, 28).

A closer look at the life’s work of the colorful Wickham, a free-spirited, half-working-class Australian émigrée, who began her career as an opera singer and then divided her life between London and Paris, might cause us to agree with Stanley Kunitz that the neglect of Anna Wickham is “one of the great mysteries of contemporary literature” (quoted in Wickham, *Writings*, front blurb, n.p.). A pacifist who nonetheless supported the Great War effort, a deprived and unhappy wife who remained faithful to her husband during the entire course of their tumultuous relationship until his death, an acquaintance of Pound, Barnes, D. H. Lawrence, and Dylan Thomas who was as comfort-

able in a London pub as she was on the fashionable Left Bank, a staunch feminist and supporter of women's rights who harbored a masochistic sexuality founded in mother-lack and Catholic education, Wickham was an exciting mass of contradictions of which her poetry is the record. Her Australian childhood offered freedoms unknown to Englishwomen and seems to have stamped Wickham with a robust sense of sexual entitlement, a view of social inequity, and an authentic personal voice, all of which set her apart from other women poets of that period. For all the exhilaration of her Australian exile, however, the return to England and her sensitivity to inequities of class heightened her sense of herself as an outsider. The social rivalry between her mother's and father's families finds its way into poems like "Descent of Dorelia" and "The Little Old House." And her own marriage into a family of aristocratic birth initiated her into the oppression of the female spirit in Victorian bourgeois culture. The rhyme scheme and alternating meter of the following poem sets off rather than contains the rage of "Nervous Prostration":

I married a man of the Croydon class
When I was twenty-two.
And I vex him, and he bores me
Till we don't know what to do!
It isn't good form in the Croydon class
To say you love your wife,
So I spend my days with the tradesmen's books
And pray for the end of life. . . .

I married a man of the Croydon class
When I was twenty-two.
And I vex him, and he bores me
Till we don't know what to do!
And as I sit in his ordered house,
I feel I must sob or shriek,
To force a man of the Croydon class
To live, or to love, or to speak!

(210)

There is defiance in the emphasis of the rhyme scheme and not a little irony in its metrical regularity. The poem is closer to folk balladry than to the genteel metrics of the Croydon class; we might even term it deliberately low-bred, even doggerel, a formal as well as political spoof on bourgeois values. This poem, "Dedication of the Cook," "The Angry Woman," "Definition," "The Wife," "All Men to Women," "Divorce," and "The Song of the Low-Caste Wife" criticize prevailing domestic politics, especially in their analysis of sexual difference within the culture that Wickham, marginalized by caste and country as well as gender, could see clearly as triple outsider. Wickham's formal conventionality is often the very vehicle of her poetic politics: her forced rhymes are meant to be funny and irreverent and to set off the political conflicts of which her poetry is made; they should not merely be read as unsophisticated concessions to the popular conventions of the day. "Meditation at Kew," outlining a poignant but humorous utopian program for marital reform, is the poetic version of her 1938 feminist manifesto, *The League for the Protection of the Imagination of Women. Slogan: World's Management by Entertainment* (Smith, 27).

Alas! for all the pretty women who marry dull men,
Go into the suburbs and never come out again,
Who lose their pretty faces and dim their pretty eyes,
Because no one has skill or courage to organize.

What do pretty women suffer when they marry?
They bear a boy who is like Uncle Harry,
A girl who is like Aunt Eliza, and not new,
These old dull races must breed true.

I would enclose a common in the sun,
And let the young wives out to laugh and run;
I would steal their dull clothes and go away,
And leave the pretty naked things to play.

(45)

Wickham's poems range from feminist pieces on marital relations and on the conflict between mothering and writing, to analyses of the domination of one class by another as in "Laura Grey," "Comments of Kate the Cook," "The Butler and the Gentleman," "Daughter of the Horse-Leech," and "Woman to a Philosopher." "Song of the Low-Caste Wife," unlike "Meditation at Kew," is rhythmically uneven and unrhymed, but it is no less than revolutionary in its analysis of the healthful dilution of the bloodline, its dramatization of the rift between herself and the women of her husband's family and class, its claim for "new myths" on the brains of "new men" mothered by underclass women, its valorization of lust and energy, change and growth, over "old glories" and "dead beauty."

What have you given me for my strong sons?
O scion of kings!
In new veins the blood of old kings runs cold.
Your people thinking of old victories, lose the lust of
conquest,
Your men guard what they have,
Your women nurse their silver pots,
Dead beauty mocks hot blood!
What shall these women conceive of their chill loves
But still more pots?

But I have conceived of you new men;
Boys brave from the breast,
Running and striving like no children of your house
And with their brave new brains
Making new myths.

My people were without while yours were kings,
They sang the song of exile in low places
And in the stress of growth knew pain.
The unprepared world pressed hard upon them,
Women bent beneath burdens, while cold struck babes,
But they arose strong from the fight,
Hungry from their oppression.

And I am full of lust,
Which is not stayed with your old glories.
Give me for all old things that greatest glory.
A little growth.

(165)

"The Angry Wife" is similarly unremarkable in its formal aspects but trenchant in its analysis of motherhood as both