The American Sonnet Community in the Early 1920s: The Alternative Evolution

In 1918, Alice Corbin Henderson, assistant editor of Poetry magazine, declared, "Nowadays everyone is writing imagist vers libre, or what the writers conceive as such. . . . Free verse is now accepted in good society, where rhymed verse is considered a little shabby and old-fashioned" (qtd. in Curdy). Certainly, the second decade of the twentieth century was a time of poetic revolution, of extraordinary innovation in voice and in form, especially in the work of Gertrude Stein, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and Wallace Stevens. The revolution continued in the early 1920s: the year 1922, for instance, saw the publication of Eliot's The Waste Land, followed in 1923 by Williams's Spring and All and Stevens's Harmonium—works very different, even opposed, in their implicit view of the function of poetry and the role of form in poetry but alike in their rejection of much traditional poetic practice. They were radically new.

Pound and Williams, especially, assailed formalist poetry, associating it with the poetic language of the past they rejected. They saw the very act of writing in meter as a sign of allegiance to the poetic expression of the previous century. Timothy Steele concludes, "the modernists' attack on Victorian idiom led to an attack on meter and to the suggestion that metrical composition was outmoded in the same manner that Victorian style was outmoded" (34). The sonnet, that most conventional of poetic forms, was predictably disdained, as Williams famously declared, "I say we are through with the iambic pentameter as presently conceived, at least for dramatic verse: through with the measured quatrains, the staid concatenations of sound in the usual stanza, the sonnet" (qtd. in Steele 242).

However, the modernists' revolutionary poetic practice and polemics, unquestionably influential though they were, failed to vanquish the sonnet. On the contrary, early 1920s America saw a flourishing of the sonnet. What has been said about Romantic-period sonnets applies with slight modification to the sonnets of the early 1920s: "At the height of the sonnet's popularity it seemed that nearly everyone wrote them—women and men, the rich and the poor, rural and urban poets, established professional writers and those struggling to make a name for themselves" (Robinson and Feldman 3). Besides the social categories listed here, the early 1920s would add African Americans, women expressing homoerotic longing, and writers committed to disrupting or altering the sonnet form, among others. Popular magazines and newspapers frequently published sonnets in the early 1920s, including Scribner's Magazine, Century Magazine, The New Republic, The New York Evening Post, and New York Sun. Little magazines devoted to poetry continued to publish sonnets in the period. In 1922, for example, despite its assistant editor's observation, Poetry published some twenty-three sonnets by twelve authors, at least one sonnet in ten of its twelve monthly issues. The number of sonnets and authors increased in 1923, including thirty-one sonnets by seven authors in the September issue alone. The Fugitive, during its four-year existence from 1922-25, published sonnets in every issue, over seventy sonnets in all by some twenty authors. Lewis Sterner, in His Sonnet in American Literature, includes seventy living sonneteers deemed worthy of mention at the time of the publication of his thesis in 1930.

As the modernists proclaimed a revolution in poetry, the American sonneteers of the early 1920s pursued an alternative evolution of poetry, openly declaring by their use of the form a relationship among themselves and with previous sonneteers. They were part of a sonnet community not, of course, because they all lived in proximity or knew each other, though in fact they knew each other's work through publication, especially in Poetry, and several were friends. Nor were they all exclusively sonneteers: they participated in other communities as well. Nor were they a community in the sense that they had similar voices or perspectives: the striking feature of the sonnet in this period is the variety of voices it contained. They were a community in that they confidently used the sonnet form as a "single consistent method" to use a phrase fruitfully applied to Renaissance sonnets by R. L. Kesler (180). These sonneteers were traditionalists in the positive sense that they believed that the method of the sonnet, a form used in English for over three centuries, still worked in the early 1920s to enable new voices and continue an evolution of poetic voice fruitfully related to sonnet traditions. Though it is true that some sonneteers of the period expressed stock sentiments in an outmoded style, many used the method of the sonnet to create original personae and perspectives enriched by their relationship to sonnet tradition. The sonnet was a familiar, sociable form that invited a broad readership to observe how a contemporary utterance resembled or diverged from the vast field of utterances in the sonnet form. In a way distinct from modernist free verse practices (and there were, of course, many varieties of free verse), the sonnet was also a way for poetry to be new.

The sonnet community of the early 1920s is of particular interest because it thrived in a time of genuine poetic revolution that included a vigorous anti-formalism. But that community nevertheless resembles previous sonnet communities, such as in 1590s England, in that the use of the sonnet form is inherently dialogic, inviting readers to see each new sonnet in relation to the language, perspectives, and formal methods of other sonnets, both of the distant past and contemporary moment. Mikhail Bakhtin rightly observes, "In a parody on the sonnet, we must first of all recognize a sonnet, recognize its form, its specific style, its manner of seeing, its manner of
selecting from and evaluating the world—the world view of the sonnet as it were” (51). However, the straightforward use of the sonnet also triggers associations with past and contemporary sonnet practice. The sonnet invites readers to observe variations in typical formal devices, such as the capping couplet of the Elizabethan form and the turn in the ninth line of the Italian form. More importantly, it invites readers to contemplate where the sonnet stands in relation to established varieties of sonnet expression, such as the hyperbolic praise of the beloved of Petrarchism, the descriptive-meditative response to nature, Wordsworthian, or the tortured or rapturous religious utterance of Donne or Hopkins. What Jacob Blevins has said of the inherent dialogism of the lyric poem applies especially to the sonnet: “No matter how ‘private’ the voice of the lyric speaker appears to be, nearly every utterance is formed from and then positioned between what others had said or will say” (16). Wordsworth conceived of the sonnet form through metaphors of containment or limitation—the “scanty plot of ground” of “Nuns Fret Not” and related images of “room” and “cells.” Similarly, in “On the Sonnet,” Keats compared the rhyming requirements of the form to being “chained,” “fettered,” or “constrained.” But the sonnet in practice is an open ludic space, a playroom unrestricted by subject matter or perspective whose play links variously—by similarity, opposition, or ironic relationship—to other sonnets.

A more comprehensive survey of the sonnet than mine would include dozens of examples from the early 1920s by Claude McKay, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Edgar Lee Masters, Elton Wylye, Arthur Davison Ficke, Louise Bogan, Robinson Jeffers, Stephen Vincent Benét, H.W. Stewart, Muna Lee, Alfred Kreymborg, and many others. In this limited survey, I only hint at the various kinds of achievement of the sonnet in this period. I explore just one sonnet each by eight American authors, in the order of their author’s fame, which is of course debatable in some cases: Robert Frost, E. E. Cummings, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Countee Cullen, Amy Lowell, Léonie Adams, Merrill Moore, and David Mccn. I analyze each sonnet to suggest how its language elicits theme, drawing attention both to salient meanings and less apparent implications. Agreeing with Keith Leonard that literary scholarship “has neglected how fully formalism is a defining component of poetic meaning” (257), I focus on how meanings are reinforced or modified by formal artifice, including meter, lineation, rhyme and other auditory devices, and certain formal conventions of English and Italian sonnets. Also, I briefly sketch—only to suggest some interesting possibilities—how the use of the sonnet form might trigger in readers associations with other sonnets, how each sonnet might be fruitfully read in relation to certain sonnets or sonnet traditions.

Robert Frost’s “On a Tree Fallen across the Road” (To hear us talk),” the single sonnet in his 1923 New Hampshire, is an English sonnet strikingly American in tone, setting, and attitude. The overt artifice of the sonnet form enables a colloquial voice, even a folksy tone (at least in the first two stan-
from reaching "our journey's end" and perplexed into "talk" as our solution. The idea of an element of nature amused by human talk, conversation capable only of frustrated planning, is humorous.

The third quatrain and couplet, logically a sestet signaled by "And yet," shifts from depiction of the specific situation in the first two quatrains to generalizations and seems to sustain a reading that human beings inevitably triumph over obstacles since even the tempest (personified as "she") "knows obstruction is in vain." An innate force "hidden in us" "will not be put of the final goal" even if we must resort to the most extreme measures. Frost seems to assert a "Promethean" vision of human beings, to use one critic's label, that we are "defined by the unbounded yearning of mind, spirit, or imagination" (Bagby 9). Yet the concluding image evokes an impossible activity, humans able to "seize earth by the pole" and "Steer straight off after something into space." Our powers are well short of permitting such actions, though we are certainly capable of imagining them. A "pole" is not only the extreme northern and southern point of the earth but also a tree stripped of its branches, and the poem wittily suggests that we inflate human actions like tossing a tree off of a road, perceiving them as god-like actions like seizing a planet or flying through outer space. The references to "our journey's end" and "the final goal" evade specifics and invite reflection on the only sure end "We have it hidden in us to attain" - death. While the poem does suggest that humans believe in and regularly proclaim their grand powers, more importantly the poem speaks to our human limitations and to our tendency to exaggerate our capabilities.

Tyler Hoffman argues convincingly that Frost's formalism was part of a deliberately communitarian impulse in opposition to the high modernism of Pound and Eliot, a desire to connect both to cultural tradition and to a broad reading public:

The contrary "compulsions" of which Frost speaks point to the politics embedded in his aesthetic, as a poet's use of fixed forms becomes a sign of his submission to the claims of culture. As Frost sees it, to take up such forms is to express a readiness to connect to an audience, to make oneself intelligible to others - the very things he accuses high modernists of refusing to do. (174)

In addition to announcing his communitarian alternative to the restricted intelligibility of modernism, Frost's use of the sonnet form in "On a Tree" also invites readers to position his voice and perspective in relation to other sonneteers. The sonnet form places Frost's darkly comic vision of the limits and illusions of human consciousness in relation to other visions of consciousness rendered in the form. The speaker's encounter with nature immediately invites dialogue with Wordsworth, but Frost's distinctive manner is all the more evident as a result. In Frost's sonnet, an element of nature mocks the human sense of power where in Wordsworth's famous sonnet "It is a beauteous evening, calm and free," "the mighty Being is awake" in the evening, the "holy time." Elevated Wordsworthian diction and confidence in the consoling power of nature contrast Frost's ironic colloquialism and his playful skepticism as to man's relationship to nature. The materialist, psychological, nontheistic perspective in Frost's sonnet also contrasts the tradition of the Christian sonnets from Donne's Holy Sonnets to Hopkins's rapturously devotional sonnets, posthumously published five years earlier. And Frost's earthly, grounded sensibility is further heightened in contrast to Yeats's "Leda and the Swan," also published in 1923, a visionary sonnet invoking ancient myth to explore the mystery of the advent of a new historical age. Frost's position in the field of the sonnet contributes to our sense of his distinctive pastoral-philosophical vision rooted in local, rural scene, his American originality heightened by relation to other sonnets.

E. E. Cummings's "when citty day with the sonorous homes," the fourth in a brief sequence of six poems titled "Sonnets: Unrealities" in his 1923 Tulips and Chimneys, suggests in its audacious experimentalism, his alignment with the modernism of the 1920s. Gillian Huang-Tiller argues that "placing Cummings's experimental sonnets in their cultural context of the high modernist twenties discloses undeniable significance - we see Cummings engaged the modernist dialogue between genre and culture in the aftermath of the 'make it new' movement" (156). Certainly, Cummings's linguistic and formal innovations exceed those of any other sonneteer of the period. Yet his innovations strike some as superficial. Jay Parini, for example, bans discussion of his work from The Columbia History of American Poetry for its "surface experimentalism that belies the highly conventional, often sentimental, romanticism of the poetry's content" (xxv). Both views bear consideration. The sonnet appears typographically as free verse, its broken and orphan lines disrupting and disguising the sonnet form, as does the frequent enjambment of lines and stanzas. It is indeed a highly experimental sonnet, and it is understandable that Tulips and Chimneys is sometimes included in the list of the landmark volumes of modernism. Yet it is also a conventional Italian sonnet in its rhyme scheme, its turning at line nine, signaled by "so even I," and its mainly pentameter lines. The enjambment of the octave and sestet is a common feature of the sonnets of Milton and of his admirer, Wordsworth. The occasion of the poem is also conventional: the speaker responds rapturously to elements of the natural world in a manner typical of the Romantic descriptive-meditative poem.

when citty day with the sonorous homes
of light swiftly sinks in the sorrowful hour,
thy counted petals O tremendous flower
on whose huge heart prospecting darkness roams
torture my spirit with the exquisite froms
and whithers of existence,
as by shores
soundless, the unspeaking watcher who adores
perceived sails whose mighty brightness dumbs
the utterance of his soul — so even i
wholly chained to a grave astonishment
feel in my being the delirious smart
of thrilled ecstasy, where sea and sky
marry —
to know the white ship of thy heart
on trailer ports of costlier commerce bent

In this sonnet, the speaker seems to apostrophize a flower in the urban dusk, the imagery of "shores" and "sails," introduced by simile. But the speaker's "thrilled ecstasy, where sea and sky / marry" makes likely Rushworth Kidder's reading that the flower is a metaphor for the sea, the "counted petals" waves (34). The flower is "tremendous," its heart "huge," like the sea's. The speaker's "grave astonishment" at nightfall is prompted by the migrating moon, "the white ship of thy heart," surely associated with "mighty brightness." The speaker's "delirious smart" in contemplating the moon at the end of "cited day" is clear. The poetic occasion, the euphoric response to the natural world at nightfall, and the sonnet form firmly link the poem to sonnets like Wordsworth's "It is a beauteous evening." The sonnet form also promotes a dialogue with Keats's famous sonnet "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," where the speaker's experience of reading Chapman's translation of Homer is compared to the experience of men discovering the Pacific Ocean. The men gazing with "a wild surmise" at the wondrous vastness of that ocean resembles markedly the "thrilled ecstasy" of Cummings gazing at the Atlantic. Remarkably, Frost's straightforward use of the sonnet form heightens his difference from Wordsworth in voice and attitude while Cummings's experimental adaptation of the sonnet finally reinforces his similarity to Wordsworth and Keats.

Cummings's experiments with form are not superficial, as Parini asserts, but productive of meaning. The orphan line "perceived sails whose mighty brightness dumbs" isolates the image of the sails, which convert in the penultimate line to "the white ship," the moon. The broken line concluding "as by shores" emphasizes the simile and the key shift of the poem from urban scene to seascape. Similarly, linguistic experiments in Cummings's sonnets are no more superficial than in Shakespeare or Hopkins. The conversion of parts of speech—noun into verb ("cited"), preposition into noun ("froms"), and adverb into noun ("whithers")—requires readers to enter a distinctive verbal universe of relevantly compounded meanings. The phrase "cited day" suggests a kind of abuse of the day by urban reality, as if the speaker resents the bustling racket of urban life, and the crypt phrase "pitted day" is likely. Where we expect "exquisite forms," we get "exquisite froms," which links with the "whithers of existence" to heighten our sense of the speaker's tortured wonder in contemplating the vastness of the sea and unfathomable movement of the moon. And "whithers" puns appropriately on "withers," suggesting the speaker's relative smallness. Cummings's formal and linguistic innovations ally him with modernist poetry, but his use of the sonnet form suggests his alliance also with the 1920s sonnet community and reinforces his allegiance to Wordworthian Romanticism—the voicing of emotional transport in response to nature.

One of forty sonnets in her 1923 volume The Harp-Wrench, Edna St. Vincent Millay's "Oh, oh, you will be sorry for that word!" wittily represents the voice of a very modern wife addressing her husband. Unlike the speakers in Frost and Cummings who respond within natural settings, Millay's speaker is a cosmopolitan commentator on marital discord. Her use of the sonnet form invites ironic comparisons to any number of sonneteers addressing beloveds. Debra Fried observes, "For a woman writing poetry in the years between the wars, the brattleness of oaths and the shaky fiction of new sexual freedom for women made the sonnet an apt form in which to scrutinize the inherited stances of men toward women and poets toward their muses" (17). The echo chamber of the sonnet by Millay's time was certainly full of male voices, but it also contained numerous well-known female voices, including the famous sonnets of Elizabeth Barrett Browning some 70 years earlier. The poem does indeed counter male sonneteers' idealizations of women, but it also counters Barrett Browning's idealization of heterosexual love.

Oh, oh, you will be sorry for that word!
Give back my book and take my kiss instead.
Was it my enemy or my friend I heard,
"What a big book for such a little head!"
Come, I will show you now my newest hat,
And you may watch me purse my mouth and prink!
Oh, I shall love you still, and all of that,
I never again shall tell you what I think.
I shall be sweet and crafty, soft and sly;
You will not catch me reading any more:
I shall be called a wife to pattern by;
And some day when you knock and push the door
Some same day, not too bright and not too stormy,
I shall be gone, and you may whistle for me.
Millay participated vigorously in the sonnet community of the 1920s,
arbitrating a distinctive woman's perspective and in so doing enlarging
what might be said and who might participate in that community.
Similarly, Countee Cullen asserted his identity as an African American
within the sonnet form, thereby expanding and revising the terms of mem-
bership in the sonnet community. Keith Leonard has fruitfully argued that
formalist practice by African American poets is a "cross-cultural move" that
simultaneously asserts racial identity and connects that identity to the dom-
inant culture:

Instead of wholeheartedly accepting mainstream literary
terms at the expense of his or her own cultural identity, the
African American traditionalist poet effectively made tra-
ditional literary culture and racial identity into extricable
aspects of one another in formalist poetic achievement.
Instead of protesting at the expense of artistry, these poets
made artistry itself into protest. (4)

Cullen's "Yet Do I Marvel," published in his first volume of poetry Color in
1925, employs the Italian sonnet form in a stately conventional manner that,
allied with his use of both Judeo-Christian and Classical myth, contributes
to the creation of a speaker fully conversant with central poetic method and
thought of the Western tradition. Its concluding couplet strikingly makes
explicit that the speaker is African American, at once pointing out the par-
adox of his social condition as being both black and gifted with poetic tal-
ent and implying his full participation in the cultural life of his historical
moment.

I doubt not God is good, well-meaning, kind,
And did He stoop to quibble could tell why
The little buried mole continues blind.
Why flesh that mirrors Him must some day die,
Make plain the reason tortured Tantalus
Is baited by the fickle fruit, declare
If merely brute caprice dooms Sisyphus
To struggle up a never-ending stair.
Inscrutable His ways are, and immune
To catechism by a mind too strewn
With petty cares to slightly understand
What awful brain compels His awful hand.
Yet do I marvel at this curious thing:
To make a poet black, and bid him sing!

The speaker presents himself as possibly pious in the opening line: "I doubt
not God is good, well-meaning, kind." But the tone of "devastating . . .
restrained cynicism" (Baker 33) begins to emerge in the image of God as too
haughty to "stoop to quibble" to explain himself to humans in the second

The threat of the opening line seems undercut by her demand, "Give back
my book and take my kiss instead." But the kiss emerges as part of a pattern
of craftiness and slyness, a conscious performance of femininity that
includes the pursing of the mouth and prinking (probably blinking eyes but
possibly walking daintily). Most interestingly, the speaker embraces an
array of negative stereotypes associated with femininity—vanity and addiction
to fashion, manipulative sexual display, deliberate deception of males—only to reveal them as a conscious strategies for avenging herself for
the slighting of her intellect. Her exclamation, "Oh, I shall love you still"
deflates as the line concludes "and all that," reducing love to mere performance
and hinting that sexual performance is part of the show. She vows not
to quit reading but only not to get caught reading, consistent with her over-
all plan to appear like Odysseus's wife Penelope, "a wife to pattern by," honesty and fidelity certainly central to that pattern. But the role-playing is
announced in the last three lines in the comic image of the husband returning
home one day in the future, whistling for her (like he might for a dog or subordinate) only to discover she has left him. The discovery in the conclud-
ing couplet is humorously reinforced in the awkwardly hypermetrical rhyme of "stormy" and "for me," a "feminine rhyme" wittily completing the
announcement of feminine performance.

The voice of the deceptive, avenging wife sharply undermines the
image of idealized women in Petrarchan tradition and ironically affirms the
variation of that tradition that presents the "mistress" as a source of anguish
for the male speaker. Millay's sonnet rejects the naturally virtuous and
unselfconsciously beautiful female addressee of Petrarchism and presents
instead a knowing female speaker in charge of appearances, a pragmatist
who recognizes the potential in human love relationships for deliberate
posing, deception, and brutal revenge. Dozens of male voices in the sonnet
could illustrate the idealized version of that love relationship, but perhaps
most interesting is the famous female adaptation of that idealizing voice
starkly shown in the concluding lines of the second of Barrett Browning's
Sonnets from the Portugese:

Men could not part us with their worldly jars,
Nor the seas change us, nor the tempests bend;
Our hands would touch for all the mountain bars:
And, heaven being rolled between us at the end,
We should but vow the faster for the stars.

Barrett Browning's Petrarchan female declares that the love between her
husband and her is unalterable by any circumstance, any interference
human, geographic, or otherworldly. The power of a man and woman truly
in love transcends all possible impediment. The echo of hyperbolic asser-
tions like this in both male and female sonneteers of the past makes Millay's
sonnet not only a representation of a cosmopolitan 1920s woman but a
response to and a subversion of those sonnet assertions.
line, making "I doubt not" ironic, not pious. The mole and humankind are examples of creations of a perverse God inclined to bury and blind even little creatures and condemn to death the most noble of his creatures, "flesh that mirrors Him." The first quatrain clearly alludes to the deity of Genesis, who created both moles and man, while the second clearly alludes to the Olympian punisher of Tantalus and Sisyphus. The shift from one god to the other is seamless: they are one and the same, Greek myth and Judeo-Christian myth illustrating the same point, the inscrutable punitive judgment of humankind by deity. The poem ignores obvious facts, that the mole lacks a consciousness that would allow it to experience suffering as it fulfills its underground nature, that Genesis is clear about why God condemned mankind to mortality, and that Tantalus and Sisyphus were punished for impiety. But these facts are not distracting since the poem is not finally about God but about the condition of the black poet, seen as mysteriously created with the ability and ambition to create poetry in a society that has historically seen black people as lacking such ability and ambition and has severely restricted their access to literacy, much less publication of poetry. The mole, mortal man, Tantalus, and Sisyphus are figures of inexplicable, even absurd suffering, emblems of the black poet.

The sonnet is deliberate in its structure, the last six lines turning from the specifics of God's creation to broad reflection on God's power so inscrutably severe. The meter is very regular, the only possible substitution a trochee, "Yet do," to begin the concluding couplet. The form contributes to the sense of the speaker as accomplished craftsman, reinforcing the authority evident in his knowledge and original application of allusions to the Bible and Greek mythology. His choice of form demonstrates his lifelong admiration of Keats, his "principle influence," says Gerald Early (118), but his most powerful literary allusion is to William Blake. God's "awful brain" and "awful hand" allude to the "immortal hand or eye" and "dread hand" of "The Tyger." And the allusion works powerfully since Cullen and Blake shared a perplexed view of God's creation, for Blake a world that includes both "the Lamb" and the lamb's predatory contrary, the "fearful symmetry" of the brightly burning tyger. Like Blake in "The Tyger," Cullen evokes a deity whose creation is not simply unfathomable but perverse.

Houston Baker recalls Dubois's notion of "double consciousness" experienced by African Americans, "the black man's sense that he is both an American and something apart" (14), a concept particularly applicable to Cullen as speaker of "Yet Do I Marvel." The speaker is not only black, not white, but also a poet, not a laborer or musician. His choice of the sonnet form highlights his sense of the paradox of his situation as he deliberately participates in a poetic community associated with the white society that has historically excluded and oppressed blacks. He employs traditional poetic practice and familiar allusions of mainstream culture to assert full humanity and invite the compassionate response of all readers, black and white, who see him doubly, as both black and a poet. He is a "black poet" but one whose form and content reinforce the view that he is at once of African descent and a full participant in American and Western culture, at once distinctive as African American poet and part of the community of 1920s sonneteers and the broader society of which they are part.

Amy Lowell's sonnet III of a sequence of six titled "Eleonora Duse" bears comparison with Cullen's sonnet in asserting marginal social identity within traditional form in order to reinforce a sense of community and common humanity. Written in 1923 (Gould 333) and published in her 1925 volume What's O'Clock, the sonnet expresses homoerotic longing, the speaker clearly stricken with anguish over love for another woman, the famous actress Eleonora Duse.

Lady, to whose enchantment I took shape
So long ago, though carven to your grace,
Bearing, like quickened wood, your sweet sad face
Cut in my flesh, yet may I not escape
My limitations: words that jibe and gape
After your loveliness and make grimace
And travesty where they should interlace
The weave of sun-spun ocean round a cape.
Pictures then must contain you, this and more,
The sigh of wind floating on ripe June hay,
The desolate pulse of snow beyond a door,
The grief of mornings seen as yesterday.
All that you are mingles as one sole cry
To point a world aright which is so much awry.

The speaker's "enchantment" with Duse is tortured, her identity painfully reformed in subordination to the beloved, "carven" and "cut." The speaker's "limitations" are "words," implying this very sonnet, which nevertheless strive to articulate her experience of near abjection. Ironically, Duse's "loveliness" is represented through an appropriate image in words -- "The weave of sun-spun ocean round a cape" -- but the speaker still declares that her words "jibe and gape," "make grimace / And travesty." The enjambed lines ("face / cut," "escape / My," "grimace / And") reflect both the passion of the speaker and her sense of the futility of her attempt to articulate her lady's "grace" and beauty, evoking speech barely contained by form. Yet the internal structure is conventionally Italian as line nine turns to an alternative method of capturing her loveliness: "Pictures then must contain you." Not only pictures but personified auditory images ("the sigh of winds," "the desolate pulse of snow") and personified emotion ("the grief of mornings") must do the work of approximating the profoundly disturbing effect of Duse on the speaker. The culminating couplet suggests Duse's god-like power "To point a world aright which is so much awry," a concluding hexameter line reinforcing the extremity of the assertion and exaltation of the beloved.
Lowell was not the first woman to be awestruck by Duse and say so in sonnets. Her friend Sara Teasdale’s first book of poetry, Sonnets to Duse and Other Poems (1907), consisted of five sonnets and three other poems all expressing fervent adoration of the actress. The use of the sonnet by both women puts them in dialogue with the origins of the form in Petrarch and his English imitators committed to sonnet sequences hyperbolically praising a beloved woman and presenting a speaker whose love is desperately frustrated. (Also, Duse spoke no English, only Italian [Gould 79], so there may be a formalist joke implied in their exclusive use of the Italian sonnet in their sequences.) Petrarchism is evident in the apostrophe to the “Lady,” in the cut flesh the speaker (Petrarchan “wounds”), and in the word “sigh,” a frequent response of Petrarchan lovers. Lowell not only articulates her immediate enchanted anguish but also includes herself in the long tradition of adoring but tormented lovers. At the same time her language and form link her to that tradition, they expand it to include homoerotic female longing, at once ironically suggesting the masculine and heterosexual one-sidedness of that tradition (though of course homoerotic yearning or homosexual affection in sonnets has a long history, including some of Shakespeare’s sonnets) and asserting the essential similarity of all suffering lovers. As in Cullen, the use of the sonnet form simultaneously asserts an historically marginalized identity and affirms that identity as fully human. Lowell’s speaker expresses emotions and experiences recognizably similar to those of many readers and to dozens of previous Petrarchan poets. Her homoerotic impulse may be seen by some as irregular but her tortured feelings are familiar, and her Petrarchism and use of the sonnet form place her within a literary community and invite compassionate understanding and a sense of shared humanity.

Leonie Adams’s “A Gull Goes Up” recalls both the Romantic tradition of responding to an element of the natural world and the Christian devotional tradition of perceiving in the natural world emblems in God’s creation significant for the perceiver. Both traditions include bird poems. One of nine sonnets in her 1925 volume Those Not Elect, the sonnet represents a speaker looking outward, transfixed by the appearance of a flying gull. Though the poem is impersonal in that it lacks the use of a first-person pronoun, the tone is rapturous, implying the speaker’s own longing.

Gulls when they fly move in a liquid arc,
Still head, and wings that bend above the breast,
Covering its glitter with a cloak of dark.
Gulls fly. So as at last toward balm and rest,
Remembering wings, the desperate leave their earth
Bear from their earth what there was ruinous-crossed,
Peace from distress, and love from nothing-worth,
Fast at the heart, its jewels of dear cost.
Gulls go up hushed to that entrancing flight.

With never a feather of all the body stirred.
So in an air less rare than longing might
The dream of flying lift a marble bird.
Desire it is that flies; then wings are freight.
That only bear the feathered heart no weight.

The sonnet is affiliated with those of Frost and Cummings in representing a speaker’s response to an element of nature and more specifically resembles Romantic poems in which the speaker responds to the sound or flight of birds—Keats’s nightingale, Shelley’s skylark, Yeats’s swans at Coole Park in 1919 and his falcon turning in a gyre in 1921. It also recalls any number of Christian poems in its seeing an object of nature, a bird’s flight in particular, as emblems of the human spiritual condition from George Herbert’s 1633 “Easter Wings” to Hopkins’s “The Windhover.” The poem is also linked to Christian poetic tradition in its sharp contrast between earthly human existence—where “the desperate” reside, “ruinous-crossed”—and spiritual movement “toward balm and rest” where “peace” and “love” thrive purely, unencumbered by earthly “distress” and “nothing-worth.” The impassioned tone, syntactic irregularity, and imagistic difficulty recall Donne’s Holy Sonnets. The syntax is complete at the end of line three so line four’s spondaic “Gulls fly” creates a run-on sentence, reiterating in plain terms the elegant description of the gull’s flight preceding. The enjambed line and quatrain, “earth / Bear” further suggest the speaker’s barely contained responsive feeling, as does the spondaic, alliterative, and assonantal “Gulls go up hushed.” The image of a “marble bird” that might be lifted by “The dream of flying” “in an air less rare than longing” strains logic in the manner of the paradoxical language of Herbert and Donne. The poem is metaphysical both in the broad sense that it contemplates mystical connections between the spiritual world and its earthly emblems and in the sense that it includes a difficult and strikingly unexpected, even incongruous poetic imagery. The hyphenated neologisms “ruinous-crossed” and “nothing-worth” again recall Hopkins, for example, the “dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon” of “The Windhover” and the “dare-gale skylark” of “The Caged Skylark,” both sonnets and bird poems rendering moments of extraordinarily intense spiritual elevation in response to God’s emblematic creatures in newly created language.

Though the poem certainly relies heavily on Christian diction and poetic tradition, its conclusion is not certainly Christian, suggesting that it may be a more general meditation on human “longing” inevitably frustrated by natural existence. The emphatic inverted word order that begins the concluding couplet—“Desire it is that flies”—in conjunction the “heart” of line 8 and “feathered heart” of the final line suggest as much erotic longing as longing for heavenly transcendence. Still, the poem’s dualistic vision of the soul and body presented through impassioned and challenging language and imagery place it clearly in the tradition of metaphysical religious med-
Merrill Moore's sonnets are magnificent. Never in this world did I expect to praise a living writer because of his sonnets, but these have been a revelation to me. For years I have been stating that the sonnet form is impossible to us, but Moore, by destroying the rigidities of the old form and rescuing the form itself intact—an achievement of far-reaching implications—has succeeded in completely altering my opinion.

Such praise seems inflated, but as a dedicated practitioner of free verse, Williams must have admired Moore's individualistic adaption of the sonnet form as well as his informally American language and subject matter that plays off that form. Moore's "Chronicle of an Acquaintance," first published in the June 1925 issue of The Fugitive, is representative as he treats the form itself casually, consistent with a breezy colloquial, prose-like, utterly unperturbing, unromantic tone. The grouping of lines into units of three, five, one, and five openly defies sonnet tradition.

I was behind him walking to a class,
He delayed to tie an untied shoe.
We spoke, and from then on acquaintance grew.

After his brother died he used to pass
The evening studying in my room with me,
At mid-night we'd go to the dog-wagon to get food
And when war came I advised him to go to sea,
He did that without the loss of blood.

Then he went to Akron to make tires.

Christmas he sent me a card and one at Easter
With notes how he was making money faster
Than I was to buy things that he admires,
Till yesterday his landlady wrote to say
That he died Thursday. This is Saturday.

The ending surprises and disturbs as the brief chronicle becomes an elegy. A subtle pathos is achieved by the abruptness of the last line, especially in relation to the preceding casually comic language that seems incompletely revised. Of course the shoe the acquaintance "delayed to tie" was "untied," but the unnecessary addition contributes to the jaunty tone and sharpens the sense of how accidentally the relationship developed. The sixth line is thirteen syllables and only awkwardly scannable as a five-stress line, but this irregularity reinforces the image of disorderly students on a late-night prowl to "get food," a funny spondee. The traditional gesture of the Italian "turn" in the ninth line signaled by "Then" does indeed signal a new direction, the beginning of the acquaintance's post-war life, but it is a witty orphan line emphasizing the very American decision to make money—wherever one must go, whatever one must do, even going "to Akron to make tires." The slant rhyme and hypermetrical ending of "Easter" and "faster" is humorous and heightens the irony of the occasion of religious holidays as moments to brag of one's growing wealth.

Williams might have appreciated a poem such as this one for its American references—"the dog-wagon," "Akron," "making money"—and for its barely respectful adherence to traditional form, its individualistic playfulness. He might also have appreciated the humanity of the poem, its focus on a character and a relationship. The poem both mildly satirizes a kind of American character and evokes sympathy for this unidentified man who served "without the loss of blood" in World War I only to die, of causes not stated, in his twenties. The difference between "Thursday" and "Saturday" can mean the difference between life and death at whatever age. The implications for the speaker and all of us are clear, but the speaker's utter lack of expression of feeling and reporter-like tone make us question to what extent the poem is elegy and to what extent social satire. The ambiguity of the poem, its deliberately talky language and local references, and its eccentric use of the sonnet form suggest that Moore was a distinctly American, antinomian participant in the sonnet community of the early 1920s.

Although Moore's books of verse are all out of print, at least literary history acknowledges his existence. The same cannot be said of David Morton, a poet now utterly unknown and never mentioned in current literary histories or companions. Yet he was a vigorous participant in America's sonnet community in the 1920s and later. Morton was widely published in little magazines, including eighteen poems in Poetry from 1920-1946 ("Poetry"), confirming the view that "Poetry did not merely publish all the canonical
The evening fields are bestowed with the human capacity to wear "their evening light" and to be "hushed," "lost in dreams"—and attractive to the moon, which is compared to "a lover." The landscape is feminized and eroticized through the comparison of the fields to beautiful women. The pluralized "musics" suggests how imperturbable they, the fields as women, are as they ignore the varieties of music the "moving worlds" make. The poem is even a bit voyeuristic, as it concludes with an image of beautiful women sleeping "through the night," doubtless in night clothes and in bed. Morton uses the Italian form in a traditional way, the octave developing the simile of the fields as women, the sestet expanding the image further by introducing the moon-lover. The spondee of "slow dusk" heightens that image, and the alliteration of "glimmer" and "ghost" aims to reinforce the subtlety of the effect of moonlight on the fields. The poem abounds in traditional poetic diction: "pale proud beauty," "evermore," "grave," "glimmer." In contrast to the elevated response to evening in Wordsworth or rapturous response in Cummings, in Morton, the response is soft sensitivity, the registering of a discrete perceptual moment in terms that suggest mildly responsive perception.

On the one hand, we may imagine Morton's readership as one that seeks comfortable and comforting sentiment and language, that sees poetry less as an evolution of voice than as a very slightly modified reiteration of conventional thought and diction, and that values the sonnet form only for its easy conveyance of familiar mood. On the other hand, given current critical interest in the poetess tradition and reconsiderations of sentimentalist poetry, allegedly "predominantly or excessively affective poetry" (Girard 46) or "sentimentism" (Finch 1) in poetry, Morton's work and the tastes of his readership might deserve some mention in literary history. If he is not a male poetess, he is at least part of the sentimentalist community as well as the sonnet community. At any rate, he would deserve mention in any comprehensive survey of the 1920s sonnet community and receives mention here to further suggest the diverse aesthetics of that community.

Cary Nelson warns against "constructing a contest between an aesthetically ambitious but elitist and apolitical modernism and a tired tradition of genteel romanticism" and rightly urges us to observe instead the multiple "alternatives," the "diversity" of American poetry in the early twentieth century (913). The American sonnet community of the early 1920s illustrates one vein of the diversity of American poetry at this time and itself consisted of highly diverse participants, many of whom committed to an alternative to modernism, an authentic evolution of poetry within the sonnet form. They formed a community connected by their faith in the sonnet as a method at once capable of enabling original voices and committed to public dialogues with the vast historical and contemporary community of sonneteers.

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Works Cited


