RICE UNIVERSITY

Reclaiming Authorship: The Modernist Aesthetics of Self-Production in Marianne Moore, Edith Sitwell, and Djuna Barnes

by

Laura K. Richardson

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

Doctor of Philosophy

APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE

Judith Roof, Director, William Shakespeare Chair in English, Professor of English

Cary Wolfe, Director, Bruce and Elizabeth Dunlevie Chair in English, Professor of English

Melissa Bailar, Associate Director of the Humanities Research Center, Professor in the Practice

Houston, Texas
May 2015
ABSTRACT

Reclaiming Authorship: The Modernist Aesthetics of Self-Production in

Marianne Moore, Edith Sitwell, and Djuna Barnes

by

Laura K. Richardson

Modernism and its twentieth-century wake witnessed the gradual decline of the very power its incipience granted to the writer: the author’s critical authority. For modernist women authors, this facet of the period proved particularly limiting. The early twentieth century opened spaces for female authorship while closing spaces for female critics, including for women’s own comprehension of their work; while female talent was acknowledged more than ever before, critics were reticent to grant hermeneutic agency to women’s authorship. Celebrations of the work of female artists are frequently qualified by skeptical sexism—that the woman writing might “stumble upon” something poignant whose craft she didn’t quite intend. This kind of rhetoric is coterminous with the rise of literary studies as a university discipline—a movement that transferred the task of criticism from the pen of the poet-scholar to that of the university professor, moving critical agency from increasingly democratic aesthetic spaces to those populated exclusively by upper-class, formally-educated white men. Female modernist writers responded to this loss of hermeneutic agency through a system of strategies that reclaim authorship—the state of being the literary origin of a piece or body of work, of asserting authority over that work’s publishing, revision, and/or interpretation. Their strategies employ a
variety of tactics to work through and against the institutions of modernism—publishing and the literary marketplace, criticism, and sex-based expectations of literary output.

Marianne Moore, Edith Sitwell, and Djuna Barnes employed methods of restoring autonomy to their voices within their corpuses, fostering a bifurcated schema of playing into and playing along with institutional structures while producing bodies of work that challenge these very establishments—the critical modernist community, the necessary reliance on male literary imprimatur, and the paradox between the growing tendency of literary scholarship to both pathologize women’s writing and dismiss the voice of the author within her work. Revision, criticism of one’s own work, and the refusal to publish are each moments of authoritative intervention in a text, and reassert the power of the female author over the structures that seek to remove it. Each chapter investigates a female modernist author’s aesthetic and biographical responses to the modernist climate and its scholastic reverberations in the regulation and divestment of the voice of women’s critical authorship.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The love and support of so many people helped make this dissertation possible. More thanks than I could ever express go to Judith Roof, whose move to Rice in my second year of graduate school was the best thing to happen for my work in modernism and women’s authorship. Judith’s mentorship and friendship encouraged me to have faith in my own abilities as a scholar, and for this I am eternally grateful. Thanks for all the parties, the chats in your office while playing with your toy collection, for going on a European vacation with me (well, we got some work done, too) and putting me and Hannah up in the swanky flat in London! You’re the best teacher I’ve ever had, and I hope that in modeling my pedagogy after your own, I can “pay forward” at least some of the goodness and inspiration you’ve contributed to my life. Thanks also to Cary Wolfe, whom it’s been a pleasure to get to know these past six years. Cary taught ENGL 600 when I was a first year, and I distinctly remember furiously writing down everything he said in class so I could go home and look up the phrases on the web to figure out what the hell he was talking about. Thank you for pushing me, inspiring my love of Jacques Derrida, working with me in the directed reading that was so influential for the course of my dissertation, for the beers and the kindness, for setting me up in your townhouse over the summer, and for introducing me to my favorite Dingo dog. Thanks as well to Melissa Bailar—here’s to mermaids and making beach movies! Thank you so much for your thoughtful advice on my chapters, for your support, and your friendship.

The climate of camaraderie among graduate students in English at Rice is one of the reasons why I decided to continue my education here. None of my work would have been possible without the love and friendship of several other graduate students. Thanks so much to
Seth Morton, who read so much of my work that he’s the secret fourth member of my committee. It’s a pleasure to be a modernist with you, Seth, and for more reasons than just your brilliance. Thank you for late night writing sessions, going to a thousand conferences with me, including me in the Reading Lab and Paleofuturism, making me delicious food, for your love, and your friendship. Alex Adkins has also been indispensable. I appreciate your candor, your humor, your biceps, and I’m looking forward to at least fifty more years as BFFs. Thanks be to Dr. AnaMaria Seglie for the hours we spent walking around the loop, summarizing our dissertations and fielding questions from each other, for the cupcakes and froyo, enduring hard times in the third year, and for always being my inspiration to work harder and smarter. Heartfelt thanks also to Joe Carson and Mark Celeste for organizing the Work in Progress event on my second chapter, which provided me with great feedback and support.

Much gratitude goes to Rice University and the support it provided me for five years. With this stipend, I was able to almost fully devote myself to my work, and I am grateful. My work also owes much to the English department’s generosity, for the conference travel funds and two summer research grants that enabled me to conduct archival work at the Marianne Moore Collection at the Rosenbach Museum and Library in Philadelphia in 2011, as well as in London and Reading archives that hold Edith Sitwell’s materials. Thank you, as well, to Rice’s Center for the Study of Women, Gender, and Sexuality, whose stipend and conference support throughout the years have been a blessing. Within CSWGS, Brian Riedel was always a welcoming and reassuring presence—a great boss when I was the Center’s E-News Editor, and a friend who always knew the right thing to say. Thank you!

For three years in a row, I presented papers on Marianne Moore and Edith Sitwell at the Louisville Conference in Literature and Culture Since 1900. I’d like to express my appreciation
to Louisville as my “conference home,” to the group of smart, fun, and friendly scholars whose comments and community inspire me anew every February, including Aaron Jaffe, Jonathan Eburne, Ann C. Hall, Craig Owens, and Ben Lee. I’d like to thank Jonathan, in particular, for his friendship and for translating a preface in French about Hernia Whittlebot for me. Additionally, Aaron has been the kindest mentor and friend over the past 4-5 years. Thanks for always being cool, for putting me up in your home, for Paleofuturism, whiskey, for writing two of my favorite books of criticism (*Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity* and *The Way Things Go*), and for introducing me to more exciting scholars than I ever thought I’d meet as a graduate student.

Lastly and most importantly, thank you to my family—my parents, Thomas Richardson, Gail Dalrymple, and Kathleen Richardson; my brother, David Richardson; my step-brothers, Scott and Peter Richter; and my grandmother, Jane Richardson. Dad, you have always been my rock. I couldn’t have done any of this without your unfailing support. We’ve experienced our fair share of hardship, but have emerged stronger, wiser, and closer. Thanks for teaching me how to nap, fish, and sing, helping me move again and again, for making me laugh with your corny jokes, for always been down for a good conversation, and for helping me through it all. I love you. Gail, we were blessed beyond measure when you joined our family. Thank you for your abiding love, your enthusiasm, and your passion for everything you set your mind to and everyone you hold dear. It is impossible not to love you for all of the things you are and all of the things you do, and it continues to be an honor to have such an amazing, accomplished, and driven woman as my mother. David, thanks for being the best, for the high-fives and thumbs-ups, the hugs, lizard catching, for sticking up for me, and always remembering to be my friend, in addition to my big brother. To Peter, thanks for checking in with me every day at 3pm, and updating me on the Spurs, Astros, and Rangers! To Gramma, thanks for giving me a lifetime of
love, support, Christmas tree pickles, wine (well, the last ten years), and puzzles—what a
pleasure it has been to grow up and get to know you as a grandmother and a friend. Lastly, I’d
like to thank my mother, Kathleen, for instilling in me a passion for literature. In some ways, the
past ten years have been my quest to complete what you started in 1981. I dedicate this project to
the memory of you, for critiquing my English papers, reading Laura Ingalls Wilder on the couch
with me, for your love, and for how much I miss you.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract                      ii

Acknowledgements              iv

Introduction                  1
   Against an Institution

Chapter 1                     30
   Back-Handed Compliments, Studied Humility
   And Poemicide: For Love of Marianne Moore

Chapter 2                     71
   Edith Sitwell’s Critical Self-Doubling

Chapter 3                     118
   Djuna Barnes: Revision and the Logic of Reproduction

Conclusion                   158
   Alternative Forms of Writing

Bibliography                  166
Introduction

Against an Institution

“I’d have to write another play to explain the play.”

—Djuna Barnes on The Antiphon

“Modernist poets are not difficult to follow, [take] “Aubade” by a modern poet—a poem which many people pretended was incapable of an explanation. Whereas it is, in reality, extremely simple and quite explainable.”

—Edith Sitwell on her own poem, “Aubade”

“There are things that are important beyond all this fiddle.”

—Marianne Moore, from “Poetry”

Modernism and its twentieth-century wake witnessed the gradual decline of the very power its incipience granted to the writer: authorial authority. For modernist women authors, this facet of the period proved particularly limiting. The early twentieth century opened spaces for female authorship while closing spaces for female critics, including for women’s comprehension of their own work. While critics were acknowledging female talent more than ever before, they were reticent to grant hermeneutic agency to women’s authorship. As Ezra Pound wrote Marianne Moore in a letter in 1919, in which he praises her poetry but questions her intellect, “How much [of your verse is] deliberate, and therefore to be taken (by me) with studious
meticulousness?" Celebrities of the work of female artists are frequently qualified by this kind of sexist skepticism—that the woman writing might “stumble upon” something poignant whose craft she didn’t quite intend. This kind of rhetoric is coterminous with the rise of the study of literature as a university discipline—a movement that transferred the task of criticism from the pen of the poet-scholar to that of the university professor, moving critical agency from increasingly democratic aesthetic spaces to those populated exclusively by upper- and middle-class, formally-educated white men.

As the turn to aesthetic self-definition, modernism and the avant-garde ushered in an outpouring of artistic innovation that was both conditioned and buttressed by artists’ ability to name their own movements and outline their own traditions. The wave of –isms and matching manifestos, the rise of little magazine culture, and newfound social freedoms for women and men signaled a host of possibilities for aesthetic invention and the distribution of art, as well as a mitigation of the strictures confining who could contribute to the aesthetic revolution. As a clarion call to this milieu, Ezra Pound’s aphorism to “make it new” mandates novelty under the auspices of ownership. To “make it new” is to create a thing distinct from historical precedent that, in the process of its composition, belongs to its maker in a manner hitherto unprecedented. To “make it new” is thus to make it one’s own, a movement unto the creative self. This promise of founding underwrites modernism and is integral to the proliferating aesthetic potential of the period. But it is an ideology propagated by the unwritten manifesto of modernism itself—a seductive assurance that discursive and/or aesthetic invention can belong to its architect.

Delivered in the imperative, “make it new” is a directive. But as soon as newness becomes a paradigm, it can no longer fulfill its function, and as soon as newness is an order from a second

---

party, the creative output of the artist no longer entirely belongs to her. This is the double motion of the modernist impulse to definition, which in its seemingly limitless aesthetic potentiality for the artist always contains within itself the revocation of this authority, evinced by the century’s unfolding doctrines of interpretation.

While the arrival of the “New Woman” signaled freedoms of dress and style, some expressions of sexuality, travel, politics, and participation in other previously masculine-centered spaces, the period wasn’t always willing to accept women’s expression as art or the female voice in the realm of critical discourse. Female modernist writers responded to this lack of hermeneutic agency through a system of comparable strategies that reclaim authorship—the state of being the “literary origin” of a piece or body of work, of asserting authority over that work’s publishing, revision, and/or interpretation. Their strategies employed a variety of tactics to work both through and against the institutions of modernism—publishing and the literary marketplace, criticism, and sex-based expectations of literary output.

Marianne Moore, Edith Sitwell, and Djuna Barnes enact strategic multiplications as authors, both through their manipulation of their texts and as figures of literary modernism. Although each strategy is distinct, they all share the same objective of restoring autonomy to their voices within their corpuses. Each woman’s method of achieving this endeavor required a bifurcated schema of playing into and playing along with institutional structures, but producing bodies of work that challenge these very establishments—the critical modernist community, the necessary reliance on male literary imprimaturs, and the paradox between the growing tendency of literary scholarship to both pathologize women’s writing and dismiss the voice of the author within her work. Revision, criticism of one’s own work, and the refusal to publish are moments

---

2 OED, 2nd edn., s.v. “origin.”
of authoritative intervention in their texts, and reassert the power of the female author over the structures that seek to remove it.

Moore, Sitwell, and Barnes share a set of conditions that particularly enable a fruitful comparison of their work and posturing as female modernist authors. All three were unmarried, childless, and supported themselves through their careers as writers (and at times with the help of female benefactors). \(^3\) Figures such as Virginia Woolf or Gertrude Stein didn’t experience the same social and material limitations as the unmarried female modernist writer, as they were largely supported by familial structures, including Leonard Woolf, Alice Toklas, and Leo Stein. Although Stein encountered small difficulties in publishing some of her works, her expatriate networks and influence were strong enough to weather these limitations. Woolf owned a publishing company and printing press, Hogarth, with her husband, and experienced fewer bars to participation in the literary marketplace than other, less well financed and situated female authors in her time. Her built-in support system enabled her to write and speak freely about the hardships facing female authors, and her ability to publish, as she acknowledges, stemmed from this support, as well as a yearly £500 inheritance from an aunt, which translates to roughly £27,150 today, or $42,800.\(^4\)

This financial support wasn’t available to most modernist female authors, however. Marianne Moore wasn’t poor all of her life, but even when she had enough funds to live

---

\(^3\) Djuna Barnes was married for about two months in 1910 (Phillip Herring, *Djuna: The Life and Work of Djuna Barnes* (New York: Viking, 1995), pp. 60-3.

comfortably, her mother, Mary Warner Moore, managed their lifestyle in the most frugal way possible, taking “an almost perverse pride in living below their means.” Moore’s years as the editor of *The Dial* were among the most profitable, but her loss of this income with the little magazine’s demise in 1929 reduced her annual salary from $2,600 to $600, or about $8,290, adjusting for inflation. Moore and her mother received small amounts throughout their lives from her brother, Warner, but these deposits were irregular, and the money Moore brought in from her writing, especially in the early years, was a welcome and necessary addition to her coffers. The feeling of poverty accompanied Moore into her old age, even though by the 1950s she was wealthy: “while Marianne had several hundred thousand dollars from prizes, gifts, and investments by the time she moved to West Ninth Street, she feared that she could not afford the increase in monthly rent from $69 to $350. She sometimes alarmed her impecunious friends by letting them believe she lived hand to mouth on the checks she received from magazines, and she sometimes accepted checks of $10 to $15 from such friends.”

Like Moore, neither Sitwell nor Barnes was financially stable. Sitwell came from an upper-class family that had lost a substantial amount of funds due to mismanagement and being conned by swindlers. She spent much of her life living off of a small income, sharing it for many years with her ailing governess, Helen Rootham. Sitwell also depended, in part, on the funds she received for her writing (her most profitable being in the genre of historical fiction) and readings. Peggy Guggenheim supported Barnes throughout the 1930s and 40s, and Emily Coleman sent her small monthly checks during this period. Because she wasn’t publishing much, Barnes’ authorial income was scant—one reason why it was vital for her to get *Nightwood* into print.

---

7 Leavell, pp. 382-3.
although the book wasn’t a commercial success. Monetary hardships were a major limiting factor for Moore, Sitwell, and Barnes. Relying, in part, on income from their writing imposed constraints on the timing of publication and pace of writing, and additionally underwrote systems of dependence on benefactors and imprimaturs.

Moore, Sitwell, and Barnes used critical work and forms of revision to push back against some of this fiscal dependence. Moore exercised her authority as a critic of other modernist texts; her editorship of *The Dial*, in addition to providing financial security, positioned her as the writer of “twenty-five article-length reviews,” which covered a breadth of iconic 1920s literature, such as T. S. Eliot’s *The Sacred Wood*, William Carlos Williams’ *Kora in Hell*, Bryher’s *Development*, H.D.’s *Hymen* and *Collected Poems*, Wallace Stevens’ *Harmonium*, and Gertrude Stein’s *The Making of Americans Being the History of a Family’s Progress*. As an editor, Moore exercised authority in her choice of which texts to review and the content and style of these pieces. She also wrote several overviews of the state of poetry, in which she wielded a similar field-defining power.

Moore is a unicorn among modernist critics, however, for more than just her unique turns of phrase and frequent use of quotation (often not from the text under review). In the seven hundred pages of *The Complete Prose*, a reader would be hard-pressed to find more than a handful of censorious statements. Poems such as “To a Steamroller” or “Critics and Connoisseurs” present a poet who was capable of censuring the critical community, but this voice is absent from the very genre to which it belongs. Indeed, Moore’s criticism is shocking in how little it contributes to an understanding of her opinions about modernist literature. Brimming

---


with quotes from the texts she reviews and other sources, these essays devote their attention to celebrations of the literature and representations of its finer qualities. Unlike Eliot, Stevens, or Pound, who frequently espoused their own theories in reviews of others’ works, Moore’s critical contributions actually represent the texts under consideration. Still, it’s unclear why Moore, so clearly capable of criticizing her peers, would refuse this outlet in her reviews. Bearing in mind, however, her reliance on the very modernist community her editorship charged her with critiquing, her recourse to censure through more indirect methods of poetics makes sense. But even Moore’s non-critical methods met with disapproval, as she recounted in 1958, defending her reluctance to express displeasure, “I have been accused of substituting appreciation for criticism, and justly, since there is nothing I dislike more than the exposé or any kind of revenge.”¹⁰ Judging by the poems of censure in her early career, this comment blends more seamlessly with her persona than her poetics, and it’s clear that Moore walked a fine line between asserting the authority of her position as a reviewer and renouncing of some aspects of that role in terms of the tones of those pieces.

Edith Sitwell’s work within and against the institution of literary criticism that arose conterminously with her career, including her “revenge criticism,” directly contrasts with Moore’s ingratiating methods. Sitwell employed a form of revision, not merely to assert her authority as a poet-critic, but also to swell her small income and reinforce positive evaluations of her own work. The curious reader who delves into Sitwell’s archive will find more than a few instances in which she repeats herself, either as paraphrase or word for word. For example, in interviews, lectures, and “Some Notes on My Own Poetry,” the introduction to her Collected Poems, she repeats almost verbatim a sentence commenting on the flaws of the poetasters of the

¹⁰ Moore, The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore, p. 504.
late nineteenth century: “At the time I began to write, a change in the direction, imagery, and rhythms in poetry had become necessary, owing to the rhythmical flaccidity, the verbal deadness, the dead and expected patterns, of some of the poetry immediately preceding us.”¹¹ This sentence finds its way into virtually every critical text by Sitwell, including even LP dust jackets for recordings of her poems in Façade, which William Walton set to music in 1923.¹² The culmination of this tactic occurs in Sitwell’s autobiography, Taken Care Of, which consists almost entirely of repeated material. Her quote about “rhythmical flaccidity” appears here again, as well as long passages from her 1934 critical text, Aspects of Modern Poetry. Reviews of Taken Care Of were ruthless. Irving Kreutz of The Kenyon Review called the autobiography “a pastiche culled from almost everything she ever wrote.”¹³ Joseph Bennett of The Hudson Review was more merciless in his comments about the book as a whole: “In this obscenely infantile book, her horrifying life is exposed in its most disgusting details; her witless crab-like mind crawls lumpishly about, coating with excrement all it touches. The loud, garish vaudeville of her poetry is turned on at full screech, and we are provided with a ‘technical’ discussion of its pretentious non-sense.”¹⁴ Even at her death, Sitwell was still inspiring an impressive amount of vitriol from the critical community, which, in addition its penchant for accusing her of nepotism, also delighted in lambasting her methods of poetic analysis. While it’s true, as she acknowledges in Taken Care Of, that Sitwell’s health was failing and a recent illness had caused an infection to spread to her hands, which made it difficult to write, reiterated material had always played a role

¹³ Irving Kreutz, review of Taken Care Of, by Sitwell, The Kenyon Review 27, 3 (Summer 1965): 523-9, 525.
in her corpus. Critics’ surprise at her autobiography’s “shortcuts” demonstrates a lack of awareness of her use of this tactic throughout her career as a writer. Repetitive material is a Sitwellian process that reinforces hermeneutic control over her oeuvre—and it works. Nearly every piece on the author quotes the “rhythmical flaccidity” line to cite Sitwell as a modernist poet interested in reviving the pulse of poetry.\(^{15}\)

In addition to crafting prose and poetry, Barnes was also a journalist; from 1913-1931 she interviewed “intriguing artists, performers, and theatrical directors of her day,” as well as literary figures such as James Joyce.\(^{16}\) By some accounts, Barnes “found Modernism through journalism,” which provided both an outlet for her writing and a fairly steady income.\(^{17}\) Writing for publications such as *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, the *New York World*, the *New York Press*, and the *New York Morning Telegraph*, Barnes “publish[ed] more than a hundred articles and interviews and twenty-five short dramas and fictions.”\(^{18}\) She was one of the first journalists to conduct “stunt journalism,” hugging gorillas and letting herself be rescued by firemen in training, all for a good story. In 1914, she volunteered to be force-fed to document the experiences of English suffragettes.\(^{19}\) For Barnes, journalism was a way to pay the bills and


\(^{16}\) Nancy Bombaci, “‘Well of Course, I Used to Be Absolutely Gorgeous Dear’: The Female Interviewer as Subject/Object in Djuna Barnes’s Journalism” *Criticism*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (Spring 2002): 161-185, 162.


\(^{19}\) Herzig, p. 256.
broadcast her talent as a writer, as well as for drawing, and within this medium, she experienced more commercial success than she would in any other for the rest of her life. Interviewing subjects afforded Barnes a particular kind of power in writing. Nancy Bombaci argues that in Barnes’ interviews, she “makes a spectacle of herself by playing the femme fatale who deliberately destabilizes the male gaze with her exaggerated and threatening performance.”

And Phillip Herring points out that Barnes frequently “put[s] words into [her subjects’] mouths, or so it seems, for few could have equaled her wit.” Citing an interview with Florenz Ziegfeld (author of theatrical revues and most famously of the Ziegfeld Follies), Herring quotes a line Barnes attributes to Ziegfeld, which is undoubtedly not his own prose: “[a vampire is] a woman who eats lightly of uncooked things; who walks out between tall avenues of spears to die, and doesn’t, and finally spends the evening in an orgy of virtuous dreams. That’s time wasted. A vampire is a good woman with a bad reputation, or rather a good woman who has had possibilities and wasted them.” These lines do sound like Nightwood’s Doctor O’Connor, but whether they are her own or Ziegfeld’s, Barnes utilized the journalistic space to exercise a boldness and freedom rarely attributed to her, expressing her style through whatever voice emerged as vector.

Moore, Sitwell, and Barnes were self-conscious of themselves as figures in a larger milieu, and their writing displays this self-awareness. More modernist women than Woolf were responding to the particularities of their positions as female authors, and not all of these positions are published lectures or treatises on “Women in Fiction,” to quote the original topic of Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own. For all the work academics have produced about Woolf’s 

---

20 Bombaci, pp. 162-3.
21 Phillip Herring, p. 91.
22 Ibid.
writings, there been so little written about other modernists’ critical responses on the position of authorship. Part of this neglect arises from the unorthodox forms of those responses, which appear in undervalued forms of writing, including published and unpublished revision and literary criticism by women. The scholastic neglect of these different forms of writing is a legacy of modernism’s own traditions. Contemporary modes of reading are tainted by a long history that denies the critical voices of female authors, reducing their work to expressions of their lives and personalities. Therefore, in order to begin to address this lacuna in scholarship on modernist women, what’s needed is an understanding of the complex history of pathologizing women’s writing, which fed into the set of methods for literary analysis that Eliot and the New Critics developed in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s. These methods materialized into a systematic denial of the authorial intent of all authors. Reading for intent as the ultimate methodology for literary analysis always limits a text, and the removal of this recourse to definitive interpretation has benefited our discipline, as well as opened up new arenas for feminist interpretation. However, the history of how critics have understood the place of personality in writing is laden with the expectation that personal expression is particular to female authors. The removal and/or critique of personal writing therefore carries a record of sexual discrimination, and the fact that disparaging personality in writing arose in tandem with the movement of literary criticism to male-dominated university spaces only reinforces this fact. Understanding the sex-based limitations that were in play during Moore, Sitwell, and Barnes’ careers is the first step toward comprehending their recourses to different modes of writing as outlets that enabled them to respond to these contexts and assert themselves within a framework designed to rebuff their voices.
As the number of women entering into the profession of writing in the early twentieth century increased, so did the number of critics turning their sights onto defining the body of literature female authors were producing—identifying feminine trends, how this kind of literature differed from the masculine tradition, and what women’s strengths and failings in this art form might be. Female authors participating in the creation of their literary tradition weighed in on two sides of this debate, arguing either that there was no such as thing as a purely female voice in literature or that women held a special, hitherto unexplored place in both the history of writing and new modern expression.

As a book reviewer for numerous popular newspapers and magazines, such as *The Times Literary Supplement* and *The Guardian*, Virginia Woolf was on the frontlines of the critical debate about women’s literature. Between 1905 and 1933, she wrote nearly 300 reviews of critical texts, fiction, and poetry for *The Times Literary Supplement* alone. In these reviews, her arguments about women’s literature vacillate between dismissing an author’s sex as a marker of difference and insisting that there are marked dissimilarities between men’s and women’s fiction. In a 1918 review of R. Brimley Johnson’s *The Women Novelists*, she maintains that “any emphasis, either of pride or of shame, laid consciously upon the sex of a writer is not only irritating but superfluous,” but later on in the article, she contends that “no one will admit that he can possibly mistake a novel written by a man for a novel written by a woman. There is the obvious and enormous difference of experience in the first place; but the essential difference lies in the fact not that men describe battles and women the birth of children, but that each sex describes itself.”

Although Woolf’s self-contradiction in the space of a few paragraphs is puzzling, one of her provocations is to question why exactly male critics seem so intent on

---

classifying women’s writing when not only is this “irritating [and] superfluous,” but “each sex describes itself.”

Woolf’s insistence that women write about women and men write about men carries two important connotations for her review’s place in this literary battle of the sexes. This point immediately follows her major censure of Johnson’s book’s argument that, as she summarizes:

[A] woman’s writing is always feminine; it cannot help being feminine; at its best it is most feminine: the only difficulty lies in defining what we mean by feminine. He shows his wisdom not only by advancing a great many suggestions, but also by accepting the fact, upsetting though it is, that women are apt to differ. Still, here are a few attempts: ‘Women are born preachers and always work for an ideal.’ ‘Woman is the moral realist, and her realism is not inspired by any idle ideal of art, but of sympathy with life.’ For all her learning, ‘George Eliot’s outlook remains thoroughly emotional and feminine.’ Women … have a greater sense of emotional purity than men, but a less alert sense of honour.²⁴

With the rising tide of female authors came a nearly equal number of male critics who weighed in on their female peers’ writing with sex-based biases based on patriarchal expectations of femininity. This is the atmosphere into which Moore, Barnes, and Sitwell entered when they first began to write in the early 1900s—new possibilities for women’s writing were immediately conditioned by these kinds of preconceptions. In her recounting of Johnson’s views of women’s literature, Woolf lets his sexism speak for itself, and then follows his arguments with her own

²⁴ Ibid.
that suggest he doesn’t have the qualifications to make these claims in the first place. As she writes in another review, “Will not the adequate critic of women be a woman?”

These sentiments echo Woolf’s humorous revelation in *A Room of One’s Own* that being male seems to be the only kind of credential one needs to write about women. At the British Museum, she finds scores of books written by men about the female sex: “Sex and its nature might well attract doctors and biologists; but what was surprising and difficult of explanation was the fact that sex—woman, that is to say—also attracts agreeable essayists, light-fingered novelists, young men who have taken the M.A. degree; men who have taken no degree; men who have no apparent qualification save that they are not women.”

Woolf’s complaints don’t arise unprovoked. As evinced by many of Johnson’s arguments, the leading critical opinion in the early twentieth century labeled women’s writing as emotional, morally pedagogical, and necessarily autobiographical. In 1904, William Leonard Courtney published a book, indicative of work in this time on modern female authors, entitled, *The Feminine Note in Fiction*, which Woolf reviewed for *The Guardian* in 1905.

Courtney identifies the central facet of novels written by women in his time as their “passion for detail,” in a manner that echoes what critics fourteen years later would cite as Moore’s work’s major flaw of “fastidiousness”:

> Such a limitation has its drawbacks, but one must accept the defects of one’s qualities. Many female writers have done their best to escape beyond the bounds

---

of illuminative detail, but very few have succeeded. But then, George Eliot’s was essentially a masculine genius, in no respect characteristically feminine. In other words, she was an artist—an ideal which the average female writer finds it very difficult to attain. The passion for detail conflicts in many ways with the general scope of a novel. The subordinate personages are apt to be too highly coloured, the inferior incidents are put, as it were, into the front place, and therefore interfere with the proper perspective of the whole.²⁸

For Courtney, most female authors, at least the ones who exhibit typical “feminine” characteristics in composition, are incapable of comprehending the larger scope of their own work, due to their meticulous “passion” for minutiae. This fault, which Courtney celebrates elsewhere as part of a marked feminine style, counters intellectual failing with emotional zeal. Zealotry is the primary barrier to women’s writing rising to the level of her male contemporaries. As Courtney explains, “It is the neutrality of the artistic mind which the female novelist seems to find it difficult to realize. A great creator like Shakespeare or Dickens has a wise impartiality towards all his puppets … If a novelist take sides, he or she is lost. Then we get a pamphlet, a didactic exercise[,] a problem novel—never a work of art. The female author is at once self-conscious and didactic.”²⁹

*The Feminine Note in Fiction* continues its line of reasoning to posit that since women are emotional creatures whose writing exhibits these same qualities, all women’s writing is autobiographical. Courtney explains, “There appears to be a certain self-consciousness in the female artist, based, no doubt, on the fact that the first form of her composition is, as a rule, a

²⁸ Courtney, pp. x-xii.
²⁹ Courtney, pp. xii-xiii.
diary.”

The central claim here is that female “self-consciousness” prohibits the handling of topics unrelated to the life of the woman writing—that her texts revolve around this central concern as a limiting factor to her potential. Unable to escape her own influence, the authoress replicates her nature in her work: “In it she puts all her recollections and her experiences, strongly tinctured with the elements of her own personality. When she lifts her eyes from the page which chronicles her own life to the big world which is going on around her, she instinctively takes her own view, and lets it colour all that she writes.”

In Courtney’s prose, the woman writing exists in a sphere that contains only herself, separate from the “big world which is going on around her” without her participation. She writes from this seclusion, and necessarily paints her prose with the colors of her skewed, sheltered viewpoint. This is a process that is “instinctive[31]” to the female author.

Women entering the scene of modernist writing encountered these kinds of beliefs about their capabilities and the sex-based expectations for the texture and scope of their work—that there was a quality of composition innate to their sex, and that to escape it, one must renounce femininity in favor of a masculine aesthetic that Courtney, headmaster of Somersetshire College in Bath, ties to the “academic.” He writes, “The academic training is a valuable lesson in reticence. Literary style … ought to have its proper and dignified restraint, its self-control, its scorn of purple patches, its innate dislike of the gushing, the sentimental, the extravagant.”

Courtney’s arguments and others like his resounded throughout the century and erected a system of anticipatory qualities for women’s writing. Female modernist authors were, like Courtney’s assessment of George Eliot, often praised for not exhibiting emotion or

---

30 Courtney, p. xiv.
31 Courtney, p. xiii.
32 Courtney, p. xxix.
sentimentality in their work, as if they’d purposefully abjured a natural impulse. As Ezra Pound wrote to Moore in 1918, “Thank God, I think you can be trusted not to pour out flood (in the manner of dear Amy [Lowell]).”

Sitwell’s review of Moore’s *Poems* praises her volume within the scope of this very rhetoric: “These poems are … more through the intellect than through the senses.”

Women’s writing found itself with the paradigm of pressure to resist autobiography and sentiment, coupled with the assumption that deviations from these qualities were in fact variations from the norm.

Written in a climate that housed feminine writing under the eaves of sentimentality, autobiography, and personality, T. S. Eliot’s declarations in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” of the importance of extracting these qualities from the writing process inevitably carries sex-based repercussions. Cultural associations of masculinity and objectivity don’t begin with Eliot’s essay, but his piece is the most influential for linking modernist ideals of textuality to impersonality. In his essay, he argues that writing “is a continual surrender of [the artist] as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.”

For Eliot, this essential quality of worthy art is “progress,” linking the “extinction of personality” to modern progressivism. The lack of the artist’s personality in her work isn’t just a defining characteristic of good work, but also of its recognition as both an individual (the “progress of an artist”) and epochal evolution. The achievement of impersonality is, as Eliot explains hyperbolically, a step on the road to perfection: “the more perfect the artist, more completely separate in him will be the man who

---

33 Pound, letter to Marianne Moore, p. 143.
suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material.”  

36 Scholars have pointed out the extent to which Eliot contradicts himself on his own tenets of impersonality in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” and elsewhere in his critical work.  

37 But while they have done so in the service of classifying the gendered dimensions of Eliot’s own work, they have yet to connect this facet of his doctrine to modernist critical trends that compartmentalize women’s writing as inescapably and effusively autobiographical. Understanding Eliot’s arguments within this context illuminates the extent to which female authorship finds itself embroiled in a set of permissives.

The fact that the theory of impersonality was situated against prevailing ideas about women’s authorship had far-reaching consequences for women’s positions both in literary modernism and its critical contingent, the codification of the study of literature as a university discipline and the inauguration of the New Criticism. The understanding of women’s writing as a space of subjectivity proved a bar to women’s participation in the fledgling field. Furthermore, the privileging of objectivity in analysis and the concurrent reliance on models of scientific methodology to instantiate literary studies as a “harder” pursuit soon left little room for the poet-scholar, drawing strong lines between the art and the discipline of writing. And as the task of criticism moved from the creative writer to the university professor, these lines were increasingly drawn between the sexes. As Woolf relates in *A Room of One’s Own*, women’s participation in university spaces was limited. As the narrator wanders the paths at “Oxbridge,” her concentration is repeatedly interrupted by Beadles and “deprecating, silvery, kindly gentlemen, 

36 Eliot, p. 104.
who regretted in a low voice … that ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a Fellow of the College or furnished with a letter of recommendation.”

Lacking the necessary credentials that may only be given to or bestowed by a male scholar, the narrator, on the basis of her sex, is turned away from merely visiting institutions of higher learning.

The rise of the New Criticism in universities across the U.S. signaled the entry of the “intentional fallacy” into the discourse of literary studies. As an offshoot of literature’s necessary “impersonality,” this tenet again displaced the role of the female author in analyses of her own work through the disavowal of authorial intent. Eliot was “the first non-academic critic who sounds like an academic critic,” and British critics I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis worked many of his methods into a series of objective tools for analysis. In turn, these two scholars influenced the school of New Criticism that dominated the American scene of literary studies after World War II. In 1946, W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley were the first to propose the intentional fallacy in their article of the same name. Asserting that “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art,” the critics sought to remove any recourse to the writer of poetry or fiction as the final word on her work. Wimsatt and Beardsley cast this movement of authority in the terms of ownership, arguing that “the poem is not the critic’s own and not the author’s (it is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or to control it). The poem belongs to the public. It is embodied in language, the peculiar possession of the public.”

Although they make the particular move to connect the rights of interpretation to the larger body of readers, and even specifically note that “the poem is not the critic’s,” their arguments in fact

38 Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, pp. 6 and 8.
40 Wimsatt and Beardsely, p. 470.
place hermeneutic agency in the critic’s possession. With the body of New Criticism breaking literary studies down to a science, if the “poem belongs to the public,” its proper interpretation belongs more fully to those members of the “public” with the education and credentials to analyze with the correct method.

René Wellek and Austin Warren’s 1949 *Theory of Literature* was also an influential text regarding the intentional fallacy. Beyond removing the author as an ultimate recourse for analysis, their book goes further to criticize a writer’s ability to interpret her work. Demonstrating the anxious concern of many New Critics to legitimate the study of literature as an objective process, Wellek and Warren disparage what they call “‘creative criticism’” as “a needless duplication or, at most, the translation of one work of art into another, usually inferior.”

Wellek and Warren target both male and female authors, but the era’s identification of women as subjective, personal writers colors these criticisms in gendered hues. Their invective is a potshot at the criticism of poet-scholars like Sitwell, whose interpretive methods are more “impressionistic” than scientific. Wellek and Warren set up a system by which the author’s intent should be questioned for its inaccuracies: “He … has obviously become simply a reader of his work and is liable to errors and misinterpretations of his own work almost as much as any other reader … ‘Intentions’ of the author are always ‘rationalizations,’ commentaries which certainly must be taken into account but also must be criticized in the light of the finished work of art.”

The renunciation of a writer’s authority, coupled with the inauguration not only of questioning but also of openly criticizing statements of intent, opened a Pandora’s Box for the

---

criticism of modernist women’s writing, especially when considered in tandem with sexist and ageist trends in literary criticism throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Housed safely within a set of professional credentials and “objective” methodologies, this movement stripped women’s voices from assessments of their own work and placed their opinions in a space of radical reproach and disbelief. This movement caused particular pains for Sitwell, Moore, and Barnes. For Sitwell, this critical milieu translated to the almost complete disregard of her critical work. With the notable exception of James D. Brophy’s 1968 *Edith Sitwell: The Symbolist Order*, scholarly work on her corpus only refers to her body of criticism in passing to shelve it or, more frequently, ridicule it in service of a humorous agenda. For Moore, ageist assumptions about her failing intellect later in her life when she revised her work for *The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore* prompted critics’ assessment of her decisions as the actions of an enfeebled authoress, “lash[ing] out against herself.”43 Anthologies with her poetry and other scholarly considerations of her work often ignore these revisions, sometimes citing earlier versions of poems without even referring to her reworking; most often these changes are mentioned in a short footnote. Scholarly work on Barnes has also ignored her habit of revising, except to categorize such revisions as symptoms of the duress in her relationships with editors and collaborators. This kind of biographical scholarship also understands her reticence to publish later in her life as a site of authorial failure, despite the enormous volume of writing and revision she produced in her old age. Refusing to accept that Barnes repudiated industry standards, including literary and editorial bureaucracy, this academic trend understands her reticence to publish as evidence of emotional instability, lack of self-confidence in her writing, and reclusive behavior—the reemergence of the authoress whose sentiment bars intellectual capacity.

---

Structuralism and post-structuralism took these attacks on the author a step further in theorists’ proclamations of the author’s demise. In his 1967 “Death of the Author,” Roland Barthes argues that “to give a text an author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing.”

In a move that evolves the New Critical intentional fallacy, Barthes maintains that writing is a space of radical potential in meaning that cannot be reduced to any final analysis, as its composition in language instantly inscribes it within an “empty process,” a “flow of empty signs, the movement of which alone is significant,” and a “performative … in which the enunciation has no other content (contains no other proposition) than the act by which it is uttered.”

In this formulation, “the author is never more than the instance writing,” and the process itself is “that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing.” Barthes’ arguments differ from the New Critics’, which he disparages, in terms of his denial of literary interpretation as anything akin to a scientific process: “literature (it would be better from now on to say writing), by refusing to assign a ‘secret,’ an ultimate meaning, to the text … liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases—reason, science, law.”

While New Criticism disregarded the intentions of the author, Barthes’ essay announces her death, which becomes a space of absence for a text. In 1969, Michel Foucault’s “What is an Author?” hypothesizes that what emerges in the space of the author’s absence is the “author

---

46 Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” pp. 145 and 142.
47 Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” p. 147.
Like Barthes, Foucault understands the point of writing as “creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears,” and maintains that the “author is the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning.” But for Foucault, this absence becomes a vacuum into which “a certain number of notions … actually seem to preserve that privilege and suppress the real meaning of his disappearance.” One of these, the “author function,” is “the result of a complex operation that constructs a certain being of reason that we call ‘author.’” While the actual being is “reduced to the singularity of his absence,” the function of the author operates as a “principle of a certain unity of writing,” signaling a classification of elements that are said to belong to a writer’s body of work, marking it as distinguishable from others’. Within this categorization, an amalgamated whole requires resolved contradictions. The author might be dead, but the author function resurrects her more strongly, as a Frankenstein, sutured together not as the authority over her work, but as a figurehead of a singular unity of design that is in fact more naturally piecemeal.

In this formulation, the author function produces a process that is irreconcilable with the opposition to intent: reading women’s literature as pathology. This methodology particularly affects women authors, especially given the twentieth century’s history of the reception of women’s writing as personal expression. Furthermore, treating women’s writing pathologically occurs more frequently with modernist female authors, as their presence on the scene of literary modernism coincided with the rise of celebrity culture. Ushering in a growing interest in author’s lives, celebrity is one modern expression of the author function in popular culture. As Jonathan

49 Foucault, pp. 102 and 118.
50 Foucault, p. 103.
51 Foucault, p. 110.
52 Foucault, pp. 102-3 and 111.
Goldman argues in *Modernism is the Literature of Celebrity*, “modernist style … serves to identify the authorial subject with the text … Modernism thus advances the idea of the author, and therefore the celebrity, as a paradigmatic subjectivity, all the while replicating the process by which one turns the self into an object. As this subjectivity is located within writing and not the body, it might be said to in fact constitute the text, which therefore emerges as a variation on the celebrity sign.”  

Academics often treat modernist women’s writing as manifestations of the author’s subjectivity—a legacy of both work like Courtney’s that insists female-authored texts are “diar[i]es” and the newfound celebrity interest in modernist writers’ lives. Considering text and life as two parts of a unified whole, much scholarship on modernist female authors reads their works biographically, seeking to reconcile aspects of their texts within conceptions of their experiences and personalities as authoresses. Pathologies of Moore’s work read her poetry through her persona, finding earnest humility and guardedness in interpretations of each poem as self-description. For Sitwell, reading biography into aesthetics has produced a body of scholarship that, considering her self-aggrandizement, refuses to take her work seriously—contributing to her disappearance from the modernist and poetic cannons. Pathologizing scholarship is also expressly interested in translating traumatic life events of authors into interpretations of their corpus. A particular problem for work on Barnes, this tendency reads her potential sexual relationship with her grandmother, Zadel Turner Barnes, her rape at age sixteen, and her early (and only) marriage at eighteen to a fifty-two-year-old male friend of her father’s into all of her texts.  

Reducing aesthetics to biographical reinterpretation, this scholarship does

---

54 See, for example, Louise A. DeSalvo, “‘To Make Her Mutton at Sixteen’: Rape, Incest, and Child Abuse in The Antiphon,” in Broe, ed., pp. 300-315.
both a disservice to Barnes and to her work, funneling her corpus through a sieve of victimization.

Biographical scholarship often manifests under the aegis of finding intent by psychologizing the relation between author and text, and the resultant “revelation” of pathologies enacts an anxious correlation to what an author may have been expressing in her work about her own life. As Barthes writes in *The Pleasure of the Text*, “As an institution, the author is dead … but in the text, in a way, I desire the author.”55 This desire is a resurrection of a figure that never existed and cannot be accurately posited through recourse to textual analysis that still relies on century-old premises of women’s writing as expressions of the self. Echoing Courtney’s approach in 1904, so many interpretations of modernist female authorship assume “a certain self-consciousness in the female artist, based, no doubt, on the fact that the first form of her composition is, as a rule, a diary,” denying the critical strategies of her authorship because they cannot be organized in the “principle of unity” that the author functioning as celebrity figure requires.

While the advent of feminist scholarship in the 1970s started recanonizing modernist literature, which continued with force for the next few decades, it also brought with it a slew of biographical analysis under the heading of feminism. Susan Koppelman Cornillon’s 1972 edited collection, *Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives*, was the first of these landmark texts, followed by other influential collections, such as Cheryl L. Brown’s *Feminist Criticism: Essays on Theory, Poetry, and Prose* (1978), Shirley Nelson Garner, Claire Kahane, and Madelon Sprengnether’s *The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation* (1985), Elaine Showalter’s *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women*,

---

Literature, and Theory (1985), and Nancy K. Miller’s The Poetics of Gender (1986). Moore, Sitwell, and Barnes are either absent from these texts or mentioned in lists of names. Instead, Woolf, Kate Chopin, Sylvia Plath, and Emily Dickinson are some of the female authors these texts most frequently analyze. As a way of demonstrating how women’s writing is informed by a set of circumstances alien to their male peers, these collections make frequent recourse to biography as a method of textual interpretation. Reading lesbian romance in Woolf’s oeuvre through the author’s relationship with Vita Sackville-West is a recurring topic, as well as posing questions about Dickinson’s sexuality through some of her poems that may express her love for a woman. While this kind of scholarship is well-intentioned in the service of documenting women’s experiences, it is unaware of its participation in a history that reduces women’s writing to autobiographical expression. Supplanting aesthetics, this methodology does to women’s writing a disservice similar to Courtney’s tome on female authors.

What happens when we read these women’s works not through the lens of modernism and its critical legacy’s refusal of female authorial agency, but against these very barriers to her assertion of her independence and intellectual abilities as an author, as well as the mechanisms of the author function that encourage interpretive pathologies? This project requires an understanding of modernist women authors’ comprehension of their roles as public figures of literary modernism, enmeshed in a set of necessary relationships to the institutions of modernism that both aided and hindered their success as authors. Moore, Sitwell, and Barnes each manipulate their “author functions” to instantiate themselves in twentieth-century literary

---

history, but ultimately were trapped by their own figurative “disappearances”/“deaths” and the perfect-stormy nexus that categorized their work, without accepting their critical and aesthetic contributions as intellectual endeavors, as instinctive expressions of the self.

Each chapter that follows investigates a female modernist author’s aesthetic and biographical responses to the modernist climate and its scholastic reverberations in the regulation and divestment of the voice of women’s critical authorship. Chapter one, “Back-Handed Compliments, Studied Humility, and Poemicide: For Love of Marianne Moore,” examines how Moore played into traditional presumptions about the female “poetess” to carve out her place in literary modernism. Moore’s persona presented a “studied humility” that endeared her to just about all of her contemporaries, and much scholarship on her work reads her poetry through this affect. However, this understanding of Moore fails to account for the large number of poems in her oeuvre that disparage the critical apparatuses of modernism—the very members of the modernist community whose adoration she mined in person. These “poems of censure” reveal a persona incommensurate with her public image as “the Mary Poppins of Poetry” or “The Good Witch of Greenwich Village.” Reading the poetic of censure into her corpus is an essential step toward understanding how Moore manipulated modernism’s critical machinery. Furthermore, integrating this affect into her revisions for 1967’s Complete Poems reveals a similar aesthetic in the assertion of her authorship over contemporary scholarly and editorial practices.

Unlike Moore, Edith Sitwell refused to play the affable, modest authoress among her literary peers. After an initial search for approval from the “proper” channels, Sitwell erected her own critical system. Developing her own style of literary analysis, she published multiple books of criticism on Renaissance, Romantic, and modern poets, brazenly bashing even elite modernist scholars, such as F. R. Leavis. Chapter two, “Edith Sitwell’s Critical Self-Doubling,”
investigates how, unsatisfied with the critical work on her own poetry, Sitwell often turns her analyses to her own work. Bypassing the need for an external critical apparatus, Sitwell’s self-criticism erects a self-aggrandizing structure that both seeks to instantiate her work in the annals of modern poetry and parodies the methodologies of modern criticism. Sitwell received no formal education, and her bold entry into the field of literary criticism is a deliberate affront to the movement of this kind of authorship from spaces of women’s participation to the male-dominated university system.

In addition to myriad versions of *Nightwood* and *The Antiphon*, 2,400 drafts and other unpublished material were recovered from Djuna Barnes’ home after her death. Chapter three, “Djuna Barnes: Revision and the Logic of Reproduction,” argues that revision was an integral part of Barnes’ process. Scholars often read Barnes’ work as emblematic of her failure to produce publishable writing from *Nightwood* on, however. Citing her reliance on such figures as Eliot, this understanding of Barnes’ corpus overplays the role of publishing in her oeuvre. But revision, not publishing, is the fundamental Barnesian activity. Through the structures of desire, genealogy, and spaces of theatrical representation, irrecuperable reproductive excess shares an aesthetic with revision in Barnes’ work, linking prose to process. Refusing to pathologize her works on these terms opens up spaces for the author’s hermeneutic agency in choosing process over product.

As the cases of Moore’s revisions, Sitwell’s impressionistic criticism, and Barnes’ writing habits reveal, scholarship is still interested in passing judgment on the perceived “failures” of modernist female authors. But the time for adjudication is over—the verdicts were already dispatched by the modernists themselves and/or the critico-literary institution that arose with them. Scholarship on these women writers must keep in mind the factors of this modernist
climate that cast female authorship in a shadow of conclusions that are based on dogged perceptions in which integral moments in women writers’ oeuvres become both sites of failure and expressions of pathology. Now, the task is to avoid rereading these women’s works through similar structures—a process by which attempts to “save” women’s authorship from the verdicts of their peers end up repeating the very prejudiced configurations this scholarship would often like to refute. What’s needed is an awareness of the context which necessitated these writers’ modes of authorship that challenge predominating understandings of successful aesthetic production. Recognizing what these women were working through and against is the first step. Recasting their alternative forms of writing as a critical aesthetic that has an intellectual life beyond the confines of pathology is the second. Scholarship can then help to restore agency to the critico-aesthetic of the female modernist author’s oeuvre by resisting the series of structures that has refused her hermeneutic capabilities for a hundred years.
Back-Handed Compliments, Studied Humility, and Poemicide: For Love of Marianne Moore

In his 1923 review of Marianne Moore’s first book of poetry, *Poems*, T. S. Eliot concludes with a final “compliment”: “Miss Moore’s poetry is as ‘feminine’ as Christina Rossetti’s, one never forgets that it is written by a woman; but with both one never thinks of this particularity as anything but a positive virtue.” Eliot never defines what he means by his scare-quoted “feminine,” but his double-negative implies that the “particularity” of female authorship has previously produced unfavorable results. Not so, however, with Marianne Moore—she is a shining beacon of “positive” femininity. As William Carlos Williams would reflect almost thirty years later, “Marianne was our saint … in whom we all instinctively felt our purpose coming together to form a stream. Everyone loved her.” Eliot’s review and Williams’ exaltation are just two examples of the modernist love of Marianne Moore, a tradition to which Ezra Pound, Yvor Winters, and Wallace Stevens, among others, would add their talents. Moore’s success in her time was largely circumscribed by the effusive praise of her peers.

For her own part, Moore encouraged the host of qualities her colleagues, and later a larger public audience, obsequiously bestowed upon her. Her delicacies of conversational phrasing and penchant for deflecting compliments with a studied diffidence situate her as a strangely constructed figure, keen to participate in early-twentieth century perceptions of non-threatening femininity. Playing into existing expectations of “positive” female roles—child, mother, spinster—she maneuvered through the early-twentieth-century gendered landscape with the ease of belonging. But Moore sticks out among the modernists for all of the reasons everyone

---

loved her; her decorum, lack of scandal, formalist poetic propriety, and careful sedateness are incongruous not only with continental avant-garde aesthetics, but also with the stateside energy and fervor of the teens and twenties. Faced with this inconsistency, modernism caricatured what it could not assimilate, so that even from her early years as a poet, Moore found herself playing the role of modernism’s “little old lady.” The history of Moore’s public image follows modernism’s translation into artifacts for pop cultural consumption, but in Moore’s case, this commodification was already happening as early as the twenties.

Moore’s caricatures foster a particularly fraught diagnostic of her work, which her peers praised with such un-modernist adjectives as “genuine” and “fastidious,” equating complex syntax with quaint affect and poems about animals with moralizing fables. The conflict here arises from the often ignored lack of connection between Moore’s public image and the poetry she writes. Mary Jacobus has identified the historical tendency of reading women’s literature autobiographically—the assumption that “women’s writing is somehow closer to their experience than men’s, that the female text is the author.”59 In relation to Moore’s work, this predisposition is especially problematic. The magical nanny conjured by Moore’s moniker, “The Mary Poppins of Poetry,” discloses an entirely different imaginary than the wry, often acerbic lines of “Marriage,” for example, or the sage sobriety of “What Are Years.” This lack of correlation between Moore’s oeuvre and her characterization widens throughout her career—especially in the fifties when mainstream magazines discovered and profiled her, exaggerating her already caricatured image, quoting excerpts from her poetry out of context to buttress her quirky celebrity.

The distinctions between Moore’s public image and poetic ethos didn’t bother anyone until the late sixties, when Moore revised “Poetry.” Moore consistently revised her verse throughout her career, often allowing simultaneous publications of poems’ variants. These revisions were sometimes small and occasionally substantial, but never more significant than her drastic editing of “Poetry” for her ironically titled Complete Poems of 1967. Moore revised “Poetry” for fifty years, but the Selected Poems five-stanza version was a standard by the publication of Complete Poems. “Poetry” was and is one of her most-cited poems. It is the piece that names her art, and as such, scholars, anthologists, and fans consider it Moore’s versified manifesto. When she reduced it to three lines, therefore,

Poetry

I, too, dislike it.

Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in it, after all, a place for the genuine.60

Critics and readers were flabbergasted, and this sentiment still reverberates in contemporary scholarship. “Poetry”’s revision does not fit either contemporaneous or many contemporary ideas of Moore’s docile and ingratiating personality, prompting critics and scholars to react much like Bonnie Costello does in her influential Marianne Moore: Imaginary Possessions: “But in 1967 [Moore] lashed out against herself again, printing only part of the first three lines of the poem in Complete Poems.”61

---

61 Costello, p. 25, emphasis added.
The drastic revision of “Poetry” is the one thing that nobody likes about Marianne Moore. Instead of offering an aesthetic self-flagellation, however, her revision deploys a statement of authorial intent as a feminist enterprise. Flying in the face of her neat public image, this textual truncation is an act of civil disobedience against the institutional codification of her affect—a codification that she encouraged for its benefit to her career, but that ultimately led to misrepresentations of her work. Moore’s act of revision is a breach that opens up a textual interpretation of her performance of “poetess.” The empty space beneath the new three-line version is a statement of the radical power of the author over her own work—an act of erasure that utilizes “genuine” archival dominion to parade the authority of the poet.

Although Moore may have thought she had the final word on “Poetry,” every anthology that includes this poem uses the five-stanza version. When even cited, sources reduce her final revision—that grand aesthetic gesture of authorial control—to an explanatory footnote. The history of post-revision “Poetry” demonstrates how Moore’s public image dominates the biographical, poetic, and editorial hermeneutics of “Marianne Moore,” including exegesis of her poetry. This image, manufactured by Moore and her contemporaries, continued by mid-century general interest magazines, and maintained by sixty years of anthologizing and scholarship, fosters a culture of disregard in relation to the “inconsistencies” of the poet’s accepted aesthetic, the largest of these being “Poetry”’s revision. Understanding how and why Moore herself would cultivate her particular public image and what effects its creation had upon her career are vital steps to complicating Mooreian hermeneutics and uncovering a complex set of aesthetics more firmly rooted in criticism and censure than the love of Moore as a figure allows.
Fastidious Fascinations

In reviews of and articles about Moore’s work, critics and scholars repeatedly converge on one particular word to describe the poet’s poetical posture: fastidious. From the Latin root fastīdium, meaning “loathing,” “fastidious” carries more negative than positive connotations. Critics and scholars use the word to refer to Moore’s attentiveness to detail, but its undertones of obsessive-compulsiveness suggest that her scrupulousness favors minutiae over more significant poetic concerns. “Fastidious” situates Moore in an odd position between the special care a poet brings to her material and an unfortunate predilection for what are ultimately irrelevancies. The word is a microcosm of the contradicting descriptors and roles that Moore enthusiasts would assign to the poet: nonthreatening, non-effusive femininity; modesty; inadvertently genius child; saintly Madonna; and quirky “Good Witch of Greenwich Village.” Like the case of the word “fastidious,” these portrayals are rooted in critics’ investment in the particularities of Moore’s character. Although they form the backbone of praise for the poet, their specific style of compliment is ultimately backhanded. These written and verbal accolades demonstrate that her peers’ “love” of Moore is founded on a series of rhetorical maneuvers that lessen or strip Moore’s responsibility for her own success and/or ability, implying that her art is accidental or at least not fully intentional.

From the incipience of Moore’s career, her peers often opportunities to review her work to advertise their own ideas about modernism. Introductions and reviews of her work frequently

---


63 OED, 2nd edn., s. v. “fastidious.”
espouse their authors’ particular brand of philosophical poetics. For example, in a 1917 review, Ezra Pound famously claims Moore for “logopoeia or poetry that is akin to nothing but language, which is a dance of the intelligence among words and ideas and modification of ideas and characters.” Winters uses his review of Observations to champion his own “analysis of the known modes of poetic construction.” And Stevens’ review of Selected Poems exists almost solely to characterize Moore’s work romantic—a style in which his own poetry, not Moore’s, is heavily invested.

Accordingly, self-aggrandizement of what Aaron Jaffe calls the “textual imprimatur”—the mark of a sanctioned producer—often replaces thoughtful analysis of Moore’s work. Jaffe examines Eliot’s iconic introduction to Moore’s Selected Poems and identifies a series of complex rhetorical maneuvers by which Eliot establishes himself as a member of the timeless literary elite, specifically through his praise of Moore. Eliot writes:

We know very little about the value of the work of our contemporaries, almost as little as we known about our own. It may have merits which exist only for contemporary sensibility; it may have concealed virtues which will only become apparent with time. How it will rank when we are all dead authors ourselves we cannot say with any precision. If one is to talk about one’s contemporaries at all, therefore, it is important to make up our minds as to what we can affirm with confidence … The last thing, certainly, that we are likely to know about them is

---

65 He writes that “the lyric may be of any one of five classes,” and then proceeds to extensively account for all of them (Yvor Winters, “Holiday and Day of Wrath,” in Gregory, ed., pp. 64-7, 64).
66 Stevens, in Gregory, ed., especially p. 115.
their “greatness” … But the genuineness of poetry is something which we have some warrant for believing that a small number, but only a small number, of contemporary readers can recognize.68

As Jaffe explains, Eliot’s self-classification as literary god both locates him as one of the “small number[] of contemporary readers” astute enough to admire Moore’s work and “count[s] himself among the dead authors who will continue to speak.”69 For Jaffe, “editing becomes a phallomorphic exteriorization of impossible literary authority, an inflated, authoritarian exaggeration supplying a model of literary working relationships that can be subsequently and readily averred as posturing.”70 Selected Poems becomes another springboard for Eliot’s reputation, and although his introduction is effusive in its praise of Moore, its status as a vehicle for self-aggrandizement overshadows any “genuine” appraisal of Selected Poems.

Eliot’s introduction ends with a self-assessment of his role as editor of Moore’s collection: “The original suggestion was that I should make a selection, from both previously published and more recent poems. But Miss Moore exercised her own rights of proscription first, so drastically, that I have been concerned to preserve rather than abate. I have therefore hardly done more than settle the order of the contents. This book contains all that Miss Moore was willing to reprint from the volume Observations … together with the poems written since that date which she is willing to publish.”71 Situating himself as preservationist of Moore’s work, Eliot addresses insecurities about his role as editor by dubbing himself the savior of Selected Poems and distancing himself from too much responsibility for the volume. Three times in this

69 Jaffe, p. 119.
70 Jaffe, p. 120.
short paragraph, he highlights Moore’s wanton willfulness: “Miss Moore exercised her own rights of proscription,” this is “all that Miss Moore was willing to reprint,” “together with the poems written since that date that she is willing to publish.” Eliot portrays himself as a literary patriarch, benevolent in his treatment of the daughter’s waywardness and “concerned” for her headstrong manner. This paragraph intimates that Moore not only does not know what is good for her, but also does not know what is good—her obstinate modesty a symptom of her poetic infancy.

Like Eliot, many of Moore’s other peers connected what they understood as Moore’s childlike quality to questions about her artistic awareness, often stripping her of poetic agency. William Carlos Williams describes Moore’s visage, “with her sidelong laugh and shake of the head,” as “quite childlike and overt,” and while he does not patently connect her naiveté to obliviousness, his use of “overt” suggests a lack of interiority—an inability to conceal, and therefore a kind of sweet, dumb simplicity.72 Hugh Kenner questions Moore’s complexity more directly; after praising Moore as one of the best American poets, Kenner finds that her work “‘deteriorates, as it were, through insufficient grasp of its own principles.’”73 And as Jaffe points out, Pound similarly questions Moore in his letter to the poetess: “*How much* [of your verse is] *deliberate, and therefore to be taken (by me) with studious meticulousness?*”74

Elizabeth Bishop, Moore’s poetic mentee, attempts to counter some of these allegations that Moore’s craft is less art than “unconscious” talent by claiming such responses merely misread Moore’s excessive humility:

---

74 Q’td in Jaffe, p. 125.
Sometimes I have thought that her individual verse forms, or “mannerisms” as they might be called, may have developed as much from a sense of modesty as from the demands of artistic expression; that actually she may be somewhat embarrassed by her own precocity and sensibilities and that her varied verse forms and rhyme schemes and syllabic logarithms are all a form of apology, are saying, “It really isn’t as easy for me as I’m afraid you may think it is.” The precocious child is often embarrassed by his own understanding and is capable of going to great lengths to act his part as a child properly; one feels that Miss Moore sometimes has to make things difficult for herself as a sort of noblesse oblige, or self-imposed taxation to keep everything “fair” in the world of poetry.  

Bishop’s defense translates the idea of inadvertent talent into an image of Moore as the self-effacing whiz kid, “embarrassed” by “his” own intelligence. Bishop’s alteration of the sex of the pronoun here functions in the service of sexist notions of precocity that deemphasize Moore’s femininity, maturity, and self-confidence. In her commentary on Moore, Bishop repeatedly undermines serious consideration of the mentor/mentee relationship they shared. Her memoir “Efforts of Affection” consists entirely of anecdotal stories of Moore at the zoo and circus, participating in funny activities with the sparkling eyes of a magical nanny. As Cristanne Miller argues, “Efforts of Affection” “highlight[s] the older poet’s otherworldliness in a way that helps to engrave an image of the poet as quaintly harmless.”  

Bishop’s poetic tribute to her mentor, “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore,” functions similarly, repeatedly asking Moore to “please come flying”:

---

76 Miller, p. 22.
Come with the pointed tow of each black shoe
trail ing a sapphire highlight,
with a black capeful of butterfly wings and bon-mots,
with heaven knows how many angels all riding
on the broad black brim of your hat,
please come flying.77

Within the poem’s almost nursery-rhyme hue, “Miss Moore” becomes the subject of bedtime stories rather than serious reading. As Miller notes, Bishop encourages readers to think affectionately of a feminine “‘beloved character’ rather than to give attentive respect to a poet or thinker of note.”78 For Miller, the endgame of Bishop’s poem “make[s] Moore nonhuman (like the musk deer), fantastic (she flies), and fragile (‘the weather’—actual and moral—must be ‘all arranged’)—not a person but a phenomenon: ‘like a daytime comet / with a long unnebulous train of words.’”79 While certainly “fantastic” and somewhat “fragile” in her requirement of opportune flying conditions, this “airborne” Moore is more superhuman than nonhuman. With the gift of flight, she travels “In a cloud of fiery pale chemicals,” emitting a blue contrail and carrying angels; she enlivens inanimate objects:

For whom the grim museums will behave
like courteous male bower-birds,

---

78 Miller, p. 22.
79 Miller, p. 23.
for whom the agreeable lions lie in wait
on the steps of the Public Library,
eager to rise and follow through the doors
up into the reading rooms.\textsuperscript{80}

“Invasion”’s soft ridicule, couched in odd tributary fashion, both infantilizes and deifies Moore. Other than Moore’s somewhat lame superpowers in the poem, “dynasties of negative constructions” and “grammar that suddenly turns and shines / like flocks of sandpipers flying,” Bishop’s poem neglects any serious consideration of her mentor’s poetic accomplishments. Furthermore, although “Invitation” solely concerns its author’s mentor, Moore has no voice in Bishop’s poem.

Homage and light derision fly together with Moore. As an “Invitation,” Bishop’s poem is a supplication to Moore, a prayer to the fairy godmother of poetry, or as Williams characterized her, “our saint” of modernism. Moore’s imposed sanctity, however, is more problematic than complimentary. Briefly citing Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s \textit{The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination}, Miller writes that despite the accolades, “idealizations of women carry connotations almost as misogynistic as open attacks because of the centuries of stereotyping in which women were respectable only insofar as they were inhumanly good, beautiful, and nonthreatening.”\textsuperscript{81} For Gilbert and Gubar, “The ideal woman that male authors dream of generating is always an angel.”\textsuperscript{82} Pace Virginia Woolf’s murder of the “angel in the house,” Gilbert and Gubar’s angel exists solely to attend to the needs

\textsuperscript{80} Bishop, p. 64.
\textsuperscript{81} Miller, p. 21.
of the household in the service of the patriarch. Devoid of agency, the angel is “wholly passive, completely void of generative power … For in the metaphysical emptiness their ‘purity’ signifies [she is], of course, self-less, with all the moral and psychological implications that word suggests.”\(^{83}\) The “angel-woman”‘s passivity reaches a maximum in the fact of her position between “this world and the next … she is herself already dead.”\(^{84}\) But unlike Jaffe’s reading of Eliot’s authoritative position as “dead author” with ultimate adjudicatory power over poetry, Moore’s position as “angel” is not empowering, but haunting—a ghostly station in which an aura of saintly benevolence replaces the vigor of individual prerogative.

In his effusive love of Moore, Williams repeatedly relegates her to such a position in his autobiography, calling her a “caryatid.” Even the OED’s definition of “caryatid,” “a female figure used as a column to support an entablature,” emphasizes its passiveness—instead of a female figure that supports, the caryatid is “used as a column.”\(^{85}\) For Williams, Moore’s passive support serves no less an edifice than modernism itself: “Marianne Moore, like a rafter holding up the superstructure of our uncompleted building, a caryatid, her red hair plaited and wound twice about the fine skull.”\(^{86}\) As a caryatid in this simile, Moore is responsible for modernism’s basic contination, but she stands forever outside of that which she upholds, maintaining a less than supplemental relationship with the very movement she sustains but cannot participate in. Noting Moore’s characteristic hairdo, Williams makes connections between Moore’s visage and figures of antiquity. This correlation elucidates Moore’s complicated relationship to the here-embodied institution of modernism: passive and yet uplifting, outside and yet emblematic, she

\(^{83}\) Gilbert and Gubar, p. 21, original emphasis.  
\(^{84}\) Gilbert and Gubar, p. 24.  
\(^{85}\) Williams, “The Caryatid,” p. 77; OED, 2\(^{nd}\) edn., s.v. “caryatid.”  
\(^{86}\) Williams, “The Caryatid,” p. 77.
legitimizes the modernist project with her historically typographic “normalcy.” She is a standing anachronism, the “tradition” to modernism’s “talent.”

In accordance with Williams’ estimation of Moore’s paradoxically vital and peripheral role in modernism, Ellen Levy identifies Moore as modernism’s “token woman,” cherished and celebrated for her allotted status as a “minor” poet, and, “uncomfortably limited,” prohibited from rising from this designated position.87 Levy’s choice of “token” is important here; encompassing such diverse definitions as the signifying mark of something, a keepsake, souvenir, or trinket, and a unit of exchange, “token” exemplifies modernism’s thorny relationship with Moore’s talent, simultaneously celebrating its importance and insisting on its secondary status. Moore’s person is the central “impurity” on which modernism functions—the affront to “modern” that allows modernism. Writing of Eve, the narrator of “Marriage” describes this position: “‘See her in this common world, ’/ the central flaw / in that first crystal-fine experiment.”88 She is the flaw, the token, the support, and the saint who watches but cannot be sullied by participation.

The modernist love of Marianne Moore, as effusive, typically well-intentioned, and generally genuine as it may have been, systematically relegated the poet to positions devoid of

---

87 Ellen Levy, Criminal Ingenuity: Moore, Cornell, Ashbery, and the Struggle Between the Arts, Modernist Literature and Culture (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Citing Blackmur’s insistence that “‘none of Moore’s poems attempt to be major poetry,’” Levy examines Moore’s critics’ “need to keep Moore in her place” (44). Levy also writes that Moore’s male peers insist on negating Moore’s female sex—a particularity (to echo Eliot’s “compliment”) that “they can forgive but not ‘forget’” (43). Quoting Blackmur’s assertion that “‘No poet … has been so chaste,’” and drawing connections between portrayals of Moore and Eliot’s wrinkly-breasted Tiresias, Levy argues that Moore’s male contemporaries conceive of Moore’s femininity as not specifically feminine, but “‘the opposite sex’”—“uncannily sexless” (46 and 45). Blackmur is not the only early critic to claim Moore’s poetry is sexless. Jarrell also writes of Moore’s work, “We are uncomfortable or else too comfortable—in a world in which feeling, affections, charity are so entirely divorced from sexuality and power, the bonds of the flesh” (q’d in Jane Heuving, Omissions are Not Accidents: Gender in the Art of Marianne Moore [Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1992], p. 18).
agency. This circuitous adulation relies heavily on traditional notions of “positive” femininity that swallow up careful reading of the very subject such praise attempts to address: the poetry. Contemporaneous considerations of Moore’s work instead become vehicles for reviewers’ own poetic philosophies and reputations and celebrations of female stereotypes. Furthermore, these characterizations rely on the fundamental mistake of equating art with artist, continuing the trend of understanding women’s writing as innately biographical. Bishop’s contribution to this economy suggests its ubiquity and attractiveness: labels are familiar, and familiarity induces the ease of contentedness. But where is Moore in all of this? How does she respond to her glorified pigeon-holing?

Moore’s Studied Humility

Shockingly, she participates. Moore fostered a mutually beneficial relationship with modernism’s cultural climate, enabling her an experience of contemporaneous and lasting success unseen by the likes of Edna St. Vincent Millay, Louise Bogan, or Mina Loy. Modernism got its “token woman,” and Moore profited. She played into the very stock feminine characteristics modernism attributed to her, creating a feedback loop of positive reinforcement. After all, an angel may be dead, but at least she has wings enough to “come flying.” Moore’s studied humility, marked by deflecting compliments, avoiding self-promotion, dismissing her role as poet, and later, assuming spinsterly eccentricity, provided Moore with an itinerant persona capable of navigating the modernist landscape as both woman and poet.89

---

89 Scholars disagree on the extent to which Moore’s modesty is affected. In her ironically titled *Illusion is More Precise Than Precision*, Darlene Williams Erickson finds Moore’s humility genuine, and, answering her own insecurities about Moore’s self-effacement, writes, “Humility is not a popular word today, particularly among some women critics … for Moore, humility was simply connected with what might be called a genuine sense of grace, a peculiar brand of honesty about her gift, which she saw as a sacred trust. She had no real doubt about her brilliance and her accomplishments” ([Tuscaloosa and London: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1992], p. 146). Joanne Feit Diehl, however, like Miller, reads Moore’s humility as a type of authority that subverts traditional power structures, akin to
In her characteristic style of speech, frequently phrased in the third person, and, like her poetry, with limited conjunctions and nary a contraction, Moore continually downplays the importance of her poetic project, often using the language of healthy curiosity to hide explanations of her talent: “One feels that what holds one’s attention might hold the attention of others,” and, “I seem to myself an interested hack rather than an author.”90 Self-effacing in her modesty, Moore deflects or refuses compliments; to Williams’ assertion of Moore’s caryatid importance to the modernist project, she later replied in a 1963 interview with Donald Hall, “I was never a rafter holding up anyone!”91 Bonnie Costello attributes Moore’s reaction here to “a strong sense of independence,” but while Moore’s exclamation does speak of a will to autonomy, that will is nevertheless couched in a heavy amount of blush.92

Moore’s studied humility also manifests in her early publication history. Her first book, Poems, was sent to publishers by H.D. and Bryher. Legend has it that the two conspired to act on behalf of Moore’s future as a poet without Moore’s knowledge. In the same interview where Moore declaims her “rafter” status, she also reflects on this first publication with conspicuous modesty: “To issue my slight product—conspicuously tentative—seemed to me premature … For the chivalry of the undertaking—issuing my verse for me in 1921, certainly in format choicer than in content—I am intensely grateful. Again, in 1925, it seemed to me not very judicious of Faber and Faber, and simultaneously of Macmillan Company, to propose a Selected Poems for me. Desultory occasional magazine publications seemed to me to be sufficient and plenty conspicuous.”93 Scholars love pointing out Moore’s lack of self-promotion, especially in the

---

the work of her poetics (Women Poets and the American Sublime [Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana Univ. Press, 1990], p. 44-57).
90 Q’td in Costello, p. 1; q’td in Miller, p. 1.
92 Costello, p. 11.
93 “The Art of Poetry,” p. 27.
early instance of Poems, and use this account to celebrate her “undermining modesty.”

However, in an unpublished dissertation, Margaret Phelan establishes that Moore and H.D. had been discussing the book since 1916, and as Charles Molesworth’s biography of Moore (published a year after Phelan’s dissertation) further explains, “[Moore’s] surprise several years later when H.D. and Bryher edited and published her first full-length books of poems couldn’t have been so total as she sometimes suggested it was, since she had already attempted book publication by herself.”

While depictions of Moore as the non-author of her success are partially true, the other half of the story involves her powers of subtle manipulation. The story of Poems is a microcosm for Moore’s lucrative “reputation,” both in terms of “repute” and “reputed.”

Equally important to Moore’s self-effacing modesty is her continuous refusal to call herself a poet—what Miller describes as “Moore’s contradictory self-positioning as both author and not-author.” Upon receiving the National Medal for Literature in 1968, Moore declared, “I’m a worker with words, that’s all.” In her interview with Hall, she insists that “What I write, as I have said before, could only be called poetry because there is no other category in which to put it,” adding, “I dislike the term ‘poetry’ for any but Chaucer’s or Shakespeare’s or Dante’s.” As a modernist whose work specifically widens the poetic genre, this assertion seems out of place, but functions within the “trope” of modesty.

---

96 Miller, p. 30.
97 Q’td in Miller, p. 31.
98 “The Art of Poetry,” p. 27.
99 For Moore’s use of modesty as a trope, see Diehl, p. 60.
While negating her own role as poet, Moore often utilizes the language of curation to describe her method, positioning herself as arranger rather than creator. In the *Complete Poems*’ notes to “Marriage,” a line of text before the citation of quotations reads, “Statements that took my fancy which I tried to arrange plausibly.” Similarly, in an interview with Grace Schulman, Moore commented that the same poem is “just an anthology of words that I didn’t want to lose, that I liked very much, and I put them together as plausibly as I could. So people daren’t derive a whole philosophy of life from that.” Miller argues that, “speak[ing] as compiler,” Moore “rejects one kind of authority in frequently apologetic or self-questioning language in order to construct an alternative kind of authority that depends precisely on lack of self-assertion [and] the foregrounding of a questioning attitude.” "Poet” was a role with more authority than Moore could claim while still maintaining an aura of innocuousness, but as “organizer,” she could be both poet and non-poet, responsible and not responsible for the creation of her art.

Moore’s studied humility took on epic proportions in her later years with a series of eccentric moves and habits that signaled the expansion of her targeted audience. Much to the embarrassment of Louise Bogan, Moore signed up for one of Bogan’s poetry workshops in 1965. Moore was seventy-six, and by this time had won “every major poetry prize offered in the United States.” As Miller records, Moore “participated unselfconsciously in the class, taking copious notes, asking questions, and discussing matters of technique and style with the other students.” Moore’s character around this time turned peculiarities into a form of modesty,

---

100 Moore, *Complete Poems*, p. 271.
102 Miller, p. 5.
103 Miller, p. 19.
104 Miller, p. 172.
wherein playing a “kooky old woman” amounts to accentuating harmlessness, converting her particular poetic intellect into a more accessible, but dismissive, eccentricity.

In 1953, *Life* magazine interviewed Moore while she visited the zoo.105 The first sentence of the article sums up the public ethos Moore promoted that, especially as an older poet, would place her personality in opposition to her poetic work, often stymying serious consideration of her art: “Marianne Moore is a 65-year-old spinster who lives in Brooklyn, wears straw hats, is interested in everything from snails to steamrollers and is, in the opinion of many literary critics, the finest living American poet.”106 Syntactically, this sentence presents a list of Moore’s qualities, culminating with her worth as a poet. The contents of the sentence, however, divide it into two distinct parts—Moore’s personality and her occupation—and instead of reading serially, the sentence bifurcates into contrasting statements that, although joined by an “and,” are separated by an implicit “but”: “[but she] is, in the opinion of many literary critics, the finest living American poet.” The article focuses on Moore’s status as an animal poet, emphasizing her love of the zoo creatures (as well as “neighborhood dogs and cats” that she “stops on the street to pat”) and reducing decades of poetry to short two- or three-line excerpts from poems describing various animals—elephants, swans, monkeys, and zebras—next to pictures of Moore feeding them. No one expects a series of serious interpretations of Moore’s work in *Life*, but the sheer ridiculousness of her portrayal points toward the popularization of her poetry and the increasing celebrity of her caricature. If her participation in early-twentieth-century conceptions of “positive” femininity were partially responsible for her modernist success, her performance of “spinster” as she grew older opened her book sales to a wider demographic.

Moore’s style of dress in these later years also formed part of the basis for her public success and recognition. As Costello explains, “In the late Forties Marianne Moore walked into a milliner’s shop and asked to be fitted as Washington Crossing the Delaware.” From this date onward, Moore could often be seen wearing a tricorn hat and cape around Brooklyn. She wore this garb when she threw the first pitch at Yankee Stadium in 1968. Moore’s adoption of American Revolutionary garb, coupled with rising awareness of her love of American baseball, present a poet who loved to be loved and who valued the particular set of wings that adoration brought. Sandra Gilbert argues that Moore’s “depict[ion of] herself as paradigmatic ‘old maid’” garnered the poet “freedom … through a process of ‘female female impersonation,’” and that Moore’s Revolutionary habiliments were an effort at achieving “freedom from heterosexualized femininity”: “Moore was casting herself as the leader of a new kind of war for independence. As president of the apparently whimsical but really fantastically serious state of ostriches and nautiluses, unicorns and virgins and deer-swift women, she would lead her creatures across the Delaware into a different history. Her New World would be the old order of birds, beasts, and flowers, of alienated women and enslaved peoples, resanctified.” But although Moore’s appropriation of Washington’s hat and cape challenges gender styles, she adopted the garb more to please than to oppose. Gilbert’s envisioned “fantastically serious state” takes part in the very fantasy Moore concocted and simultaneously whimsically patronizes and sanctifies the poet, much along the lines of Eliot, Williams, Jarrell, et al.

107 Costello, p. 246.
A Critical Poetics

Moore’s persona courts the ideas of humility, eccentricity, and femininity that inform contemporaneous criticism and much subsequent scholastic consideration of her work. Her first books of poetry, however, challenge these readings, destabilizing the selfsame establishments within which her career prospered—namely the critico-literary modernist institution. Instead of demonstrating humility and deference, Moore’s early poetry is censorious, criticizing other modernist poets, their work, modernist critics, and phallocractic institutions. In Observations, poems such as “Pedantic Literalist,” “To a Steamroller,” “Critics and Connoisseurs,” “To a Strategist,” “Marriage,” “To Be Liked by You Would Be a Calamity,” “He Wrote the History Book,” “Silence,” and “Novices” are openly critical. Many of these poems direct vitriol at a particular target and/or lodge complaints against unnamed individuals. This censuring is a major component of Poems and Observations, and yet one that did not contribute to her public reception in the 20s. Much of Moore’s later work is missing this vitriolic dimension, which is likely why little scholarship focuses on this aspect of her oeuvre; however, it is also likely that the early “love” ethos that focused so heavily on the formation of her caricature created a blind spot for Moore’s poetic spleen, which in turn has become a lacuna in contemporary scholarship.

Moore’s poem “Marriage” critiques the tradition of its title, as well as the sexed roles implicit in the union of man and wife, and questions the possibility of unity in multeity through a system of unequal power distribution. The poem dismantles its titled subject, “This institution, / perhaps one should say enterprise,” by disputing the idea of unity upon which it is founded and revealing and complicating the sex inequalities that such a formation institutionalizes. Scholars agree that “Marriage” is Moore’s most feminist poem, but in this light, it is also important to realize that Moore’s version of feminism strikes at tradition and religion as the source of
inequalities rather than condemning a nebulous male antagonist. The poem begins by remarking the strange collusion of communal spheres that marriage marries: “requiring public promises / of one’s intention / to fulfill a private obligation” (BMM 115). Already, this “enterprise” mixes separate domains, and, following “one says one need not change one’s mind / about a thing one has believed in,” these lines suggest the disingenuousness of requiring the public sphere to validate the private. Legally bound vows are obligations, while privately pledged promises are principles of honor; combining the two cheapens the latter.

“I wonder what Adam and Eve / think of it by now,” “Marriage” continues, moving onto its central trope—an investigation of marriage through the figures of the first couple. If ideas of heterosexual joinder originate in the example of the first pair (who were not married), then marriage is founded on structures of inequality. Eve is marked as the initial contamination of that union: “‘See her, see her in this common world,’ / the central flaw / in that first crystal-fine experiment” (BMM 116). The poem dubs marriage an “experiment” three times (lines 44, 134, and 155), this first mention emphasizing the practice’s essential fragility. In “Marriage,” this union is bound to be a failed experiment, circumscribed by Eve’s inescapable fate, determined and determining: “that invaluable accident / exonerating Adam” (BMM 116). Traditional ideas of marriage are built on Eve’s fundamental spoil, for which she is punished—“in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee”—and Adam, although also penalized for his partner’s transgressions, escapes bodily harm (excepting, of course, the Biblical inauguration of death).109 Within this reprimanding, Adam, too, suffers particularly. The “O thou / to whom, from whom, / without whom nothing—Adam!” relinquishes his painless godlike power of origination to Eve as they exit the garden, and

109 Genesis 3:16, The King James Bible Online.
subsequent generations of men begin instead in the female body; they have not Adam’s “ease of the philosopher / unfathered by a woman” (BMM 118). While the institution of marriage has a special bearing on Eve, as a variety of bondage, this union has also mitigated Adam’s saintliness. Man and woman are individual creatures, and it is their unification under the law of God or government that initiates distress, malcontent, and power discrepancies.

Adam and Eve are alike in narcissism—beautiful individuals who cannot comprehend the other for the obstruction of the self’s seeming perfection. Eve

loves herself so much,
she cannot see herself enough—
a statuette of ivory on ivory,
the last logical touch
to an expansive splendor
earned as wages for work done.

(BMM 121)

The poem presents her as Adam’s gift, “the last logical touch” to Eden. But Adam does not want such an intrusion upon his self-adoration: “he loves himself so much, / he can permit himself / no rival in that love” (BMM 121). “Marriage” is a feminist poem, but it does not idolize Eve while denigrating Adam; both are comparably flawed. The middle of the poem erupts into a squabbling match of “he says, she says” for thirty-six lines. Eve has a distinctive voice in “Marriage,” but cannot hear Adam’s complaints anymore than he hears hers:
She says, “‘Men are monopolists
of stars, garters, buttons
and other shining baubles’—
unfit to be the guardians
of another person’s happiness.’

He says, “These mummies
must be handled carefully—
‘the crumbs from a lion’s meal,
a couple of shins and the bit of an ear’;

turn to the letter M

and you will find

that ‘a wife is a coffin.’”

(BMM 120-1)

Eve’s enframed quote is from the President Emeritus of Moore’s college, Bryn Mawr, and is a decidedly feminist address that takes issue with men rewarding men with ribbons and the like for “difficult work well done” (BMM 146). Adam’s reply, or rather, what he says when it is his turn to comment, rambles on for eight more lines—his gift of gab, what the poem calls “Alive with words,” is one of his own “central flaw[s]” (BMM 117 and 116). His patronizing Eve includes a quote from Pound—“a wife is a coffin”—or rather, a quote of Russian writer and translator John Cournos quoting Ezra Pound, quoted by Adam (BMM 146). The third degree of this citation reinforces Eve’s quote’s implication of patrilineal bequest, but oddly reverses that the order of that inheritance. Adam also quotes Amos, chapter three. The beginning of the chapter, not quoted
by Adam, but circumscribing his speech nonetheless, begins with a series of givens to demonstrate the surety of the Lord’s retribution on the wicked. Verses two and three pronounce, “I will punish you for all your iniquities. Can two walk together, except they be agreed?”

“Marriage” argues that the answer to this question is a resounding “no.” “The crumbs from a lion’s meal” will be all that is left of disobedient Israelites who do not follow religious law and are found in places they should not dwell, “Samaria in the corner of a bed, and in Damascus in a couch.” Concordantly, a wife is the proper place for a man, and the poem’s pseudosexual reference to “coffin,” recalling vaginal space and a French idiom for orgasm, “la petit mort,” reinforces the ultimate bondage of this eternal union, including Adam and Eve’s mortal sentence in their expulsion from the garden. Both characters are punished, and although Adam is given rule over Eve, she speaks as much as he does in the poem.

Eve’s presence baffles Adam in “Marriage”:

Plagued by the nightingale
in the new leaves,
with its silence—
not its silence but its silences,
he says of it:
“It clothes me with a shirt of fire.”
“He dares not clap his hands
To make it go on
lest it should fly off:

110 Amos, 3:2-3, The King James Bible Online.
111 Amos, 3:12, The King James Bible Online.
if he does nothing, it will sleep;
if he cries out, it will not understand.”

(BMM 118)

The lengthy quotation comes from Edward Thomas’ in *Feminine Influence on the Poets* (1910), and describes the nightingale (Eve) frustrating Adam with its lack of cooperation. The nightingale, longtime symbol for the poet, also calls reference to Ovid’s Philomena, whose tongue is cut out after she is raped by her sister’s husband, Tereus. In her silence, Philomena still manages to communicate Tereus’ villainy, and after achieving her revenge, is transformed into the bird. This background story, combined with *Feminine Influence*, speaks of the limitations of male power over female bodies, indicating that such abuse ultimately fails.

“Marriage” also undoes the enterprise of its title at its core foundation of unity: “this amalgamation which can never be more / than an interesting impossibility” (BMM 116). The beginning of the poem makes a lark of the idea of unification of two separate entities. Eve “stipulate[es] quiet,” saying,

“I should like to be alone;”
to which the visitor replies,
“I should like to be alone;
why not be alone together?”

(BMM 116)
Being alone with someone else is an oxymoronic expression that when scrutinized “with x-raylike inquisitive intensity” betrays a logical impossibility. This impossibility impinges upon Eve’s requested solitude, bearing the burden of company to her chosen seclusion. By the end of the poem, however, the discourse of impossible unity turns sinister, and although “Marriage” overturns gender structures of dominance throughout the text, it ends with an image that seems to solidify the lasting presence of those institutional hierarchies:

“I have encountered it
among those unpretentious
protégés of wisdom,
where seeming to parade
as the debater and the Roman,
the statesmanship
of an archaic Daniel Webster
persists to their simplicity of temper
as the essence of the matter:

‘Liberty and union
now and forever;’

the book on the writing-table;
the hand in the breast-pocket.”

(BMM 123)
The speaker of this quote, internal to the poem, is unclear, but reads syntactically as “the world.” “‘Liberty and union,’” like “alone together,” is another oxymoron that links the union of marriage to the “Union” of the United States. As a statesman of the Civil War, Webster’s presence in the poem speaks to the ineffectual attempt of the United States’ “divorce.” Rather than a founding father, he is a binding father, one hand casually tucked away, hidden and adjacent to the “breast,” and beside him lies “the book on the writing table”—a symbol of law, religion (“book” is capitalized in Complete Poems), and patriarchal power (as Adam is “Alive with words”).

Academics traditionally read the last bit of “Marriage” for its negative implications. As Taffy Martin writes, the “poem ends pessimistically by equating artificially regulated promises with closed books and empty gestures.”112 The poem’s final image is indeed disconcerting, but is tempered by the preceding lines’ mention of “unpretentious / protégés,” “seeming,” “parade,” “archaic,” and “simplicity of temper,” implying that the “essence of the matter” is its impossibility, guarded by symbols of patriarchal power. Although “the hand in the breast-pocket” may take the final position of the poem, “Marriage” does not allow that position the final implication.

In addition to poems such as “Marriage” that present a poetics irreconcilable with Moore’s deferential persona and studied humility, Observations also contains more than a few poems that pointedly address the institution of modernism via its poetico-critical industry of taste.113 “Critics and Connoisseurs” lambastes the nonchalance of critical purview, comparing...

---

113 In addition to the two discussed here, see “Bowls” and “Pedantic Literalist” (BMM 112 and 75).
this type of discernment to a “flamingo colored” “swan” that stands stoically in the stream, waiting for “bits / of food” to flow toward it:

…it reconnoitered like a battle

ship. Disbelief and conscious fastidiousness were the

staple

ingredients in its

disinclination to move. Finally its hardihood

was not proof against its

proclivity to more fully appraise such bits

of food as the stream

bore counter to it; it made away with what I gave it
to eat.

(BMM 77)

“Reconnoiter[ing],” the swan easily judges what comes toward it with a minimum of effort. The poem criticizes the ease of criticism, noting that the food the speaker sends to the creature is not eaten, but “made away with,” signaling consummation, robbery, and dismissal. After directly connecting the swan to the critic—“I have seen this swan and / I have seen you”—the next section of the “Critics and Connoisseurs” considers the qualifications of the critic in relation to “a fastidious ant carrying a stick” (BMM 77). Prefacing the ant’s actions, the poem quips, “I have seen ambition without / understanding in a variety of forms” (BMM 77). The ant carries the
stick in a vast, circuitous route, then abandons it and repeats the same march with an egg. The end of the poem queries what qualifications of position (standing in a stream) or past work (carrying a stick/egg) license the critic to a rank above the artist:

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

(BMM 78)

The poem’s three uses of “fastidious” (lines 2, 12, and 22) draw connections with Moore’s own experience of criticism, and this poem reads as though it is a response to that critique. Regardless, the poem takes serious issue with the evaluative institution on the very grounds of its aptitude and qualifying experience.

“To a Steamroller” confronts the same institution as “Critics and Connoisseurs.” As Pound quips in 1917, “Miss Moore has already prewritten her counterblast to my criticism in her poem ‘To a Steamroller.’”¹¹⁴ The poem is an invective against a callous critical apparatus that mows down artistic expression with none of the finely tuned instruments of true artistic interpretation—a giant cylinder of metal that crushes everything in its path without even the discernment of “Critics and Connoisseurs” swan. The poem protests:

The illustration

is nothing to you without the application.

You lack half wit. You crush all the particles down

into close conformity, and then walk back and forth on them.

Sparkling chips of rock

are crushed down to the level of the parent block.

Were not “impersonal judgment in aesthetic

matters, a metaphysical impossibility,” you

might fairly achieve

it.

(BMM 63)

The quoted material in the poem comes from Lawrence Gilman, referenced in the notes only by name (BMM 137). Victoria Bazin identifies Gilman as the North American Review’s music critic whose article “describes the ways in which efforts to innovate in art are always met with hostility and suspicion by those who at one time were likewise dedicated to making it new.”115 Smashing rock “down to the level of the parent block,” the steamroller permits no innovation, and instead prizes and shapes conformity. The last sentence of the poem offers up a fruitless comparison:

“As for butterflies, I can hardly conceive / of one’s attending upon you, but to question / the

115 Victoria Bazin, Marianne Moore and the Cultures of Modernity (Farnham UK: Ashgate, 2010), p. 73.
congruence of the complement is vain, if it exists” (BMM 63). This complex ending juxtaposes “butterflies,” artists or artistic inspiration, against the machine’s comparative monstrosity, disavowing “the congruence of the complement”—that the two would share even the smallest attribute—as both an impossibility and a mark of vanity. “Critics and Connoisseurs” and “To a Steam Roller” are directly antagonistic to the critical apparatus Moore courted in her public persona and corresponding commentary.

Poemicide

The lack of connection between Moore’s contemporaneous response to institutional modernism, the gender hierarchies within it, and her poetics is a vast, seemingly uncrossable gulf. Academics such as Jeanne Heuving have argued that Moore’s late work conforms more closely to the poet’s affect. There is, however, a clear instance of her earlier poetic ethos later in her biography: Moore’s 1967 radical revision of “Poetry.” Despite connections between aesthetics and history, the two are separate spheres with separate and diverse rules and interpretational tools. The discord between Moore’s life and poetry evinces this fact. But the process of revision unites these two spheres in a union almost as inharmonious as “Marriage.” Moore’s radical revision of “Poetry” combines history and aesthetics with no small amount of friction, placing archival occupation, editorial representation, and consumer preference against the authorial intent of the “Mary Poppins of Poetry.”

Examining Moore’s infamous revision of “Poetry” first requires an understanding of the relationship between poetry and storage in her work. To this effect, an early poem, “Reprobate Silver,” unpublished in Moore’s lifetime, is key:
Freighted with allusion “of the sort to which we are accustomed,"

Hand wrought slang—in the spirit of Cellini and after the manner of Thor—

Like Panshin’s hose, not permitted to be willful,

Trembling incessantly and champing the bit—

It is worthy of examination.

It is quite as much a matter of art as the careful

And a kind of Carthage by Flaubert.

It is like the castles in the air that manufacture themselves

Out of clouds before our eyes

When we are listening to a scientific explanation of things in which we are not interested.

The fact that there is no justification for its existence

And that perhaps it had to be written

About what ought never to have been written at all.\(^{116}\)

“Reprobate Silver” situates the poem as a small-scale archive, in this case a space for storing “allusion.” But in the manner of “Critics and Connoisseurs” and “To a Steamroller,” “Reprobate

\(^{116}\) Moore, *The Poems of Marianne Moore*, ed. Grace Schulman (New York: Viking, 2003), p. 43. The capitalization of every line in this poem follows Moore’s early poetic form. This poem is likely unfinished, as the last stanza forms an incomplete sentence, which is uncharacteristic of Moore’s work.
Silver” criticizes this particular method of hoarding. “Allusion” is “Freighted”—both bearing and burdened by “meaning.”¹¹⁷ Like the steamroller, this poetry is “Hand wrought slang”—carrying the idea of craft within an economy of poetic language and cipher that, like “slang,” is directed at a particular audience. But this craft is too often pounded into the homonymic doppelgänger of “wrought”—“rot.” Instead of the skillfully manipulated works of Italian artist Benvenuto Cellini, this poetry is hammered into ungainly existence. The title of the poem, like many of Moore’s references, is Biblical and derives from Jeremiah 6:30: “the bellows are burned, the lead is consumed of the fire; the founder melteth in vain: for the wicked are not plucked away. Reprobate silver shall men call them, because the LORD hath rejected them.”¹¹⁸ The Lord’s fire has not yet engulfed these men, who are instead to be condemned in name—they cannot yet be destroyed, so they must be labeled. They are silver-tongued, bad modernist poets. And as the poem contends, we are “not interested” in their kind of “Carthage by Flaubert”—the nascent modernist growing rainforests of words on the salted page. “Reprobate Silver” name-drops as much as the poems it seeks to censure; condemning the useless, boring storage of allusions, the poem-as-archive store up these fragments against the ruins.

“Reprobate Silver,” with its “castles” appearing “before our eyes,” shares a similar theme with a version of “Poetry” Moore published in the second edition of Observations (1925). In this revision, the five-stanza version of the poem is significantly reduced:

I too, dislike it:

there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle.

The bat, upside down; the elephant pushing,

¹¹⁷ Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online, s. v. “freighted,” 2b and 2c.
¹¹⁸ Jeremiah 16:30, The King James Bible Online.
a tireless wolf under a tree,
the base-ball fan, the statistician—
“business documents and schoolbooks”—
these phenomena are pleasing,
but when they have been fashioned
into that which is unknowable,
we are not entertained.
It may be said for all of us
that we do not admire what we cannot understand;
enigmas are not poetry.

(BMM 207)

Rather than ending with a celebration of “genuine” poetry as in the five-stanza version, this variant censures the “enigmas” of deliberately convoluted verse. Following the “fiddle” of poetry, a list of pleasant curios become distasteful when transferred into thorny work. Useless complexity in the matter of art is to be discouraged—poetry, the poem somewhat boringly claims, is to be understood. This poem sends an odd message from one modernist poet to her peers. “Business documents and schoolbooks” derives from the Diary of Tolstoy, Moore’s poetry notes record: “Where the boundary between prose and poetry lies, I shall never be able to understand. The question is raised in manuals of style, yet the answer to it lies beyond me. Poetry is verse: prose is not verse. Or else poetry is everything with the exception of business documents and schoolbooks” (BMM 138). Tolstoy provides this unsatisfying definition of poetry in a parenthetical sidebar, and the poem’s inclusion of the very things that are not poetry, in his
designation, in a poem called “Poetry” speaks to “Poetry”’s disagreement with his claim (not to mention the fact that Moore often quotes from sources as diverse, if not as exact, as these). Indeed, the whole poem can actually be read satirically, especially in light of the text in the *Diary* surrounding Tolstoy’s quoted material:

Lamartine says that writers neglect the composition of popular literature: that the greatest number of readers is to be found among the masses, which comprise persons hungering for enlightenment, have no literature of their own, and never will have until writers shall begin to write also for the people … (business documents and schoolbooks) … To be good, literary compositions must always be, as Gogol said of his *Farewell Tale*, “sung from my soul,” sung from the soul of the author. But how could anything likely to be accessible to the people be “sung from the soul” of authors who, for the most part, stand on a higher level of evolution? They would never be understood of the people. And even if an author were to attempt to descend to the popular level, the people would fail to understand him.119

Speaking to a populace that “dislike[s]” poetry, the speaker of “Poetry” counts herself “among the masses” that “do not admire what [they] cannot understand.” Tolstoy’s voice in the poem recalls Adam’s of “Marriage” in his frustration with the nightingale—“‘if he cries out, it will not understand,’” the greater populace in this metaphor the unreachable bird. A satirical reading of

---

this “Poetry” also suits the timbre of much of Moore’s work, specifically *Observations*, in which almost half of its poems are censorious.

The beloved five-stanza version of “Poetry” is a different poem. It carries implications of earlier and (because the thirteen-line “Poetry” above both follows and precedes the five-stanza rendering) later iterations, but unlike the thirteen-line version and “Reprobate Silver,” separates the wheat from the chaff. After a long list of non-human animal and human responses to external stimuli as reactions “we cannot understand” but that “are important,” the poem makes a “distinction”:

> when dragged into prominence by half poets,
> the result is not poetry,
> nor till the poets among us can be
> “literalists of
> the imagination”—above
> insolence and triviality and can present

for inspection, imaginary gardens with real toads in them,

shall we have

it. In the meantime, if you demand on one hand,

the raw material of poetry in

all its rawness and

that which is on the other hand

genuine, then you are interested in poetry.
The speaker changes the subjects of her address in the last stanza of the poem as surely as she changes her now qualified position of “dislike[ing]” poetry. Rescuing good poetry from the condemnation of the bad, this “Poetry” pays tribute to the poems that “have / it” and the people who can recognize this, the speaker included—not unlike Eliot’s posturing in his introduction to Selected Poems.

Scholars argue about the meaning of the last two stanzas, particularly the triadic parallel between “literalists”/”imagination,” “imaginary gardens”/”real toads,” and “raw material”/”genuine.” Costello’s reading follows (and has influenced) most accounts of these oppositions, wherein “raw material” is “language and all its various ordering devices (surprisingly aligned with the garden), and the genuine things are they are (aligned with real toads)—a Stevensian, romantic division between imagination and reality. As she notes, the poem’s syntactical opposition seemingly inverts “imaginary gardens” and “real toads,” and most scholars ignore the order of this line. Later versions with small revisions to the five-stanza “Poetry” of Observations, quote this phrase, which could account for its misalignment, but Moore frequently and freely edits other quotations in her work. Rather, the reverse orientation of this line adds a layer of complexity to an already convoluted argument—it would seem that “enigmas” are poetry. The convoluted nature of the poem’s last eleven lines distances poetry from a system of equivalences and highlights its non-definitional status. As Heuving notes, the

---

120 Costello, p. 22.
121 See “People’s Surroundings,” specifically Reverend J. W. Darr’s “escalator” citation (BMM 143). Moore never provides the source of “imaginary gardens with real toads in them,” although at the Twenty-First Century Moore Conference at the University of Houston in March 2015, Patricia Willis suggested that this reference derives from William Blake.
“poem is frequently interpreted as an attempt to realize the unrealizable,” but “this clarity and truth expressed as ‘the genuine’ … exists prior to and apart from its representation in poetry.”

As the poem that names Moore’s art, “Poetry” came to signify for readers the singular expression of Moore’s entire corpus. Critics and academics consider the poem a Mooreian Manifesto, and the word “genuine” a general descriptor that makes the semantic slip from “Poetry” to personality—an effect of the long history of understanding women’s writing as an expression divorced from “real” modernist art and relegated to the critically inferior position of autobiographical description. Eliot is in no small part responsible for this detail. As quoted in the beginning of this chapter, Eliot (strangely akin to Tolstoy’s assertions surrounding “business documents and schoolbooks”) distinguishes between “genuineness” in poetry and “greatness.” Although he does qualify this division in terms of living and dead authors, the compliment of Moore’s works’ genuineness is still couched by its opposition to greatness. Subsequent references to the “genuine” in Moore’s poetry bear the weight of this division. With this in mind, along with the poem’s fifty-seven printings (by Bonnie Honigsblum’s count) and its position as manifesto, “Poetry” becomes one of the stereotyped traits of Moore’s person—its “genuineness” reinforcing her saintliness and her “positive” femininity.

That is, until she cut it to three lines in 1967. This final and most drastic revision angered numerous contemporaneous critics and still baffles academics today. A reviewer of Complete Poems complains of Moore’s edits in this volume: “Others—most notably, the well-known poem on ‘Poetry’ itself—she reduced to a ruin. In what was probably her single greatest book—

---

122 Heuving, pp. 91 and 87.
123 Bonnie Honigsblum identifies “four basic versions” of “Poetry,” listed chronologically: the five-stanza version (printed fifty-seven times), the thirteen-line version (above, printed once), a three-stanza version (printed five times), and the three-line version (printed ten times) (“Marianne Moore’s Revisions of ‘Poetry,’” Marianne Moore: Woman and Poet, ed. Patricia C. Willis [Orono ME: The National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, 1990], pp.185-222).
Observations (1924)—Poetry’ was a poem of 13 printed lines. By the time the Collected Poems appeared in 1951, it had grown into a poem of nearly 40 printed lines … But in the misnamed Complete Poems of 1967, it had been reduced to four.”¹²⁴ Academics propose multiple reasons for Moore’s infamous revision, including Heuving’s argument of Moore’s later poetics of “overstatement.” Honigsblum’s study of “Poetry”’s four major versions concludes that Moore’s shortened version is a more accurate representation of the poet’s intentions, arguing that the five-stanza version “was restored [in 1935] not so much to please Eliot or a coterie as to sound like those she considered to be her contemporaries and her equals,” and that the three-line version “revert[s] to an Imagist technique … at worst playful and at best an insightful homage to a mellowing tradition.”¹²⁵ These citations recall Costello’s contention, quoted earlier, that Moore “lashed out against herself,” and, manifesting under the aegis of identifying Moore’s intentions, relegate the true authority of her revision to the very apparatuses against which that revision rebels.

Read in light of the censorious qualities of some of Moore’s poems and the atmosphere of modernist love that simultaneously propelled Moore to fame and solidified her person and poetry into strictures her work resists, Moore’s 1967 revision of “Poetry” is a marked effort to reassert archival aesthetics and to call attention to her authority as author. The epigram to Complete Poems says this clearly: “Omissions are not accidents”—they are intentional. Her decision to allow the beloved five-stanza “Poetry” to appear in the footnotes to the three-line version only reinforces the complete control Moore exercised over her work in Complete Poems.

¹²⁵ Honigsblum, pp. 192 and 195.
The presence of this note serves as a reminder of the poem’s history, and as such, a staunch declaration of the power of authorial intent.

But more than the presence of the longer version in the footnotes, the empty space below “Poetry” is the true call to the poet’s authority. This self-referential space occupies a liminal position between presence and absence—it calls to that which is missing, evincing a special kind of storage of the poem. “Poetry” utilizes a “less is more” ethos wherein the power of the poem lies in precisely what is not there, but was present before; the three-line “Poetry” relies on archival power. No discussion of this revision is complete without reference to its longer version, and every conversation about the shorter poem must contend with its history of revision.

Although Moore made this final revision to her supposed manifesto, editors often dismiss the shorter version, which they relegate to an explanatory footnote, as in the case of The Norton Anthology of Poetry, or don’t mention at all. When cited in scholastic work, her grand authorial gesture is typically attributed to a decline in poetic talent. Moore’s history and the interpretations of her poetry are indeterminable in their dependence on future reception and scholastic analysis. That any version of the poem is subject to dismissal owes directly to the fact of revision itself, to chronology, to publishing habits, and above all to aesthetics. For the presence of the poem’s history produces an editorial consensus of rejection, and this disregard of authorial intent can only be validated by, what is in the case of “Poetry,” an aesthetic certainty: it is difficult to argue that the three-line version is better. But this kind of preferential archival aesthetics is couched by decades of critics utilizing “Poetry” for its quotable material—citing it as evidence of Moore’s “genuineness,” and then moving on, paying as much attention to the complexities of this poem as they do to the others. It is fitting, then, that the final revision places the very existence of the poem in a spectral relation to itself. In this economy of self-reference, the poem is multiple and
diverse. Reflexively recalling its own metaphysical impossibilities of “literalists of the imagination,” “imaginary gardens with real toads in them,” and the juxtaposition of “raw material” and the “genuine,” “Poetry” exists as relation between its multiple versions. It cannot be represented. And in its lack of representational possibilities, it performs itself, undetermined by external influences. As Moore wrote to Pound’s question of her experience and publication history in 1919, “I do not appear.”

Rice University’s Fondren Library’s copy of Complete Poems carries the marks of previous readers. On the page of the three-line “Poetry,” the empty space beneath the poem is bracketed, and between these brackets is written, insightfully, “There’s more to this poem.” Puns on “more/Moore” aside, this unidentified defiler of library materials has a point. The story of Moore’s infamous revision is long and complex. It concerns a poet who, confined by an institution that sought to codify her work and person for its own purposes, felt obliged for the sake of her success to perform those roles assigned to her. The case of “Poetry” exposes that so many, particularly the early, critical investments in Moore’s work are always about an idealized relation between the text of a poem and the woman who writes it. The three-line version of “Poetry” gets to the quick of its subject, and its radical reduction in beloved quotable material signals its place as a critical shell that uncovers the symptoms of a larger issue: “There’s more to this poem.”

---

Edith Sitwell’s Critical Self-Doubling

---

Edith Sitwell was a genius of self-promotion. F. R. Leavis’ famous quip about the Sitwell trio, including her brothers Osbert and Sacheverell, belonging to the “history of publicity rather than of poetry” is thus partially true.\(^{127}\) Sitwell belongs to both of these legacies—publicity and poetry—and the former has always overshadowed her aesthetic contributions. Critics and scholars find it hard to ignore that after Sitwell received her first honorary degree, she insisted on being called “Dr. Sitwell,” or that upon receiving her fourth Doctor of Letters, her luggage tags read, “Dame Edith Sitwell … D.Litt, D.Litt, D.Litt, D.Litt.”\(^{128}\) Sitwell’s status as a poet and critic is inexorably intertwined with her greatest artistic endeavor: her public image as academic. This persona was paramount to both Sitwell’s and her work’s reception in her time. Inventing scandal, retaliating relentlessly against critics, repeatedly insisting on her own genius, and creating individual, self-referential systems of poetry and literary (often self-) criticism, Sitwell barreled through modernism as her own best champion, and in the process established herself as a principal player in her period. She did so partly by being narcissistic, self-important, pedantic, iconoclastic, and entitled.

Contrary to a long history of scholarship that considers Sitwell’s personality a major detriment to her historical and contemporary reception, this chapter understands Sitwell’s marked self-aggrandizement as a genius self-promotional strategy. To this end, criticism emerges as the most important genre she practiced, in which she displays a penchant for often unattributed self-reference (and thereby unattributed self-reverence) and self-explication. Seldom-read textual records such as *Aspects of Modern Poetry* (1934), various lectures and

interviews, and “Some Notes on My Own Poetry” provide a glimpse into Sitwell’s creation of a reflexive author function. Sitwell doubles herself in her criticism, forging an arbitrary division between Sitwell the empirical critic and Sitwell the poet-philosopher. The empirical critic functions as a stand-in for the critico-literary institution, providing an “external” imprimatur for the poet-philosopher. This doubling is structurally parodic, “double-voiced discourse”—a Janus-faced practice that sees through different sets of eyes, united in the same figurehead.\textsuperscript{129} Noël Coward’s creation of Sitwell’s parodic poet-doppelgänger, Hernia Whittlebot, interprets Sitwell’s own parodic self-doubling as part and parcel of her self-promotional genius; Coward’s/Whittlebot’s relationship to Sitwell reenacts Sitwell’s approach to her own work. More broadly, these relations are a microcosm of the historical institution of modernist literary criticism that developed conterminously with the maturation and solidification of Sitwell’s strategies of authorship. Virginia Woolf may have owned a printing press, but Sitwell had her own reproductive machinery. The duplicating engine she constructed established her credentials by self-broadcast and created an almost entirely self-referential system for verifying her intellect and importance to modernist poetry and criticism.

\textit{Wheels}

Early in her career, Sitwell distanced herself from public pressures on her work by refusing to ingratiate herself to the London reviewing conglomerate of daily and Sunday newspapers. Before \textit{Façade}’s first public performance in 1923 garnered the attention of big names in literary criticism, Sitwell’s relationship to the critico-literary institution of modernism began with this saucy London review culture and its widely varied responses to \textit{Wheels}, the

Sitwell trio’s collaborative yearly poetry anthology that published works of “up and coming” modernists from 1916-1921. Her management of Wheels’ publicity is an early example of the strategies she would later employ in service of her position as an experimental poet and critic in her own right. Earning the Sitwells the nickname “the three ‘enfants terrible,’” Wheels was mostly nepotistic in its inclusion of all three Sitwell siblings’ work every year, as well as works by close friends, including Helen Rootham, Edith’s former governess. Aldous Huxley, who contributed to all but the first issue, dubbed the collection “the well-known Society Anthology.” Wheels was generally mocked by the media for its naïve audacity (“Mr. Osbert and "Miss Edith Sitwell we can imagine as anxiously asking themselves, ‘What can we do to be original?’”) and moroseness (“Conceived in morbid eccentricity and executed in fierce factitious gloom”). By and large, reviewers took the publication only half-seriously.

But Wheels in turn took its reviewing audience only half-seriously. Under Sitwell’s editorship, the anthology distanced itself from a reliance on external sources of validation by mocking and provoking publications that assessed it negatively, printing excerpts or complete reviews of its own work in the “Press Notices” and “Some Opinions” sections at the end of every issue. Wheels pairs bad reviews with good reviews, serious evaluations with complete dismissals. Sitwell even printed reviews that comment upon the anthology’s printing of reviews: “In ‘Wheels’ we have discovered nothing to interest us except the press notices of the first cycle published modestly at the end. As the young authors appear to be pleased with their posturing

---

130 Ledbetter, p. 323. Ledbetter attributes “three enfants terrible” to novelist Frank Swinnerton.
132 Wheels 2 (1917), pp. 114 and 117
133 Excepting the last issue. John Pearson attributes the idea to print the “Press Notices” to the anthology’s publisher, Basil Blackwell (The Sitwells: A Family’s Biography [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978], p. 113). As the editor of Wheels, however, Sitwell approved this decision, arranged and commented upon the reviews, and continued to include them through issue five.
and the remarks it has elicited from indiscreet reviewers, we do not propose to add to their amusement; for amused they must have been if they had any sense of humour, at finding themselves taken seriously by anyone."

Sitwell’s decision to include these responses fashions a peanut gallery out of critics who write about Wheels in unfavorable terms. Armed with tactics Sitwell would reiterate almost thirty years later in A Poet’s Notebook (1943), the anthology relies on juxtapositional humor to expose a variance of opinion as grounds for dismissing disapproval:

EVERYMAN

The names of the poets are unfamiliar to us.

THE OBSERVER

The names speak for themselves.

THE SKETCH

The names are sufficient to secure a second edition.\textsuperscript{135}

Wheels also capitalizes on the wit and absurdity already present in overblown and ridiculous condemnations:

THE NEW STATESMAN

…It is rather stupid to put a picture of a nursemaid wheeling a perambulator with a baby in it on the cover. None of the contributors can be quite so young as that.

\textsuperscript{134} Wheels 3 (1918), p. 101.
\textsuperscript{135} Wheels 2 (1917), p. 114.
THE PALL MALL GAZETTE

…The fetidness of the whole thing clings to the nostrils…

At the end of every issue, through Wheels, Sitwell laughed at the critical conglomerate. This laughter dismissed captious critics, and in the process partially lifted Wheels’ and Sitwell’s reliance on a codified external reviewing culture.

For the majority of the Press Notices, Sitwell lets her curatorship of reviews deliver its own effect, but occasionally she includes her own commentary. In one of these cases, a not-so-mysterious “E.P.” writes that Wheels “is [a] proper sort of ink-pot,” but criticizes her “inexcusable carelessness as to meaning and to the fitness of expression.” The “editor” in turn includes a retaliatory note directly after E.P.’s evaluation, not in her own words, but following the spirit of the Press Notices, she quotes:

Editor’s Note:—‘We are in especial bored with male stupidity.’

From ‘The Condolence’ by Ezra Pound.

The fact that Sitwell uses Pound’s words against him is clear. She recontextualizes his review vis-à-vis a line from his own poetry, which she also co-opts for her own purposes. The power of evaluator over evaluated shifts as Sitwell responds to criticism by seizing the power of critique. In addition, she spells out Pound’s name, revoking his ersatz gesture of anonymity and withdrawing his privilege to christen himself a force recognizable by initials. In the process, her identification of Pound again snatches his move for her own; “E.P.” becomes “Ezra Pound,” but

---

137 Wheels 2 (1917), pp. 110-1.
Sitwell’s contribution retains its mask as “Editor,” especially because *Wheels* issues did not openly cite her name as editor until the third issue.\(^{138}\) Sitwell did indeed distance herself from a reliance on the critical conglomerate, and certainly refused to follow the rules this culture set for the literary community; more importantly, however, by excerpting, (re)publishing, and generally recontextualizing *Wheels* criticism, Sitwell took ownership of it. The criticism works *for* her, even, and especially, when its content purports to work against her (as in the case of “E.P.”), generating buzz and becoming the most important part of each issue. *Wheels* subsumes external evaluations of Sitwell’s own work into her growing oeuvre, and the reviews are thenceforth internal(ized)—subsumed into the purview of the anthology and under Sitwell’s contextualizing control.

Sitwell’s Press Notices also draw the reader’s attention to the particular turf war waged over modern poetry in the time of *Wheels*. For as much as the anthology mocks its critics, it also exploits the very literary gab culture it ridicules, harnessing the power of not only reviews but also contemporaneous debates about what the “new” poetry should look like—debates in which Pound figured prominently.\(^{139}\) *Wheels* entered the poetic scene as an early participant in the “poetic renaissance of the nineteen-teens and twenties … when poetry enjoyed mainstream popularity, audiences packed poetry readings, and readers avidly followed the honors, exploits and feuds of their favorite poets.”\(^{140}\) Proponents and opponents of the Georgian School formed the largest and most polarizing feud, alike in dividing both poets and critics. *Wheels* was a publication designed to (as Sitwell later claimed) proffer a revolutionary, modern poetics in the

---

\(^{138}\) Edith did claim editorship over all six issues, although her role as editor in the first issue is disputed (Pearson, p. 106).

\(^{139}\) As the founder of Imagism and regular contributor to *Poetry, The Egoist, The Little Review*, and other little magazines in the teens, as well *Gaudier-Brzeska* (1916).

face of what was seen as Edwardian or even Victorian verse holdovers, such as the poetry of Rupert Brooke; according to one of Sitwell’s biographers, “it was Edith who took the idea up and introduced [Wheels] to her Oxford publisher, Basil Blackwell, as something of a counterblast to Edward Marsh’s Georgian Poetry.”141 Kathryn Ledbetter identifies Wheels as a “significant aspect of the larger war to redefine modern poetics” in which even “[i]f the readers of the new generation had not seen any of the six ‘cycles’ … they were nonetheless aware of the controversy surrounding the Sitwells because of all the public discussion, and they could take sides in the war between the old and the new.”142 The Press Notices of the first issue profit from a long review by The Morning Post, for example, which describes Wheels’ position as anti-Georgian and actively couches any derogatory reviews as symptomatic of the poetic turf war (and therefore exclusive of genuine, reputable aesthetic judgment): “Some of the poetical new births are certain to arouse the wrath of the new mechanic, Victorian critics who have not learnt that poetry is not a sort of black cosmos but a living, growing creature … ‘Precious,’ ‘Macabre,’ ‘Baudelairian’ are some of the epithets hurled at them, for there is nothing which irritates the hack-critic so much as the appearance of a new ‘school’ of poetry engaged in quietly working out its own conception of the art.”143 How “quietly” this reviewer would have considered the Wheels endeavor once the Press Notices appeared is unclear; Wheels made sound waves because it successfully took advantage of the hostile modern poetic climate.

Ledbetter’s argument, however, reaches too far to claim that Wheels became a “significant aspect” in the codification of modernist poetics. As Huxley himself quipped of the publication, “Their [the Sitwells] great object is to REBEL, which sounds quite charming; only

---

141 Pearson, p. 106.
142 Ledbetter, pp. 322-3.
143 Wheels 1 (1916), p. 90.
one finds that the steps which they are prepared to take, the lengths they will go are so small as to be hardly perceptible to the naked eye.”

John Pearson, one of the Sitwell trio’s many biographers, acknowledges that the poetry of *Wheels* isn’t representative of the verse the Sitwells would later produce, and none of the other contributors, save perhaps Wilfred Owen, supplied the anthology with particularly enduring verse. In fact, “Sherard Vines and Iris Tree,” Pearson notes, “read embarrassingly today, and Huxley’s jaunty verses hardly seem worth the effort Edith put into getting them.”

This kind of evaluation isn’t limited to critical hindsight—in a 1920 issue of *Coterie* (a little magazine with T. S. Eliot and Huxley on its editorial committee), British writer Douglas Goldring’s poem, “Post-Georgian Poet in Search of a Master” muses, “Are the Sitwells really safe? Is Iris Tree / A Certain guide to higher poesy?” Quite simply, the content of *Wheels* pales in comparison to other slim volumes of poetry and little magazines that added their verse to the “modernist” side of the war against Georgian poetry. There are multiple reasons for the shortcomings of its content, but most stem from its nepotistic selection process—a process the publication bypasses by self-classification as “anthology.” For all intents and purposes, *Wheels* is a little magazine, but, published only once a year and advertised as an *anthology* of the years’ work in modernist poetry, it self-sorts into a format that entails “a collection of select literary masterpieces.”

With little or no vetting process for contributors other than Sitwell’s invitation and/or approval—the endorsement of a poet in the beginning of her career—*Wheels* was always going to be a short-lived, semi-serious venture.

---

144 Qtd. in Pearson, p. 116.
146 Ibid.
148 Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, s. v. “anthology.”
The fact that arguments such as Ledbetter’s exist, then, are testament to Sitwell’s early success in fashioning herself, outside of or counter to the approved channels, as an important modernist figure. As she was establishing herself as a modernist poet, she was also already establishing her importance as a social figure in this scene. She had published individual poems in little magazines before, but the editorship of Wheels was her first exercise in the maintenance of her work’s reception. She launched her own “anthology,” and therefore her own poetry, into the crossfire between the “new” and Georgian poetics; no one “introduced” her, but rather she took it upon herself to use Wheels as a forum for this process—even introducing the work of other young poets before she herself was a recognizable poetic presence. Ledbetter writes that “assembling her own community of poets was Sitwell’s daring, even grandiose, effort to proclaim the writers of her generation as one of the brilliant epochs in the history of literature,” but Wheels’ true “daring” lies in its bypass of so many channels of review culture—because the “anthology” declared itself, where convenient, both embroiled in and above this fray.

Sitwell’s biographers, critics, and scholars have long understood her editorship of Wheels as the beginning of Sitwellian vitriol for the critical community of letters, or “the early manifestation of [her] critical temper, in particular, her ‘minding’ of adverse criticism of her own work.” These authors consider Sitwell’s manipulation of Wheels criticism as a symptom of her personality “defects.” No scholarship about and hardly a review of Sitwell and her work are devoid of commentary about these “defects.” The index to Pearson’s biography of the siblings illustrates this point; five of the eleven “General” descriptors under “Sitwell, Dame Edith” point to shortcomings of affect—“aggressiveness,” “put-downs’, slaps, etc.,” “royal airs,” “sensitivity

---

to criticism,” and “unhappiness.” Even non-historical considerations of Sitwell’s work betray
the need to enter the discussion about her brazenness; James Brophy, the author of one of the few
book-length studies of Sitwell, spends an entire chapter of *Edith Sitwell: The Symbolist Order* on
her personality, although the book’s primary focus is the evolution of images and symbols in her
work. Entitled “Electric Eel,” the chapter briefly chronicles the major anecdotes of Sitwell’s
responses to criticism, from *Wheels* to bits of her memoir—a “greatest hits” of the Dame’s spats.
Brophy’s justification for this first chapter, incongruous among five others that all offer close
readings of her work, is short and rather bootless; he explains, “No one has better seized the
essence of Edith Sitwell’s art than Yeats who remarked that ‘she creates … driven by a
necessity of contrast.’ It is this characteristic which suggests that a satisfactory critical view of
her be comprehensive rather than single.” Brophy’s haphazard link between the aesthetic
contrast to which Yeats refers and Sitwell’s oppositionary politics is a typical move made by
scholars who feel the need to spend a certain word count on Sitwell’s “spleen.” But beyond
connecting this phenomenon to her “sensitivity to criticism” or dubbing it a repeated publicity
stunt, critical work on Sitwell rarely reads the manner in and with which she approached the
critical community of letters in her time. Her editorship of *Wheels* set the standard for her
continued relationship with this community—a relationship built on a simultaneous disavowal
and appropriation of evaluative systems.

---

150 Pearson, pp. 530-1.
151 Brophy, p. 3.
152 Brophy terms Sitwell’s reactionary criticism “spleen” (pp. 11 and 16). Yeats’ original quote discusses the
aesthetics of Sitwell’s poetry and offers no biographical commentary: “She has transformed … metaphors into
mythology … This dream is double; in its first half, through separated metaphor, through mythology, she creates,
amiid clouds and scenery that suggest the Russian Ballet and Aubrey Beardsley’s final phase, a perpetual
metamorphosis that seems an elegant, artificial childhood; in the other half, driven by a necessity of contrast, a
nightmare vision like that of Webster, of the emblems of mortality” (W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Works of W. B.
Alternative Literary Criticism

The reviewing system that Sitwell really set her sights on, and especially after *Wheels*, was not the news media, but the budding institutionalization of literary criticism. Her fifty-year career witnessed the rise of this institution—the movement of accepted literary criticism from the occupation of the poet-scholar to that of the university scholar. In this transition, “modernism was not poised wholly outside or against the changing economy of the new … professionalist society which surrounded it, but was engaged in a more complex and ambiguous dialogue with it.”153 As Sitwell played roles of both modernist and critic of modernism, her relationship to this “changing economy” is complicated. Not the least of these complications arises from her sex; when scholars discuss the transition of writing about literature from its more amorphous home in the hands of those who also wrote creatively, to the codification of this activity into a university discipline, they by and large neglect the fact that this movement stripped evaluative and interpretive power from female authors. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that this process is more closely tied to a drive to “construct[] a literary history that denies the reality of women writers … critical ceremonies of male self-certification so that the emergence of modern male literary theoretical discourse, exemplified by canon-forming works like ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent,’ *The ABC of Reading, Seven Types of Ambiguity*, and *The Well-Wrought Urn*, could be seen as an attempt to construct ‘his’ story of a literary history in which women play no part.”154

Because their discussion of the literary “tradition” focuses on the composition of aesthetic history, Gilbert and Gubar don’t discuss women’s access to higher education in the early twentieth century. In the UK, Oxford didn’t allow women’s membership until 1920, and Cambridge didn’t follow suit until after WWII.\footnote{Janet Howarth, “Women,” in \emph{The History of the University of Oxford: Volume 8: The Twentieth Century}, ed. Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994), pp. 345-76, 349; and Susanna Chambers, “At Last a Degree of Honour for 900 Cambridge Women,” in \emph{The Independent} (31 May 1998).} Literary criticism’s move to the universities limited women’s access to writing and publishing this kind of work. At a time in which more and more women were writing creatively, emergent systems of evaluation and interpretation were barring women’s participation in criticism. Although she would later earn several honorary degrees, Sitwell received no formal education. Her brothers went to college, but her only education was the tutelage of governesses.

Understanding Sitwell’s oeuvre demands an understanding of how she positioned herself vis-à-vis the changing landscape of criticism. The story of how Sitwell tries to insert herself into the new tradition of literary criticism is spectacularly important to her own work. This story also provides a much-needed counternarrative to the accepted trajectory of modern literary criticism—one that draws a straight line from Eliot’s work in the early twenties, to New Criticism and the university, up through present-day standards and methodologies. Sitwell’s work is different and has been forgotten largely because her methods are not only misaligned with the critical hegemony, but are also patently antithetical to it. Thus, the story of her criticism is that of the birth of a singular institution.

Sitwell’s critical work often begins with some form of oppositional stance; establishing her methods and aesthetic contributions to modernism often follows a negative form.
Aspects of Modern Poetry explicates to disparage, often retribution for peers who had criticized Sitwell’s work in the past. Critics and scholars generally read her derision of other poets and critics as both evidence of her oversensitivity and fondness for pot-stirring, but her animadversion is also a repeated tactic that consistently identifies herself as a critic to be reckoned with. Going after other critics, especially, provided Sitwell with an easy platform for defending her critical method. The focal points of Sitwell’s revenge criticism find roots in her experience with Wheels; the idea that responding to criticism could be part and parcel of her own work likely germinated during her time with the anthology. Along these lines, throughout the rest of her career, Sitwell would consistently cite her vehement opposition to Georgian Poetry.

Letting fly what Brophy calls her “eccentric spleen,” she lambasted the “wriggling, giggling horrors” of the Georgians, who, she humorously complains, “seem obsessed by the predilection for sheep.” By the time of Aspects in 1934, however, the Georgians were an easy target that hardly needed targeting. The particular poetic clashes of the teens had passed, and a second wave of modernists was entering the critical and poetic scene. Sitwell’s continued criticism of the Georgians’ methods, therefore, became something close to a straw man against which her own poetics found its identity. This is the structure of Sitwell’s critical antagonisms, which are,

156 She first formally added her pen to this vocation in 1925 with the slim Hogarth volume Poetry and Criticism, but Aspects of Modern Poetry represents the culmination of her posturing in the genre and the solidification of her style (London: Duckworth, 1934).


158 Brophy, p. 16; Sitwell, Aspects, pp. 11 and 13. Not even A. E. Housman pleases Sitwell: “I have the greatest respect for Professor Housman, and I am not intending any discourtesy to him when I say that to my feeling, the cramped and rheumatic eight-syllable lines, the threadbare texture in which he finds, as a rule, his expression, are not suitable to his themes” (p. 14); R. H. Ross, The Georgian Revolt: Rise and Fall of a Poetic Ideal (London: Faber, 1965), p. 195; qtd. in Gary Day and Gina Wisker, ”Recuperating and Revaluing: Edith Sitwell and Charlotte Mew,” in British Poetry, 1900-50: Aspects of Tradition, ed. Gary Day and Brian Docherty (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), pp. 65-80, 66.
contrary to the bulk of scholastic arguments on this issue, much less products of sensitivity than constructed points of opposition.

Sitwell spends the bulk of the first chapter of *Aspects of Modern Poetry*, “Pastors and Masters,” disparaging F. R. Leavis and Wyndham Lewis, both of whom had recently maligned the Sitwell clan—Leavis with his infamous “history of publicity” comment in *New Bearings in English Poetry*, and Lewis in the last chapter of his satirical *Apes of God* (1930) that “portrays the Sitwells as wealthy buffoons, extravagantly fawning upon editors of poetry anthologies and interminably reminiscing about mawkish childhood experiences.”\(^{159}\) Sitwell’s complaints per Leavis stem from the fact that he critiques poetry without writing poetry, and she extends this wavelength to the insouciance of his commentary:

> Amongst our pastors and masters, we must place, first and foremost, Dr. F. R. Leavis, a gentleman who plays in the literary life of Mr. T. S. Eliot, and in a lesser degree, in that of Mr. Ezra Pound, much the same part as that played by the faithful Dr. Watson in the life of Sherlock Holmes, listening, wondering, chronicling, bludgeoning the dangerous, and, as a rule, bringing about much the same results as were obtained by Dr. Watson when he was left to himself.\(^{160}\)

Consigning Leavis to the margins of modernism, Sitwell sets him up as the bumbling sidekick whose usefulness lies primarily in his documentation of protagonists’ (among whom she figures) adventures in poetry. His triviality emerges from his uselessness as a non-artist, reduced to the singular role of chronicler. But even this task he cannot perform well; his commentary reeks of


“disinfectant,” he does not understand “where the stresses fall” in Milton, and his syntax stutters with needless overcomplication.\footnote{See Sitwell, \textit{Aspects}, pp. 23, 29, and 24. Sitwell also curiously points out a vague antecedent in Leavis’ article on Milton in \textit{Scrutiny} (September 1933); she quotes him, “‘But the case remained unelaborated, and now that Mr. Eliot has become academically respectable those who refer to it show that commonly that they cannot understand it’ (the italics are mine [Sitwell’s]). Are we to gather from this that Mr. Eliot is “It,” or that Dr. Leavis \textit{has} “It”?}

Not one for hiding grievances, Sitwell offers no apologies for her brashness in an in-text note that appears in the center of the page at the end of her discussion of Leavis:

\textit{Note}.—If I am accused by cultivated gentlewomen of both sexes of discourtesy towards Dr. Leavis, I would remind my readers that he has said of me in his \textit{New Bearings} that I “belong to the history of publicity rather than that of poetry.” I would be idle, perhaps, to speculate as to why a wish for self-advertisement should be shown by the fact of a poet practising his or her art, and why it is \textit{not} self-advertisement when a person who is not a poet publishes his opinion on an art which some might think nature has not fitted him to judge.”\footnote{Sitwell, \textit{Aspects}, p. 31.}

Leavis was professing at Cambridge, and had just published the most important text of his career, which her note references, \textit{New Bearings in English Poetry} (1932). Contrary to Leavis’ passing remarks on the Sitwells in this text, in \textit{Aspects}, Sitwell devotes ten pages to the critic. Appealing to “nature” and “art” as higher powers than the academy for bestowing the right to critique, her extended meditation on his credentials preemptively answers unasked questions about Sitwell’s own qualifications. At its quick, Sitwell’s critical “revenge” is always self-posturing.
In the 50s, Ian Fleming approached Sitwell for a chapter in his collection, *The Seven Deadly Sins*. Writing, naturally, on pride, she explains, “I have never minded being laughed at. All original artists are laughed at. But sometimes I laugh back and that is not appreciated.”

As Brophy, Pearson, and her other scholars/biographers would have it, Sitwell does mind. But like much of her oppositional criticism, even this statement works more carefully than these critics realize; semantically, “laughter” morphs from evidence of mockery or scorn to the marker of specifically contemporary (with the italicization of “are”) “original[ity],” and then back to mockery and scorn, but projected outward from an original and contemporary artist whose established talent allows her to command the discourse of derision without being subject to it. Sitwell’s individual genius in laughing back is her utilization of spaces like these not only to undermine derogatory comments but also to validate her own enterprises. This kind of “revenge criticism,” thus, plays the second role of asserting her own right to write critically about poetry and promote her own work.

Sitwell’s brand of revenge criticism is typically humorous and saucy, and peaks in her discussion of Lewis, in which she attacks his sensitivity to highlight her own thick skin. She satirically emphasizes the “sentimentality underlying all his brusqueness,” quipping that “Mr. Lewis longs for his friends to love him, he longs to be understood. Oh, will not somebody be kind?”

His book of poetry, *One-Way Song* (1933), reminds her “of a German jünges mädchen counting the petals of a marguerite, pondering over the last words, the last look, of the Herr Lieutenant, and longing, oh, more tenderly than anyone will ever, ever know, for him to turn

---

163 Ian Fleming wrote the James Bond series.
165 See especially Brophy’s discussion of “Pride,” pp. 3-4.
from those wild, wild ways of his, and appreciate true worth.” Sitwell’s mockery of Lewis’ sensitivity culminates in her insinuation of his homosexuality—a particularly pointed topic for Lewis, who was outspoken about his abhorrence of “sexual deviation.” Tongue-in-cheek, she uses vague allusions, puns, and one of Lewis’ poems to show ersatz support for his “situation”:

Mr. Lewis suffers from various other little troubles that he would like us to understand and to sympathise with. There is, for instance, the worry about backs and fronts to which I have referred, and this, at moments, grows to such pitch that he seems scarcely to know if he is going or coming,

“Try and walk backwards: you will quickly see
How you were meant only one-way to be!
Attempt to gaze out of your bricked-up back:
You will soon discover what we One-Ways lack!
Endeavour to reoccupy the Past:
Your stubborn front will force you to stand fast!
(No traffic caption of Sens Interdit
Is necessary for this clearly One-Way Street.)
Address yourself to sitting down front first—
Your joints will stop you, or your hips will burst!”

… Now, Mr. Lewis, we do understand. And we want you to know that you are amongst friends. You can safely confide in us … The situation you describe must

---

be most trying, but these little things will occur, we know. And we want you not
to fret about the seriousness of the symptoms.169

Contrary to her insistence on the proper interpretation of poetry, Sitwell willfully misreads
Lewis’ poem in the service of a takedown. Her recontextualization reaches the formal
equivalency of “that’s what she said,” fashioning a sexualized understanding that the poem alone
does not support. More importantly, however, the pedantic, condescending tone of the passage
and its pronouns include the reader in the joke on Lewis.

Aspects of Modern Poetry thus begins the way much of Sitwell’s criticism begins—with
assertions of what poetry is not, endorsing her own methods of composition and interpretation
through the vehicle of the bad example. This negativity was not the central feature of her work,
but nonetheless quickly became her trademark. Recognizing criticism’s field-defining power, she
paves the way for acceptance and commendation of her poetry by classifying unworthy poetry in
opposition to her own methods: “One of the most noteworthy things about all the versifiers
whom I have mentioned is the fact that they had practically no rhythmical impetus whatever
(excepting in the case of Austin Dobson, where it resulted only in his catching his toe-nails in his
beard) and that the texture of a poem meant nothing to them, either from a melodic point of view,
or as a means of lengthening a line or changing the speed.”170 Her lamentation of the lack of
“rhythm” and “texture” recall description of her own poetry in Façade—particular a blurb that
crops up incessantly, word-for-word in her work (and, not attributed to Edith, in Osbert’s
biography, Laughter in the Next Room171): “My experiments in Façade consist of inquiries into

the effect of rhythm and on speed of the use of rhymes, assonances, and dissonances, placed at the beginning and in the middle of lines, as well as at the end, and in most elaborate patterns … I experimented, also, in texture, in the subtle variations of thickness and thinness brought about in assonances by the changing of one consonant or labial, from word to word.”172 As her signature strength, “texture” is the buzzword in Sitwell’s criticism and her major poetic complaint, as in her discussion of Lewis’ work, in which the “texture is doughy and inadequate.”173

Championing one’s own methodology in one’s own criticism isn’t a new activity, but rather a frequent occupation of the poet-critic. Sitwell’s brand is unique in its combination with casually-intoned vitriol. She first formally added her pen to this vocation in 1925 with the slim Hogarth volume *Poetry and Criticism*, but *Aspects* represents the culmination of her posturing in the genre and the solidification of her style.

Sitwell’s interpretive method combines critical and creative analysis without differentiation. This alliance offers an alternative to Eliotic/New Critical standards that were developing conterminously with her methods. In opposition to these dominant modes, Sitwell’s remind her readers that critical work is also interpretable text.

Sitwell’s criticism focuses on aurality—the rhythms, rhymes, and what she calls the “texture” of poetry: “the relations of a poem’s vowels and consonants, other than rhymes, considered as mere sound, and supplementing the rhythm and images … the variation of internal vowel sounds to give an effect of richness; the use, perhaps, of liquid consonants and labials and open vowels to give smoothness, of aspirates and dentals to give strength; the careful use of

173 Sitwell, *Aspects*, p. 44.
sibilants which are to texture what salt is to food.”174 Objectively speaking, the capabilities of aural poetic interpretation are limited, exemplified even by the definition of “texture,” in which “richness,” “smoothness,” and “strength” aren’t especially indicative of sounds, nor do they all neutrally correspond to recognizable sound groups. This is the most curious aspect of Sitwell’s interpretive method, which, hinging on synaesthetic renderings of word sounds into highly specific images, is seemingly unaware of its variability. Sitwell’s sound theories find “sense” in resonance, but only on the most specific of terms. In Aspects of Modern Poetry, Sitwell spends a chapter reading Gerard Manley Hopkins’ verse, praising his “magnificence of texture” and including the Victorian poet in her volume because “it is largely due to the influence of [his] work … that the latest school of poets ascribe the trend of their verse, technically.”175 She quotes a stanza of his long poem, “The Wreck of the Deutschland”:

Thou mastering me

God! giver of breath and bread;

World’s strand, sway of the sea;

Lord of living and dead;

Thou hast bound bones and veins in me,

Fastened me flesh,

And after it almost unmade, what with dread,

Thy doing: and dost thou touch me afresh?

Over again I feel thy finger and find thee.176

174 Sitwell, Poetry and Criticism (London: Hogarth, 1925), p. 15. She borrows part of this definition from Robert Graves.
175 Sitwell, Aspects, pp. 52 and 51.
176 Sitwell, Aspects, p. 59.
Sitwell’s reading of this passage translates the stanza’s aural elements into images that accompany those the poem’s diction already produces; “In this passage,” she argues,

we have the huge primeval swell of the sea, with its mountain-heights and its hell-depths, we have the movement before life began, conveyed by technical means. In the slow and majestic first line, the long and strongly-swelling vowels, and the alliterative M’s, produce the sensation of an immense wave gathering itself up, rising slowly, ever increasing in its huge power, till we come to the pause that follows the long vowel of ‘me.’ Then the wave falls, only to rush forward again. After this majestic line comes the heaving line[,] “God! giver of breath and bread,” ending with the ship poised on top of the wave. This last effect is caused by the assonances of “breath and bread.” The sound of “breath” is slightly longer, has slightly more of a swell beneath the surface than “bread,” because of the “th.” 177

Sitwell’s reading extracts images that are external to the poem, pairing recognizable literary devices with unrecognizable effects—interpretive non sequiturs. Brophy calls her criticism “impressionistic,” noting that Sitwell “almost alone, emphasizes the organic form and relevance of the poem’s aural aspects,” as opposed to “contemporary critics [who] deal, in their organic approaches, with meaning, and so concern themselves mostly with … facets of ratiocinative statement.” 178 “Ratiocinative” here is Brophy’s kind work for logical argumentation. For him,

---

177 Sitwell, Aspects, pp. 59-60.
the fact that Sitwell’s criticism frequently lacks this trait is one reason why circa his *Symbolist Order* in 1968, there had been relatively little written on Sitwell’s criticism. Indeed, to date, Brophy’s text remains the most extensive study on this aspect of her oeuvre.\(^{179}\)

Sitwell’s “impressionist” style of criticism clashes with formalist/New Critical modes that were being standardized in the 1930s, which privileged a more neutral, objective discourse that could compete for a position among and along the terms of university sciences. As “the first non-academic critic who sounds like an academic critic,” Eliot is at the root of this tradition, “isolating for criticism the domain of literary values.”\(^{180}\) His theoretical work between 1917 and 1924 inspired many of the tenets of New Criticism and was “worked up into a corpus of acceptable interpretive techniques by I. A. Richards, among others, in the years immediately following,” from which sprung “the brilliant exercise of those techniques by Richards’s student William Empson; the renegade variant of Cambridge English established by F. R. Leavis and the group surrounding *Scrutiny* in the 1930s and 1940s; the way these various influences fed into the work of the American New Critics, such as Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren … and the gradual establishment of the New Criticism as a powerful critical orthodoxy within American universities.”\(^{181}\)

The objectives Eliot applies to poetry in his formative “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” which privileges a “depersonalization [by which] art may be said to approach the condition of science,” apply to explication as well.\(^{182}\) As literary criticism became an

---

179 Although not as extensive as Brophy’s, Samberger’s discussion of Sitwell’s criticism is an important recent addition (pp. 99-105).

180 Menand and Rainey, 7:12; Menand, “T. S. Eliot,” in Menand and Rainey, ed., 7:15-56, 18. Menand argues, however, that although Eliot played a large role in the codification of literary criticism into a university discipline, he “thought that one of the deplorable aspects of modern culture after the age of Johnson was the adulteration of poetry and the criticism of poetry by the intrusion of extraliterary interests” (p. 18).

181 Menand and Rainey, 7:7.

increasingly academic pursuit, scholars latched onto Eliot’s style of criticism for its “professionalization” of the study of literature: “it was anti-impressionistic and almost scientific-sounding; it had the look of being theoretical rather than journalistic or belletristic.”183 Charles Altieri calls this the “new realism” that “establish[ed] ways of attributing value to … distributions of formal energy … while resisting the general languages about values that risked being dominated by rhetorical posturing.”184 For Altieri, “poets’ ways of working with their materials had to replace the modes of authority based on the work’s qualities as sincere expressions or moral edification.”185 Sitwell’s criticism lies somewhere in between the old “modes of authority” Altieri describes and the objective critical standards developing contemporaneously with her writing.

For her own part, Sitwell was aware of the critical trends of her time; Aspects of Modern Poetry presents an intentional iconoclast. Describing to what “depths … the present state of criticism [has] sunk,” she laments the swell of critics and their loss of passion for the texts they scrutinize:

In the midst of these troubles, most of them noisy ones, we may find time to wonder at the number of dilettanti, persons interesting, no doubt, to the home circle, but unwary in straying outside that benevolent shelter, who are now giving their opinions in loud and shrill voices on the subject of poetry. Egged on by a small but excited crowd consisting, I imagine, of admiring aunts and a few infant Ajaxes from the universities, bent upon defying and being impertinent to their

183 Menand and Rainey, 7:10.
185 Ibid.
betters, these gentlemen squeak defiance, and, with the best of intentions in the world, do a great deal of harm to poetry. The critics in question have a singularly debilitated, semi-puritanical dislike of beauty in poetry, so that we feel that their love of the art is platonic, not passionate.186

According to Aspects, this problematic detachment results precisely from a scientific, medical, and/or mechanical approach to literature. Sitwell derides Leavis on this point too, describing his “genuine, natural and cultivated gift for wincing, and this causes him from time to time, when probing a poem, to use phrases, graciously antiseptic, which remind one of a tenderly-ruthless, white-robed young dentist … probing and dressing a decayed molar, discovering the root of the trouble, and explaining it to the patient.”187 Leavis’ treatment of poetry shares the sterility of the dental office and a similar repetitiveness of occupation, “probing,” “discovering,” and, one could add, “drilling and filling.” Aspects resists the becoming-discipline of literary interpretation for the sake of opposing stagnating codification that “extracts” poetry from an appreciation of aesthetics to the science of aesthetics, which she argues are antagonistic pursuits: “[critics’] worthlessness is at the root of the present denial that poetry should be regarded as an art, and not a treatise or a tract, or a book on economics.”188

Indeed, text and criticism are not remarkably separate fields for Sitwell; rather, Aspects demonstrates an understanding of criticism as an art that supplements its subject. The subjective nature of Sitwell’s aural explications combined with her stylistic commitment to clever and overly constructed prose are devices that highlight the textual nature of criticism; calling

186 Sitwell, Aspects, p. 20.
187 Sitwell, Aspects, pp. 22-3.
188 Sitwell, Aspects, p. 11.
attention to its aesthetics stresses that criticism is a text that can be read in much the same manner as purely creative work—indeed, Brophy’s study of Sitwell’s use of symbols extends to her criticism, finding thematic and stylistic continuity in seemingly disparate genres. Sitwell’s interpretation of poetry is poetic interpretation, often sounding more like the poetry she’s reading than the criticism she’s writing. Of William H. Davies’ work, she exclaims,

The beauty of these poems is due mainly to their fresh and lovely fancy, and this is enhanced, often, by the shape, which is clear and rounded as an apple, or has the soft perfection of a bullfinch’s rosy feathers. The beauty … lies more in the exquisite images—those reflections in a lake, in the roundness of the dew-clear apple—than in the texture, which often has a kind of homely and pleasing country roughness, like that of certain leaves—raspberry leaves, for instance—or of cool country sheets and of home-baked bread.\(^{189}\)

Descriptions like these are not ornamental commentary that introduces a different kind of analysis—they are (part of) the analysis. How, you might wonder, is a poem like the shape of an apple or the feathers of not just any bird, but a bullfinch, especially? These kinds of questions have put scholars off of Sitwell’s criticism for the better part of a century, but they miss the point. What is this kind of reflection doing in a text that is aware of the trends pushing literary criticism in the direction of objective scholarship? Sitwell’s “bullfinch” and “home-baked bread” flaunt her disavowal of critical fashions that draw an increasingly firm divide between art and criticism, and her rejection of this divide connects her critico-aesthetic project to the avant-garde.

\(^{189}\) Sitwell, *Aspects*, pp. 90-1.
The dominant trajectory of criticism’s becoming-academic necessarily repudiates the aesthetic relationship between art and “external” critique; the price of objectivity is aesthetic. This “antiseptic” quality, however, only portends to stymie interpretive possibility. Sitwell’s distinct methodology is therefore dually purposive in this regard, criticizing criticism’s developing sterility and exposing its disavowed susceptibility to interpretation.

This disavowal was rooted in the changing function of the author as literary criticism became literary scholarship in the modern university system. Critic-scholars such as Richards and Leavis were employing increasingly objective, codifiable methods to diffuse the potential for a multiplicity of meaning in their work. In this way, objectivity in criticism tries to eliminate issues related to its own intentional fallacy, and indeed considers this problem theoretically moot; if the author must be dead, the critic is a zombie—all intention, all the time. As the “principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning,” Foucault’s “author function” operates on intent, what Barthes characterizes as the “limit” imposed upon a text.

Foucault argues that the author function is not stable across all discourses, but rather a “certain number of discourses [are] endowed with [it] while others are deprived of it.” He locates his argument historically, utilizing the difference between ancient literary stories and texts, which were frequently anonymous, and scientific works, which were “accepted as ‘true’ only when marked with the name of their author.” From the “seventeenth or eighteenth century onward,” however, he proposes that this affiliation switches: “Scientific discourses began to be received for themselves in the anonymity of an established or always redemonstrable truth … by the same token, literary discourses came to be accepted only when endowed with the

---

190 Foucault, p. 107.
191 Foucault, p. 109.
author function.”¹⁹² As twentieth-century literary criticism competed with university sciences, codifying itself into a modern professional enterprise, it made attempts to renounce this function on the terms of the redefinition of its discourse; schools of criticism replaced names of poet-critics, the names of universities increasingly became points of contact for analysis.

Sitwell’s work, however, abjures this renunciation, putting the “literary” back in literary criticism, stressing her own function by utilizing others’ work to showcase her aesthetics and methodology. Her individualized aural interpretive system redirects the reader from the poetry discussed to the form of discussion, shifting the subject and question of readerly analysis from, in the case of “home-baked bread” above, the poetry of Davies to Sitwell’s own method and the arguments/images she extracts with it. This exaggerated interpretive style glorifies the author function of the critic. Providing an antithetical answer to the rhetorical question posed by Beckett and then Foucault, “What does it matter who is speaking?” Sitwell’s criticism seems to respond, “It matters if I am reading.”¹⁹³ She brings back the question of the author—not the one she’s writing about, but the one as whom she writes. To answer a rhetorical question I posed earlier, “How is a poem like the shape of an apple or the feathers of a bullfinch?”—when Edith Sitwell says it is. Her alternative criticism forces the reader to consider a comparative, individualized methodology, becoming in fact acutely self-referential—the implicit structure to her creation of a reflexive “author function.”

Nowhere is her work more self-referential than when she uses herself as a reference, applying her own methods of interpretation to her own work. “Some Notes on My Own Poetry” is a thirty-odd page document that precedes Sitwell’s Complete Poems and consists entirely of “impressionistic” close readings of her own poetry, stylized as a reader’s manual to her poetic

¹⁹² Ibid.
¹⁹³ Foucault, p. 101.
oeuvre. As a thorough explanation of the images, sounds, and intentions of the work at hand, “Some Notes” is akin to a pamphlet for a “self-guided” museum tour. Its position at the beginning of the collection of her life’s work in poetry, extensive treatment of individual lines and sounds, and frequent use of words like “intend” and “deliberate” position the essay as a mandatory handbook for getting the most out of Sitwell’s poems—wherein “getting the most out of” means a full dose of authorial intention. For example, discussing Façade’s “Dark Song,” which proceeds:

The fire was furry as a bear
And the flames purr . . .
The brown bear rambles in his chain
Captive to cruel men
Through the dark and hairy wood.
The maid signed, ‘All my blood
Is animal. They thought I sat like a household cat;
But through the dark woods rambled I . . .
Oh, if my blood would die!’
The fire had a bear’s fur;
It heard and knew . . .
The dark earth furry as a bear,
Grumbled too.194

---

194 Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. 149.
she writes,

The long, harsh, animal-purring ‘r’s and the occasional double vowels, as in ‘bear’ and ‘fire,’ though these last are divided by a muted ‘r,’ are intended to convey the uncombatable animal instinct. The poem is built on a scheme of harsh ‘r’s, alternating with dulled ‘r’s, and the latter, with the thickness of the ‘br’ and the ‘mb’ in ‘The brown bear rambles in his chain’ are meant to give the thickness of the bear’s dull fur … these effects are deliberate.”195

Sitwell’s self-explicating method follows that of her criticism of other authors’ poetry, but where the experience of the latter offers an informed opinion, the former is a final meaning, “intended” and “deliberate.” Sitwell is keen to claim authorship of her work and ownership of the ideas it produces. “Some Notes” anticipates critiques of her work that, akin to Hugh Kenner’s comments that Marianne Moore’s work “deteriorates … through insufficient grasp of its own principles,” would shelve Sitwell with other women poets who are apparently unconscious of their own ideas; her strategy of self-explication seems a reasonable response to an institution bent on stripping intention from female authors. Providing an explanatory handbook to her poetic oeuvre is one way she preemptively counters these tendencies, in addition to promoting her own style of literary criticism and underscoring her “genius” through explanations of her works’ intricacies.

“Some Notes” is Sitwell’s inner explicative control freak, attempting to dictate the conditions of her poetry’s reception. She exploits the schism between her critical and poetic roles to control reception of both—the critic “correctly” explices and unveils the poetry’s genius.

195 Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. xxix. For Sitwell’s use of “deliberate” and “intend,” see also pp. xviii, xxiv, xxvi, and xlv.
and the poetry provides a proper forum for the demonstration of critical methods. These systems are cross-validating. For Sitwell, then, in the case of her subjective, “impressionistic” style, glorification of her own author function, and insistence on self-explication, interpretation is always linked to intent—but only her own. No other text in her oeuvre demonstrates so well the importance she places on her own rationale as author.

In the process of insisting upon the importance of reading and interpreting her own work, Sitwell doubles herself. Her bifurcation into Sitwell the poet and Sitwell the critic is a division that her external criticism does not draw. This is not to say that Sitwell’s self-criticism differs methodologically from her criticism of other poets’ work, but that the basic structure required of self-explication is dissociative duplication. The reproductive quality of her self-validation keeps her explication of her own work from being tautological—the Sitwell who reads Sitwell is not the Sitwell being read. The exact nature of this relationship between Sitwells becomes even more complicated when we take into account her tendency to quote and explicate her own poetry without self-attribution as poet. In a lecture she delivered in 1929, “Experiment in Poetry,” at London’s City Literary Institute, she begins by discussing the merits of dance rhythms in poetry; preparing to use her own verse as an example of this technique, she prefaces, “I am afraid I am going to quote a poem of mine, not out of egoism, or because I underrate the poems of other writers, but merely because it is a useful blackboard example of the point which I wish to make.” She then cites the entirety of Façade’s “Fox Trot.” Later in the lecture, Sitwell goes on to quote “Dark Song,” followed by a reading of the poem’s aural aspects, but she never mentions the author of the poem or that it’s from Façade. “Dark Song” does not come with

---

197 Sitwell, “Experiment in Poetry,” p. 78.
reference to apologetic self-quoting, but surfaces in the text like an external source. In *Poetry and Criticism* a few years earlier, Sitwell makes the same move with her poem “Aubade”:

“Modernist poets are not difficult to follow if the face of different sense-values is remembered. Let us, as an example of this new scale of sense-values, use an “Aubade” by a modern poet—a poem which many people pretended was incapable of an explanation. Whereas it is, in reality, extremely simple and quite explainable.”\(^{198}\) Sitwell refers to the writer at hand as “the poet” and “another poet,” signaling an external body, literally “an[ ]other” that is not she. Moreover, this “other” poet has been accused of illegibility, which only the poet-critic currently interpreting can “explain.”

As the division between a text’s author and its speaker(s), the author function operates between a “plurality of self”—a multiplication problem by which Sitwell proliferates in her criticism, becoming Sitwell the person, Sitwell the self-critic, and Sitwell the poet, but also not-Sitwell. For Foucault, the author function takes place in the separation between these figures—these personae—as he writes, “in the scission itself, in this division and this distance.”\(^{199}\) Sitwell’s case, however, departs from Foucault’s considerations by posing the question of what happens when (the) author(s), plural in singularity, communicate across this divide. When the Edith Sitwells talk to and about one another, as they so often do, “Sitwell” becomes a reflexive author function that creates an autotelic evaluative organism—a microcosmic literary institution that writes, recites, explicates, and appraises its own work in the service of Sitwellian advancement, fulfilling the first “characteristic trait of the author function,” which is its linkage “to the juridical and institutional system that encompasses, determines, and articulates the

---

\(^{198}\) Sitwell, *Poetry and Criticism*, p. 18.

\(^{199}\) Foucault, p. 112.
universe of discourses.”  


It bypasses the need for external validation.

As a self-validating microcosm for an absent external imprimatur, Sitwell’s singular institution is structurally parodic of the emergent modernist critico-literary institution. Parody is “vari-directional, double-voiced discourse,” or in Hutcheon’s definition, “a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text … repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity.”  

The style of Sitwell’s “impressionistic” criticism maintains an “ironic[ally] invert[ed]” scope in relation to its genre, and her “critical distance” occurs in the proliferation and separation of her roles of authorship—of course, given parody’s relationship with comedic effect, it doesn’t hurt that her method produces such humorous results in its inventive imagery. Sitwell’s criticism becomes structurally a discourse “within and about a discourse,” “vari-directional” in its reflexive and reciprocal dialogism, participating in the construction and codification of what the new poetics and the new writing about poetics should look like in the early twentieth century.  

The structural mimicry of Sitwell’s critical practices reduces critico-literary institutional processes to a one-woman show.

---

200 Foucault, p. 113.
202 Bakhtin, p. 199; Hutcheon, p. 6.
203 Hutcheon, p. 72.
Sitwell’s one-woman show, however, could (and did) run without a Sitwell-authored Sitwell; the Sitwell parody Hernia Whittlebot was an immensely popular figure with audiences in the 1920s. Whittlebot is Noël Coward’s creation—Sitwell’s parodic, poetic doppelgänger, a self-important, aristocratic modernist author of oftentimes frightfully terrible verse, penned in 1923 for his parody of Sitwell’s Façade production. Coward’s skit, “The Swiss Family Whittlebot” was so successful that “Whittlebot” went on to pen several books of poetry and even made “regular appearances in the gossip columns, to which Coward would feed such information as ‘Hernia is busy preparing for publication [of] her new books, ‘Gilded Sluts,’ and ‘Garbage.’ She breakfasts on onions and Vichy water.”

Whittlebot’s work lampoons Sitwell’s by highlighting the qualities of her poetry and personality that fostered her reputation for haughtiness. Whittlebot’s two published books of poetry, Poems and Chelsea Buns (1925), come complete with introductions by Coward as Whittlebot’s chief “devotee.” The orgiastic tone of these introductions contrasts with snippets from Whittlebot’s “earlier poetry” that Coward quotes between frenzied effusions:

In the first place, may I say that even to mention the name Hernia Whittlebot is a far greater privilege than falls to the lot of most men … In what magic hour was this juggernautic mite of inspiration—destined to meet in the course of life’s story, such transcendent beauty and such woeful disillusionment—born …

Creation is almost too small a word with which to endow the ineffable service

---

204 Sheridan Morely, A Talent to Amuse: A Biography of Noel Coward (New York: Doubleday, 1969), p. 100. Coward’s parodies of Edith Sitwell sparked a feud between the two that lasted forty years. Edith trashed Coward at every opportunity. She even prompted her lawyer to contact Coward’s publisher when one of Whittlebot’s books of verse, Chelsea Buns, was slated for reprinting in 1932 (Faye Hammill, “Noël Coward and the Sitwells: Enmity, Celebrity, Popularity,” Journal of Modern Literature 39, 1 [Fall 2015], forthcoming, cited with permission).
which she has rendered to Poetic Thought in the British Isles; nay, wherever
English is spoken, and possibly for future ages, wherever the stars may glimmer,
and the sun shine … In “Peeps at Mice’, the freshness of girlhood is paramount,
as evidenced by the ephemeral joy of the first poem beginning—

Ah! Heaven, the sparrows seem so blue,
The cows go laughing tip-a-toe—

And finishing:

Tramp, tramp, look at the lamp,

Daddy’s asleep and my shoes are damp.205

The purview of Coward’s parody extends beyond Sitwell to the larger territory of modernist
poetry in general; Coward simultaneously pokes fun at critical brown-nosing and establishes the
dreadful quality of Whittlebot’s poetry through the juxtaposition of overly effusive praise and
flat, trite, and/or meaningless quotations. The humor in his parody arises, naturally, from the
similarities between Whittlebot’s and Sitwell’s poetry, and the devices and themes he ridicules
emphasize the parodic poet’s author function. Whittlebot’s poetry mocks Sitwell’s on every
possible level, from formal elements of rhyme, rhythm, and enjambment, to those of content,
including diction, racial and class commentary, and Sitwellian historical topos. Often,
Whittlebot’s commentary on these aspects boils down to a critique of Sitwell’s assumed lack of
direction—a randomness in service of rhyme and/or ostentatious efforts toward intellectualism,
predicated upon the poet’s assumption she that could defecate on a page and Paradise Lost
would emerge from the waste.

Whittlebot’s diction is the driving force behind her poetry’s absurdity; her nonsensical words, illogical word combinations, irrelevant titles, and grab-bag proper name selections poke fun at Sitwell’s individual mythos, substituting randomness for what I call Sitwell’s “flat intertextuality.” Whittlebot’s poetry is generously peppered with long, unwieldy words of the sort one would never expect to find in a poem—“Messalinian,” “Scorbutic,” “incarnadine,” “antimacassar.” Frequently adjectives paired with nouns to which they have no ordinarily descriptive relation, such as “Messalinian adolescence,” “Scorbutic wits” and “Scorbutic brains” (Scorbutic relates to scurvy), these combinations mock disparate associations in Sitwell’s verse. Some of Whittlebot’s odd words are simply contrived, like “unproduberous animal grab”—probably a misspelled form of “protuberance,” but even if this is the case, its modification of “animal grab,” a children’s card game, makes little sense. Amusing in Whittlebot’s oeuvre, the same kind of diction and combinations in Sitwell’s work are seldom received with such mirth. Much of Façade’s verse requires the accompaniment of a dictionary for words like “Paphian,” “onycha,” “phoca,” “barracoon,” “corraceous,” and “Laceous porraceous.” However, like “unproduberous,” readers won’t find “corraceous” or “Laceous” in any reference book; rather, the former is most likely a misspelled “coriaceous”—“resembling leather”—and the latter, an invented adjectival modification of “lace.” Whittlebot categorizes Sitwell’s diction as irresponsible flippancy, collapsing intention into mistakes due to reckless frivolity and lackadaisical offhandedness. This extends to Sitwell’s disjointed referential habits. The content of Whittlebot’s “Agamemnon and Sappho” pairs poorly with its serious title:

---

206 Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online, s. v. “Scorbutic.”
207 Sitwell, “Trio for Two Cats and a Trombone” and “The Wind’s Bastinado,” in Collected Poems, pp. 120-1 and 127.
Pull! Pull with a will, pull!

Pool, pool with a whirlpool;

Rustle and scratch, and heave and snatch,

Open the window, the walls aglaze,

Nothing matters—ecstasy

The great God Pan is Lord of all.\(^\text{208}\)

The poem highlights the expectation and subsequent disappointment in the disconnection or unclear connection between proposed topics of poetic exploration and the ensuing neglect of said topics, as well as the failure of poems to adequately address thematics upon which they purport to genuinely meditate. The poem pairs with early Sitwell pieces such as “Trio for Two Cats and a Trombone” (in which neither cats nor trombones appear).

In Sitwell’s “flat intertextuality,” mythological, historical, and literary figures appear and disappear in her poems with spotlight swiftness, but their references seldom offer probing commentary on interpretations of poems’ content.\(^\text{209}\) Instead, flat intertextuality withholds the completion of its allusive circuit, flaunting the absence of referential fulfillment with feigned connections. Take, for example, Sitwell’s poem “Ass-Face”:

Ass-Face drank

The asses’ milk of the stars . . .

The milky spirals as they sank

\(^{208}\) Coward, p. 60.

\(^{209}\) See Samburger, p. 223; and Pearson, p. 152. “Flat intertextuality” is not a significant feature of Sitwell’s later work, which takes a Christian, more serious turn in the 1930s and 40s.
From heaven’s saloons and golden bars,
Made a gown
For Columbine,
Spirting down
On sands divine
By the asses’ hide of the sea
(With each tide braying free).
And the beavers building Babel
Beneath each tree’s thin beard,
Said, ‘Is it Cain and Abel
Fighting again we heard?’
It is Ass-Face, Ass-Face,
Drunk on the milk of the stars,
Who will spoil their houses of white lace—
Expelled from the golden bars!\(^{210}\)

“Ass-Face” is a mixture of Biblical, Shakespearean, and harlequinesque references, complete with talking animals and an undercurrent of lewd humor. The title character is Nick Bottom from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*—the pompous actor who briefly sports an asses’ head—with whom Titania falls in love after both are bewitched by Puck. But instead of Titania, the poem pairs Ass-Face with Columbine, the mistress of Harlequin. “Ass-Face” moves from the drinking holes of heaven to a “divine” beach setting. From there, the poem extends its Christian imagery

to the construction of miniature beaver-dam Babels, and then compares the ruckus made by Ass-Face to the antagonism of the first brothers. “Ass-Face” hinges on confusion and simulation, from drunken theatrical figures to the beavers’ misrecognition, all connected by the “milky spirals” of “asses’ milk”—a heavenly, maternally-sourced spirit that coats everything, including Columbine, the beach, and the beavers’ (presumably “their,” although syntactically unclear) houses. “Ass-Face” is a playful pastiche that relies on intertextuality not to deepen its “message” or “meaning,” but like the manna-like, intoxicating liquid, to glaze with referential reverence. As Gary Day and Gina Wisker argue, Sitwell’s works’ “brilliant coruscations are a refusal of the consolations of modernism’s myths—such as Joyce’s use of Ulysses—which seek to redeem the fragmentation on which they depend.”

Instead, Sitwell’s poetry courts this “fragmentation.”

This quality is a central reason why critics consider Sitwell’s poetry devoid of “sense,” constrained to “the immediacies of consciousness” by the poet as “arch-nurse of empty phrases.” Not finding the usual connective avenues, critics assert that “sense” is absent or elsewhere, celebrating or condemning this assertion depending on the purview of their critical format. This is a tendency that goes back to Sitwell’s early career. In a 1924 *New York Times Book Review* of *Sleeping Beauty*, Richard Le Gallienne notes his confoundedness:

> [O]ne is prompted to [review *Sleeping Beauty*] by its exasperating affection[] and general pretty silliness … Great poets before her have taken the beautiful old fairy tale … But these poets and artists we were at least able to understand. Their subtle

---

211 Day and Wisker, p. 67.

212 Huxley and Julian Symons, respectively; qtd. in Day and Wisker, p. 66; Day and Wisker argue that Sitwell’s “constant drawing attention to sounds, rhymes and rhythms alerts us to the primacy of the signifier in the constitution of meaning.” Comparing her work to Julia Kristeva’s semiotic order, they find that Sitwell’s poetry “asserts possibilities of language other than those of control, fixity and appropriation” (Day and Wisker, pp. 67 and 66).
variations upon their theme were within the range of one’s comprehension. The difficulty with Miss Sitwell’s poem is that it is all but incomprehensible … Before reading Miss Sitwell’s poem I lent it to a lady who is deeply read in all forms of modern poetry, “Imagist,” “Vorticist,” “Futurist,” & etc, and she returned it to me with the remark that she could not understand it. Afterward when I had myself read it, she asked me if I had been able to discover in it anything of the old story from which it takes its name. I could only answer that the perseverance of a conscientious reading had dug out references to the story, but that, generally speaking, I was as far from understanding it as she.²¹³

Le Gallienne attributes the difficulty of *Sleeping Beauty* to its disjunction from its source material; this is the same issue that, with its “exasperating affect[edness],” both obliges the review and makes Sitwell’s poetry “worthy of the guillotine.”²¹⁴ Critics may find flat intertextuality exasperating for the same reasons as Sitwell’s subjective aural criticism; incomplete points of reference prevent a more universalized, standardized legibility. This refusal on the part of the poetry to follow through on its allusions precludes the interpretive potential in recourse to other texts, locating points of analysis more firmly in the author of the text at hand—not, in this case, in the story of sleeping beauty.

Whittlebot’s “Agamemnon and Sappho” also exaggerates Sitwell’s focus on poetic aurality, throwing in with critics who accuse Sitwell of being a poet of sound over sense. Like the opening of “Agamemnon and Sappho,” many of Whittlebot’s poems begin with or collapse

²¹⁴ Ibid.
into pure sound play, as though the poet considers long lists of rhyming words “virtuoso exercises” in poetic composition:

Away, away,
To-morrow, to-day,
Soldiers play
In new mown hay;
Golden spray
A roundelay,
Sometimes clay
Will join the fray

Isabel Jay,
Evelyn Lay,
Henry de Bray,
Maisie Gay.215

Sitwell’s own rhyming schemes aren’t actually much lighter-handed than Whittlebot’s. Her “Trio for Two Cats and Trombone” begins in Whittlebotian fashion: “Long steel grass— / The white soldiers pass— / The light is braying like an ass.”216 Similarly, in “Country Dance,” “That hobnailed goblin, the bob-tailed Hob, / Said, ‘It is time I began to rob.’ / For strawberries bob,

216 Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. 120.
hob-nob with the pearls.” Sitwell’s more intensely rhyming sections often serve synaesthetic or onomatopoetic constructions. They also pair rhythmically with her many dance meters, which Whittlebot in “The Swiss Family Whittlebot” characterizes as “Rhythmic Color Poetry”:

“Rhythm is fundamental in everything. My brothers and I have been brought up on Rhythm as other children are brought up on Glaxo.” Whittlebot’s humorous emphasis on rhythm and rhyme reaches a pinnacle in “A Country Fair,” a poem composed entirely of onomatopoeia:

Chipperty, chap
Croperty, bibberty,
Snib, Snobb,
Mop in wooh,
Clinter, clanter,
Shinter, Shanter,
Oggledy, boggled, roops a hoo!
Danderloy, Plockinsnitch
Keedle-weedle, keedle bim
Rift,
Toft,
Keek,
Snoop,
Piddery,
Frickerty,

218 Coward, p. 51.
Ramperty tooop

Griberty grap,

Voberty, Viberty.

Drib, Drob,

Yock in fooh,

Younter, Tanter,

Minter, Manter

Nutlety, puttelty, Oggsie, Booh! 219

“A Country Fair” recalls early critiques of Sitwell that derided her work for similarities its sound and subjects have to children’s texts; the poem’s Seussical qualities are fit for hopscotch routines. Rhythmically, however, “A Country Fair” is an oddly virtuoso exercise in dactyls such as “Piddery, / Frickerty, / Ramperty.” Its exaggerated enjambment pokes fun at Sitwell’s own habits, but also goes to lengths to hide the poem’s complex rhyme scheme. In the ear, the poem separates into three stanzas—the first seven lines, the middle nine, and the last seven. The first and last stanzas share not only end, but also internal rhyme—“Chipperty, chap,” “Griberty grap” and “Cropperty bibberty,” “Voberty, Viberty.” Despite its framing as the dredges of poetry, “A Country Fair” is a surprisingly smart exercise in formal invention.

In addition to parodying Sitwell’s formal idiosyncrasies, Whittlebot’s poetry also roasts content-based foibles of her literary prototype, including racism and classism. Whittlebot’s “Theme for Oboe in E Flat,” with its “Zebubbah zebubbah, / Zooboom tweet tweet” exemplifies Susan Gubar’s classification of Sitwell’s poetry as “Boomlay BOOM”: “ersatz African rhythms

219 Coward, pp. 67-8
produced with standard English lexicons.”

Marsha Bryant explores Sitwell’s early poetry’s frequent use of racial tropes to describe various women (and to a lesser extent, men) in a manner that both “parody [] Empire’s efficacy [and] at the same time [] reinforce the racial stereotypes that helped to maintain it.”

For Bryant, Coward’s Whittlebot demonstrates that “race was a recognizable aspect of Sitwell’s early poetry.” Bryant’s comment speaks to Whittlebot’s larger role as the earliest, and perhaps also the most comprehensive, critical commentary on Sitwell’s work.

More recognizable than racial elements, class commentary in Whittlebot’s poetry mocks Sitwell’s perceived pretentiousness. The last poem of “The Swiss Family Whittlebot,” “The Lower Classes,” Whittlebot describes as “a very long and intensely primitive poem.”

Byzantine diction plays a part in constructing its tone of cagey disgust and quizzical distrust of those less fortunate than the Whittlebots:

War and life and the Albert Bridge
Fade into the mists of salacious obscurity
Street hawkers cry apathetically
Mothers and children rolling and slapping
Wet on the grass—I wonder why.
Guts and dahlias and billiard balls
Swirling along with spurious velocity

---

221 Marsha Bryant, p. 263.
222 Bryant, p. 255. Bryant also argues that *Façade*’s staging is an element of Sitwell’s “racial ventriloquism,” reading the smaller face of darker complexion Dobson painted on the front-cloth as “a modernist form of minstrelsy” (Bryant, p. 254 and 259; “racial ventriloquism” is also qtd. from Gubar, p. 139).
223 Coward, p. 53.
Ending what and where and when
In the hearts of little birds
But never Tom Tits.
Freedom from all this shrieking vortex
Chimneys and tramcars and the blackened branches
Of superfluous antagonism
Oxford and Cambridge count for naught
Life is ephemeral before the majesty
Of Local Apophlegmatism
Melody semi-spheroidal
In all its innate rotundity
Rhubarb for purposes unknown, etc., etc.224

“The Lower Classes” presents a cacophony of purposeless noise as “superfluous antagonism,” adding to which conglomerations of disparate objects—“Guts and dahlias and billiard balls” and “Chimneys and tramcars and the blackened branches”—produce the scene’s alienating effect on Whittlebot, who probes the mysteries of “regular” folks in a manner akin to an anthropologist’s. Her use of “Tom Tits” furthers the wide gulf between the speaker and her subjects; in its poetic context, “Tom Tits” reads as an expression for the “ordinary” man, but the term, which refers to a type of common mouse, also comes with the slang connotation of “shit.”225 Her delicate sensibilities are offended by “the majesty / Of Local Apophlegmatism,” an archaic medical term

224 Ibid.
225 OED, 2nd edn., s.v. “tom-tit.” According to the OED, the slang definition of “shit” did not emerge until 1943, however Coward’s selection of this term suggests that it carried similar connotations at the time of “The Swiss Family Whittlebot” (1923).
that amounts to the expectoration of phlegm.\textsuperscript{226} The poem’s humor emerges from these pairings of highfalutin descriptors with “lowbrow” subject matter, revealing the presumptuousness of an aristocratic poet who would not only descend to comment upon “The Lower Classes,” but also criticize them. Sitwell’s own “Country Dance” displays similar tendencies; its title announces its class relation to country folk, but the poem’s content varies between references to country-based phenomena and terminology, such as “haycocks” and the “bob-cherry” game (“a game in which the player tries to catch with his teeth a cherry suspended at the end of a string”), and more bookish references to Greek mythology, such as “Pan,” “Silenus,” and “satyrs.”\textsuperscript{227} The similarities between Whittlebot and Sitwell extend so far as to render their poetry, in many places, virtually indistinguishable from each other’s. Coward experimented on his friends in this regard, pairing Whittlebot’s and Sitwell’s work and delighting in discovering that his friends could not discern who had written the verses he presented.\textsuperscript{228}

The progression of Whittlebot’s work from “Swiss Family” to \textit{Poems} and \textit{Chelsea Buns} unveils an important evolution in her reception. In “Swiss Family,” Whittlebot alone speaks for the genius of her verse and interprets the important messages her work is intended to convey. Once her work becomes more “popular,” she gains an ally in Coward and, more importantly, an introduction. By introducing Whittlebot not as Whittlebot, but as Coward-fan-of-Whittlebot, Coward is recommending and reading his own work (Whittlebot’s) without identifying himself as author. His actions as doppelgänger poet and doppelgänger critic reveal the parodic structure of Sitwell’s own self-posturing, uncovering the nature of connections between Sitwell, the critico-literary institution whose structure her self-promotion imitated, the parodic form of that

\textsuperscript{226} OED, 2\textsuperscript{nd} edn., s.v. “apophlegmatism.”
\textsuperscript{227} Sitwell, \textit{Collected Poems}, p. 130. OED, 2\textsuperscript{nd} edn., s.v. “bob-cherry.”
\textsuperscript{228} Hammill, p. 4; before learning about Coward’s experiment, I conducted one of my own at the Alternative Modernisms conference in Cardiff, Wales, May 2013, to similar results.
imitation, and the operation of Sitwell’s function as author—critic and poet—within these co-imbricated systems.

Specifically, Whittlebot shows us how the structure of parody substitutes a sham author function for that (or those) of the writing body. Contrary to expected substitutions, however, while the “sham” author in this case is Whittlebot, the writing body supplanted is not Sitwell’s—because Whittlebot’s poetry, as I’ve demonstrated above, serves to interpret Sitwell’s—but Coward’s. In this way, both parodic structure and increasingly scientized literary analysis similarly disregard the writing body. Returning to Foucault’s description of the “switch” after which scientific discourse is no longer obsessed with its author, he writes that this discourse’s “membership in a systematic ensemble, and not the reference to the individual who produced them, stood as [its] guarantee. The author function faded away.”229 Foucault argues in the beginning of the essay that “a certain number of notions that are intended to replace the privileged position of the author actually seem to preserve that privilege and suppress the real meaning of his disappearance”—this same logic should apply to the movement of authorial power across a changing discipline from the poet who practices criticism to the institution that codifies and co-opts those practices. As literary analysis becomes academic, it already begins to move authorial intent, and on a grander scale, the author’s own discursivity from the “pen to the men.” I am not proposing a return to intent-driven analysis, but rather analyzing Sitwell’s relationship to her own authorship vis-à-vis intent in order to explain not only her oftentimes eccentric recourse to self-reflexive argumentation and self-aggrandizement but also the historical fact that the roots of the modern university discipline of English grow in the refusal of female critical agency.

229 Foucault, p. 109.
But the story of Edith Sitwell’s individualized critical institution isn’t an alternative history to be revisited and mined for methodology. An analysis of her one-woman show is a quest to understand why a modernist female author would adopt a public persona as self-aggrandizing and iconoclastic as Marianne Moore’s was modest. For both of these authors, personality functions strategically and has a specific use-value for any woman writing in the forty-odd year period that 100% of the major literary critics-cum-scholars were men. As also in the case of Moore and “Poetry,” however, Sitwell’s self-promoted institution would also serve to demote her current position in the canon—up until the 80s she was a fixture in anthologies, but her work has now all but completely fallen out of fashion. With the 2008 publication of *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, however, and its glaring lack of evidence of women’s contributions to criticism (as well as its own glaring dearth of female authorship), Sitwell’s machinery may yet be rediscovered for its singularity and its affront.
In the forty-three year period that Djuna Barnes lived at Patchin Place in New York City, she published just one major work, *The Antiphon*, a Selected Works consisting mainly of previously published material, and five poems that total forty-four lines.\(^{230}\) Scholarship on late Barnes typically paints this period with the colors of ageism, stressing the author’s reclusiveness, reduction in output, and infirmity to lament the decline of the author in the last half of her life.\(^{231}\) After an initial period of minor publishing successes, *The Book of Repulsive Women* (1915), *A Book* (short stories, 1923), *Ryder* (1928), and *Ladies Almanack* (1928)—texts popular mainly among her expatriate coterie in Paris’ left bank—Barnes struggled to find publishers. Her publishing record of the teens and twenties appears a veritable fecundity compared to that of the latter half of her life—a considerable length of time, since at the time of her death in 1982, she was ninety. Between 1930 and 1958, she primarily worked on and over just two manuscripts, the novel *Nightwood* (1936) and the play *The Antiphon* (1958). By one account, Barnes produced twenty-seven versions of the latter, and treated *Nightwood* similarly, although there are fewer known revisions of this text.\(^{232}\) While her publishing record declined in her later years, however, her literary output did not. After her death, 2,400 drafts totaling over two thousand pages of material were recovered from her apartment, consisting mainly of poems with staggering numbers of revisions. As Scott Herring reveals in his 2015 *PMLA* article, “Djuna Barnes and the Geriatric Avant-Garde,” Barnes revised one poem, “Dereliction,” over eleven hundred times.\(^{233}\) Barnes scholarship, including editions of her work, have made few efforts to understand revision as a significant aspect of the Barnesian oeuvre.

\(^{231}\) See Phillip Herring, pp. 295-313.
\(^{233}\) Scott Herring, p. 74. Barnes did not publish any version of “Dereliction” in her lifetime.
Decades of historicizing the circumstances of Nightwood's and The Antiphon's arduous path to publication have produced a bifurcated body of scholarship that, ignoring her rich production of unpublished revisions to her poetry, drama, and prose, is either quick to label Barnes’ lack of published material as a personal and aesthetic failure, or quick to rescue her work from the contemporaneous influences that necessitated her revision habits. The first camp often cites Barnes’ own characterization of herself in letters as a “bad editor” of her own work, a sentiment corroborated and perpetuated by Phillip Herring’s 1995 biography, Djuna: The Life and Work of Djuna Barnes. With diction that resonates with some of Eliot’s descriptions of Barnes’ work (as well as Moore’s peers’ critiques of her poetry), Phillip Herring argues that “[c]raft was precisely Barnes’s weakness, which is why Nightwood took so long to be written and published … as an ungifted editor she could not always tell the good parts of her novel from the bad and so had to be guided … Barnes had no editorial skills and, being more attuned to the lyrical voices of her characters, had little clear sense of what was and was not digressive or irrelevant.” Phillip Herring’s critique of Barnes’ editorial “failings” translates into a value judgment of her aesthetic sensibilities—not being able to “tell the good parts … from the bad”—couched under the guise of what he dubs a more “practical,” managerial skill: “[a] good editor working full time on Nightwood might have shortened the publication history by at least two years.”

While scholars like Phillip Herring consider Emily Coleman’s and T. S. Eliot’s roles in editing Nightwood ultimately fortuitous, another camp laments the relationships among Barnes, Coleman, and Eliot. These collaborations were born half of necessity and half of friendship, forging complicated structures of influence in editing—structures scholars have been squabbling

234 Phillip Herring, pp. 203, 204, and 218.
235 Phillip Herring, p. 218.
over since Barnes’ work experienced a surge of popularity in the 90s.\textsuperscript{236} From the 30s on, for these scholars, Barnes was unable to function independently as an artist—unable to edit her own work appropriately, find publishers, or support herself without the assistance of myriad benefactors, including Coleman and Peggy Guggenheim. Here Barnes’ failure is a result of her alcoholism, her increasing reclusiveness, and a dearth of self-sufficiency and confidence that made her amenable to editorial intrusions, which produced contaminated, inauthentic versions of *Nightwood* and *The Antiphon*. This scholarship therefore always seeks the recuperation of a Barnesian individuation; the failure of the author to proceed without contaminating influence becomes a site of historical and editorial resuscitation.

The problem with the Barnesian Rescue Unit, however, is that it chases the ghost of a body that never existed. Barnes’ writing and publishing record from 1930-1958, preserved partly in her extensive (and unpublished) collection of letters, reveals an editorial muddle that is alluring in its promise to uncover the “true” text, and within that, the “true” Barnes. Cheryl Plumb’s 1995 *Nightwood: The Original Version and Related Drafts*, in its concoction of a *Nightwood* text from Barnes’ third draft, scrubbed of the identifiable editorial “strong-arming” of Eliot, is the best evidence for this promise of the Barnes archive. But the “final” (or “original”) draft can, and never will be, the point.\textsuperscript{237} The search for *Nightwood*, and related searches for versions of *The Antiphon* sans Eliot’s imprint, rehearse an impossible goal of finding intent free from influence. In so doing, this scholarship actually emphasizes the role of external authors on


Barnes’ archive, privileging these authors’ authority under the aegis of saving Barnes’. Utilizing the tools of that selfsame editorial sway, the scholastic bickering over the situation of Nightwood and The Antiphon’s editing tends to recreate the very problem it identifies, expanding the host of manuscripts into an infinite futurity of “corrected” versions, envisioned and/or, in the case of Plumb, produced.

In addition to avoiding textual interpretation, this scholarship misses the point. Nightwood and The Antiphon cannot be individuated. Their multiplicity is ingrained in the very ethos of the texts themselves, in terms of both material history and content; this kind of proliferation is an integral component to Barnes’ oeuvre. Incorporating this aesthetic into Barnesian hermeneutics is both an acknowledgement and a dismissal of her failures according to institutional tenets. This process allows us to see how modernist structures of “failure” still puppeteer contemporary scholarship. The task is not to save Djuna Barnes from the structures that both disabled and enabled her success, but rather to understand the results of her dependence as a mode of authorship in its own right. This isn’t an ahistorical process that divorces her rewriting from the conditions that helped fuel this process. Instead, this pursuit requires an understanding of two key points: seeing Barnes’ history of revision as a failure to produce refuses to consider Barnes’ participation in the modernist ethos of revision; and the logic of lateral reproduction, the mechanics of which share significant similarities with the hermeneutics of rewriting, is a defining aesthetic in both Nightwood and The Antiphon. Revision is a key part of a larger Barnesian philosophy.

The bulk of this chapter is concerned with this last argument: what happens when we integrate Barnes’ history of revision as an aesthetic of the second half of her career (from the 30s on) instead of identifying her habits of rewriting as a historical limitation to her artistic self-
sufficiency? As the academic responses to *Nightwood* and *The Antiphon* evince, Barnes’ revisions are an unrecuperable excess—a multiplication problem upon which only the material circumstance of publication imposes a teleology. Considered in tandem with the two texts in question, Barnes’ rewriting sketches a theory of revision that posits every version of a text as simulacra—a copy of an invisible product that promises originary status, but can never deliver on this promise. This process generates variants marked by their similarities. Its reproduction is lateral in the sense that it refuses the developmental linearity of a progress narrative. All revisions create simulacra of themselves, especially in light of the scholastic functions of the archive; as soon as a text is multiple, it inhabits a transitory ontology. Barnes’ revisions are a special case because, in addition to the complex impetuses for their emergence and the subsequent anxious scholastic response, they parallel a similar textual aesthetic of *Nightwood* and *The Antiphon*.

For Barnes, revision is the embodiment of a reproductive excess—the proliferation of markedly similar entities—that manifests in her later work through the structures of desire, genealogy, and spaces of theatrical representation. Desire in *Nightwood* plays and replays itself through a series of characters who, in their longing for Nora Flood, reproduce or attempt to reproduce images of themselves and other lovers. For these characters, Nora is an ungraspable imaginary with the promise of authenticity—an originary whose individuality cannot be conceptualized outside the system of the self and self-representation that paints desire as an aesthetic. *Nightwood*’s Felix and *The Antiphon*’s Augusta take lateral reproduction to its literal, genealogical roots. The children of each should embody familial futurity, but instead rehearse the failure of the reproductive telos—the heir, the furtherance of genetic material—through sexual abstention and incest. In late Barnes, children reproduce the anxieties of their parentage,
becoming copies of the very disquietude that occasioned their conception. Alongside Lee Edelman’s arguments about children in *No Future*, these figures in *Nightwood* and *The Antiphon* are sites of radical negativity and the death drive. They, more than the comparatively normalized lesbian relationships of *Nightwood*, are Barnes’ queer characters. Lastly, the logic of reproduction manifests structurally through the mise en scène of *The Antiphon*, a metatheatrical production that replays familial trauma through the acting of acting and the restaging of past events in an onstage dollhouse. Barnes’ play is about the restageable, the iterability of theatrical performance both within and outside of the confines of the play itself, which obsesses over its own unprogressive reopening of the traumatic event.

Reproducing Desire in *Nightwood*

In *Nightwood*, desire is founded on the reproducibility of the desired object, in terms of both the biological capacity of the female reproductive body and the metaphysical replication of the desiring subject onto conceptions of the other’s psyche. In the novel, Robin Vote is the site of these multiple reproductions. Save Doctor Matthew O’Connor, every major character holds an unrequited love for her, and *Nightwood* is loosely structured around their affairs and the aftermath of these trysts, in which the lovers Felix, Nora, and Jenny pine for Robin’s peripatetic attentions. Robin moves between lovers with abandon, and after a brief period of monogamy with each, returns to what the novel calls the “night”—a time-space of radical, unpredictable potential in a boozy, sex-laden nightlife that has no bearing on or connection to the moralism or responsibilities of the daylight hours. As the Doctor explains, “the day and the night are related by their division … Every day is thought upon and calculated, but the night is not premeditated.
The Bible lies the one way, but the night-gown the other. The night, ‘Beware of that dark door!’”

Robin is a creature of Nightwood’s night, and as such, shares in its lack of premeditation, predicated on an extreme malleability. She is not a stable entity, but a person-as-process, always in the state of becoming, but never arriving at or positing a permanent form. This static interchangeability manifests as a lack of personality—as an empty signifier that promises infinite potential. The reader has as little access to Robin’s interiority as the characters who love her. She speaks very little in the novel; apart from a few meager paragraphs, other characters dominate the dialogue, even and especially when she is the subject of the discussion. Her lack of voice might translate her figure to the status of observer, listening instead of talking, but the text insists that Robin listens as little as she speaks. She engages in conversation neither actively nor passively, but instead simply does not participate. Throughout Nightwood, the other main characters develop through motive, monologue, and the narrator’s point of view, but Robin remains so aloof the novel refers to her several times as a sleepwalker, “La Somnambule”: “as if sleep were a decay fishing her beneath the visible surface,” “she leaned still further in a swoon, waking and yet heavy, like one in sleep.”

As Judith Roof argues in her discussion of Nightwood and narrative, Robin represents a “perverse lack of narrative cooperation … [she is] the character who cannot be a character because narrative has no meaning for her.” Despite being inscribed in the novel’s narrative as a kind of kernel around which the text and its main characters operate, Robin’s absence—both in terms of her abandonment of her lovers and her lack of interiority—is the fullest space of her character.

---

239 Barnes, Nightwood, pp. 38 and 51.
Without a personality, Robin’s status as an object of desire is a curiosity that *Nightwood* invites its readers to question. The etymology of her last name, “Vote,” stems from the Latin *vovēre*, which means “to vow, desire.” In desiring her, then, *Nightwood*’s characters enact a tautology—they desire desire itself, the structure of longing without the substrate necessary to anchor that affection to an external entity. Within this system, Robin becomes a means of replicating the desiring foreign ego, and therefore the catalyst by which the novel’s reproductive logic proceeds; as Nora explains, “I thought I loved her for her sake, and found it was for my own.”

And indeed, Felix Volkbein, Nora Flood, and Jenny Petherbridge are unable to locate, understand, or love anything about Robin that is not intrinsically related to their own characters. She becomes instead a reimagining or *revision* of their own self-created identities. For Felix, Robin is the perfect woman to bear him sons and propagate his pretend genealogy, fabricated by his father. What really excites him about Robin are her listlessness and malleability: as he tells the Doctor, “With an American anything can be done.” Conceiving of her as a sponge for his own verbalizations, Felix prattles as he courts Robin: “He felt that he could talk to her, tell her anything, though she herself was so silent. He told her he had a post in the *Crédit Lyonnais*, earning two thousand five hundred francs a week; a master of seven tongues, he was useful to the bank, and, he added, he had a trifle saved up, gained in speculations.” Robin offers no response to Felix’s assertions of his own eligibility, but when he proposes, she nevertheless

---

241 OED, 2nd edn., s. v. “vote.”
244 Barnes, *Nightwood*, pp. 44-5.
accepts, “as if [her] life held no volition for refusal.” Once Robin is member of the Volkbein family, Felix takes her to Vienna:

To reassure himself he showed her all the historic buildings. He kept saying to himself that sooner or later, in this garden or that palace, she would suddenly be moved as he was moved. Yet it seemed to him that he too was a sightseer. He tried to explain to her what Vienna had been before the war; what it must have been before he was born; yet his memory was confused and hazy, and he found himself repeating what he had read, for it was what he knew best. With methodic anxiety he took her over the city. He said, “You are a Baronin now.” He spoke to her in German as she ate the heavy Schnitzel and dumplings, clasping her hand about the thick handle of the beer mug. He said, “Das Leben ist ewig, darin liegt seine Schönheit.”

Felix and Robin vacation in the Baron’s Heimat, Vienna, so that Robin can experience the heritage into which she has married. Taking her to the “historic buildings,” acquainting her with this foreign city, Felix becomes professorial in his desire for Robin to feel the connection—“to be moved”—to what he himself is also alien. His attempts to immerse his new wife in Viennese culture are a reproduction of his own anxieties, funneled vicariously through Robin’s tourism and education. But as this passage suggests, Robin digests little other than Schnitzel, dumplings, and beer, and even these cultural markers seem incommensurate with her wispy frame, as they

---

245 Barnes, Nightwood, p. 46.
246 Barnes, Nightwood, pp. 46-7. This German phrase translates to, “Life is forever, that is its beauty” (my translation).
are “heavy” and “thick.” Robin’s promising potential—that “with an American anything can be done”—translates to the reiteration of two generations of generational angst. Felix surrounds his wife with the objects/ornaments of a lineage to which he has no access, just as his father, Guido, in his “pretence to a barony,” “people[s]” the house he buys his wife with “Roman fragments, white and disassociated; a runner’s leg, the chilly half-turned head of a matron stricken at the bosom … impressive copies of the Medici shield and, beside them, the Austrian bird.”

Trying to recreate a heritage that was already a simulation, Felix finds with Robin only the reproduction of his estrangement from this history.

Jenny Petherbridge also has a problem with authenticity comparable to Felix’s, and to which Robin’s character also promises but does not deliver a desirable solution. Instead of genealogical anxieties, Jenny’s fakery occurs on the level of individual personality and capability for love. *Nightwood*’s third-person narrator explains that Jenny lacks any sort of genuine responsiveness (“She defiled the very meaning of personality in her passion to be a person”), which she tries to account for by “squatting”—or appropriating—emotions she admires: “she could not participate in great love, she could only report it … When she fell in love it was with a perfect fury of accumulated dishonesty; she became instantly a dealer in second-hand and therefore incalculable emotions … she appropriated the most passionate love that she knew, Nora’s for Robin.”

Jenny’s desire for Robin, akin to Felix’s, is not about Robin herself, but about the structure of desire she embodies. In the manner by which she promises to produce the continuance of Felix’s history, Robin offers Jenny self-definition through the replication of another’s love affair. But upon usurping Nora’s place, Jenny finds only a reflection of her own inability to be grounded:

---

247 Barnes, *Nightwood*, pp. 5 and 8.
248 Barnes, *Nightwood*, pp. 74-5.
Jenny leaning far over the table, Robin far back, her legs thrust under her, to
balance the whole backward incline of the body, and Jenny so far forward that she
had to catch her small legs in the back rung of the chair, ankle out and toe in, not
to pitch forward on the table—thus they presented the two halves of a movement
that had, as in sculpture, the beauty and the absurdity of a desire that is in flower
but that can have no burgeoning, unable to execute its destiny; a movement that
can divulge neither caution nor daring, for the fundamental condition for
completion was in neither of them; they were like Greek runners, with lifted feet
but without the relief of the final command that could bring the foot down—
eternally separated, in a cataleptic frozen gesture of abandon. 249

Together, the two are as ineffectual a coupling as Robin was with Felix. Metaphor and
metaphorical ekphrasis describe the deferred state of desire produced by their relationship—the
non-“burgeoning” flower, a lack of “fundamental completion,” but in the position of possibility,
symbolized by the runner who is always set on the mark but never starts running. Jenny’s desire
for Robin just reproduces its own logic in anxieties of impotence.

By Nora’s account, her recreation of herself in the figure of Robin is the sincerest form of
love. And in the context of the more malignant fakeries of Jenny and Felix, Nora’s desire does
paint a comparative picture of genuine desire and affection. The doctor and the third-person
narrator of the novel treat Nora’s desire as a tragic and near-sacred emotion, which, although it
shares similarities of structure and outcome to the other rejected lovers’ longings, is supposedly

249 Barnes, Nightwood, pp. 75-6.
more authentic. However, although the narrative favors Nora’s unreliable narration of her desire, it is still in the service of the reproduction of the desiring ego. For Nora, Robin is the potential for what Nightwood posits as the impossible quest for self-identity. As Nora explains, “She is myself. What am I to do?” and “have you ever loved someone and it became yourself?” Nora’s acute identification with Robin incites her desperation upon Robin’s philandering and subsequent departure. Doubling herself in her relationship with Robin, Nora’s quest for self-identity through her lover is not a wish to extend her family history or to appropriate the qualities or circumstances of another, but to see and understand herself through self-reflective desire. Committed to replicating herself through her lover, Nora’s grief at Robin’s exit signals the reproduction of the very anxiety that spurred her love of Robin—her desire to duplicate herself results in the loss of this very identity.

The impossibility of unique self-identity in Nightwood is distinctly related to Robin’s status as a replicating device—an odd sort of human copy machine. This particular function of hers is what sutures the novel’s thematics of self-reproduction to the ethos of revision in Barnes’ oeuvre. In Nightwood, reproduction is an illusory promise of self-invention funneled through Robin, the reflective empty signifier. Her main attraction is what Felix, Nora, and Jenny understand as her replicating capabilities—the possibility of recreating the self in the visage of the other. But for each character, Robin’s reproductive potential backfires in its accuracy; instead of reproducing what her lovers desire to create vis-à-vis their own imagined identities, desiring Robin reproduces the very anxieties that prompt her lovers’ interest—Felix’s wish to continue his ersatz lineage finds its dissolution in his wife; Jenny’s drive to coopt Robin and Nora’s

---

250 The root of this privileging is likely the biographical element of the novel; Barnes based Robin’s character on her ex-lover, Thelma Wood, and therefore, through association, scholars typically argue that Nora is a stand-in for Barnes in the novel. See Phillip Herring, p. 156-7.
251 Barnes, Nightwood, pp. 136 and 161.
relationship instead becomes a representation of her own ineffectuality; and Nora’s desire doubles herself in Robin, which, upon Robin’s leaving, reproduces the loss of identity Nora so desperately wished to remedy through their relationship. The logic of reproduction in Barnes’ oeuvre signals the incessant recreation of the self-same—a process without progress, ineffectual in terms of reproductive telos.

For Barnes, the presence of revised or reproduced material posits the impossibility of isolating and/or identifying an originary status. In Nightwood, this process occurs with Robin as the vector—characters look to her to stabilize their genealogical or individual identities, but their relationships with her ultimately exacerbate the original force of their desires. In her corpus, revision takes the place of any publishing teleology. Remembering the 2,400 drafts recovered from Barnes’ home after her death, Barnes’ rejection of the publishing norm later in life favors the infinitely revisable. Phillip Herring and Osías Stutman describe Barnes’ writing habits in their introduction to her 2005 Collected Poems, explaining that “Rather than continuing yesterday’s draft, she would usually begin anew each morning. She would first set down by hand the makings of a poem, type the rest, and then correct it time and again, thus producing multiple versions of the same poem in a sequential order that is usually unclear. Typically she typed an original with two carbon copies, and in almost every case the handwritten corrections on the three versions are different. Then she would incorporate some of the previous day’s corrections, type a new version, and make new corrections by hand.”

Revision and reproduction are stymying processes in Barnes’ corpus, but only insofar as they refuse the “natural” end of an author’s production: publishing. To refuse this end is to reject any manner of fixed form for a piece of writing, and beginning anew every day is the mark of a writer for whom revision

---

becomes itself a teleology without telos. Like Robin, Barnes’ process of revision abjures the creation of stable identities in the textual love affair.

*The Antiphon*’s Mise en Abyme

Barnes’ *The Antiphon* is a metatheatrical play that reproduces characters’ traumatic pasts in the hopes of stimulating psychological catharsis for the family’s matriarch, Augusta. Set in 1939, *The Antiphon* is about an actress, Miranda Hobbs, returning to her family’s estate after a long absence. In disguise as a man named Jack, one of her brothers (Jeremy) accompanies her back to her family estate after a long absence and orchestrates via a dollhouse the rehearsal of an early traumatic scene in which Miranda’s father, a Mormon, polygamist, and philanderer named Titus, sold her virginity (at age sixteen) to a “travelling Cockney thrice her age.”253 By the time of the play, Miranda is in her fifties. Titus is dead, but Miranda’s mother, Augusta, is alive, and the play calls her to reckoning for her complicity in the crime of her daughter’s rape. In the third and final act, Miranda and Augusta each play-act the role of the other, which proves too much for the elderly Augusta, who, in an act of misdirected anger, bludgeons Miranda to death with a curfew bell and then herself dies from her murderous effort.254

254 Many scholars argue that *The Antiphon* is a reenactment of Barnes’ own traumatic sexual experience(s) in her youth, and this aspect of *The Antiphon* has been well documented (See Julie Taylor, “Revising *The Antiphon*, Restaging Trauma; or, Where Sexual Politics Meet Textual History,” *Modernism/Modernity* 18, 1 (2011): 125-47, 126; and DeSalvo. Barnes’ most recent biographer, Phillip Herring, argues that this biographical feature of her work is more dispersed: “in Barnes’s mind, the real-life impetus for the play was usually not clearly distinguished from the play’s plot. In addition to her comments to friends, the context for understanding Barnes’s complaint about her father’s conspiracy to take her virginity as a girl is spread over several literary works, forming, in effect, an antiphonic response of art to life” (Phillip Herring, p. 268).
The Antiphon is obsessed with staging its own restageability; the entire premise of the play is founded on the acting of acting and the recreation of a past event on different stages to form a mise-en-abyme of traumatic reenactment. The play includes several additional plays within its own action—Jack’s secret designs that puppeteer his family members into confronting their traumatic past, including his introduction of the dollhouse tableau; Miranda’s brothers’ gleeful, masked assault of their sister, symbolically rehashing the patriarchal violence; and the nested narrative that mother and daughter perform together in the end.

The Antiphon flaunts its own textuality in staggeringly archaic diction and form. Barnes spent time reading the Oxford English Dictionary, and frequently peppers her late work and poetry with “arcane vocabulary.”255 Written in blank verse, the lines that the play’s characters speak inhabit a code of metaphor that defers comprehension of the play’s action into the comparative work of often ungrounded allusion. Miranda, for example, speaking randomly of funereal procedures in Act Three, recalls in them, “The frantic sloth of grieving, the hidden head—/ By its waters eaten. The high crossed sleeves; / The muffled drum, the creeping catafalque / Toiling backward to the cot; the great stone fly / Sarcophagus.”256 These lines foreshadow the approaching death of mother and daughter, but ultimately paint of picture of the processions of bereavement that the indifference following Miranda’s murder does not match. In epistolary conversation with Barnes, Swedish author (and second Secretary-General of the United Nations) Dag Hammarskjöld calls these moments in The Antiphon “explosively condensed series of associations,” and they appear frequently in the play, dominating the final

255 Phillip Herring and Stutman, p. 7.
256 Barnes, The Antiphon, p. 123.
Like the “its” of the second line in the quote, unclear antecedents abound in these “explosions,” adding interpretive potential but producing even a denotation that is hard to follow.

The overall effect is a style of artifice that slows reading and presents barriers to comprehension for the reader that likely compound in performance—“likely” because The Antiphon hasn’t seen any major performances (outside of Sweden, in translation) since its flopped debut as a “reading performance” in May 1956 by the Poet’s Theatre Company at Harvard.258 The critical consensus is that The Antiphon is a “closet drama,” unstageable due to the “sheer difficulty of its verse” and the fact that “the characters scarcely talk to each other. Each one is intent on subtilizing and distilling his own thought and feeling into a verse expression adequate to the author’s norms of rhetoric, and these are not at all dramatic norms. The result: there is no dialogue in any proper sense of the term.”259 Barnes herself claimed this status for the play, saying of it in 1961, “You can’t act it. It wasn’t meant for acting. I wrote it because I wanted to. I wrote it as a verse-drama because I like the form. But it can’t be acted. I know that.”260

In this comment, Barnes is both right and wrong about The Antiphon. The play cannot be acted because it is a performance of performance, a self-conscious metatheatricality. The Antiphon can only be acted as acted, always one step further inculcated in an abyss of...

---

257 Quoted in Daniela Caselli, Improper Modernism: Djuna Barnes’s Bewildering Corpus (Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2009), p. 249.
259 Louis Kannestine, The Art of Djuna Barnes: Duality and Damnation (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1977), p. 151; Lionel Abel, “Bad by North and South,” Partisan Review 25 (Summer 1958): 462; q’d in Kannestine, p. 153. One voice of dissent in the “closet drama” debate is Altman, who argues that “The Antiphon is not a closet drama. Closet dramas at their most successful draw on a conception of character which is dramatic and not lyric; but they themselves are really long poems and not plays … Barnes occasionally wrote little closet dramas, which she called “three-minute plays,” for use in her journalistic work; she was familiar with larger closet dramas and would have written one if she had wanted to. Instead, she chose to write The Antiphon” (pp. 272 and 402n4).
260 Recounted by James B. Scott in Silence and Power, ed. Broe, pp. 341-5, 244. According to Scott’s account, Barnes then turned to him and said, paradoxically, “Did you ever see anything flop like The Antiphon? I can’t understand it” (p. 344).
representation; the play isn’t drama in the closet, but drama down the rabbit hole. This is why, despite its efforts at archaism, The Antiphon is avant-garde. One of the clearest indications of this is the setting’s proliferation of costumes, toys, instruments, and a gryphon, “once a car in a roundabout [carousel]”: “Over the balustrade hang flags, gonfalons, bonnets, ribbons and all manner of stage costumes ... To the left, standing before a paneless Gothic window, a dressmaker’s dummy, in regimentals, surrounded by music stands, horns, fiddles, guncases, bandboxes, masks, toys and broken statues, man and beast.”261 This is a stage set for multiple performances, and its protagonist, Miranda, is an actress by trade: “she has a distinguished but failing air, wearing an elegant but rusty costume, obviously of the theatre, a long cloak, buckled shoes and a dashing tricorne blowing with heron feathers.”262

Miranda’s brother Jeremy, in disguise as a coachman named Jack, is The Antiphon’s Shakespearean fool. His status as a performer performing is most marked among the characters. He enters in the beginning with Miranda, “holding his billycock [hat] straight up over his head, as though he expected applause from the gallery.”263 Jack’s lengthy bouts of dialogue throughout the play identify him with Nightwood’s Doctor O’Connor, as the two both speak in aphorisms and offer some comedic relief to the otherwise heavily dramatic plotlines. Jack often meditates on the nature of his role in the play, understanding himself within his depth:

They say soliloquy is out of fashion,
It being a kind of talking to your betters.

[He climbs into the chair (gryphon)]

262 Ibid.
263 Ibid.
But then what motion but betrays oneself?
Esau’s heel trips every man his running.
But Jack—not running—disinherited?
Do I move under, like the pilot-fish?
Am I a cow-bird, shill, or Judas goat,
Gaited to walk on other people’s pools
As the skating-fly who skips on sleeping water?
Or do I, by some private irritation
Set about the step on my own rope?
Do I unplot my head by plucking hairs?
Or throw my lines away between my teeth?
Or do I so entirely slip from custom
That I sprawl in any place, a king?
Why then, so be it.
If crouching on a throne’s called sitting
I’ll sit this out.\footnote{Barnes, The Antiphon, p. 17.}

Consciously delivering a soliloquy, Jack ruminates on his disguised relationship with his family, questioning whether his function in the coming acts will be to allow events to unfold, “like the pilot-fish” following a boat, a “cow-bird” picking off insects stirred up by moving cattle, a “shill,” or a “Judas goat,” leading a flock to its slaughter. As he delivers these lines, he “senses he is not alone”; brothers Dudley and Elisha appear at the window and on the gallery (balcony),
and the bulk of his speech is delivered deliberately within their earshot. Dudley and Elisha don’t seem to register Jack’s lines, since they enter and exit the play without recognizing him as their brother, even though Jack practically confesses his deceit, revealing himself doubled through comparison to twins Esau and Jacob. In Genesis, Jacob traded Esau a bowl of lentils for Esau’s birthright, hence the now largely obsolete usage of “Esau” to designate “a person who prefers present advantage to permanent rights or interests.”265 Jack is the “disinherited” Esau, usurping his own (Jeremy’s) rightful place as a member of the Hobbs family. His decision to “sit this out” refers not to his nonparticipation in the play, because he directs much important action in Act Two, but to his decision to keep his identity secret, remaining an actor acting throughout the duration of the play.

In Act Two, Jack commences his orchestration of the play’s antiphonal structure through the revelation of a dollhouse he has built that stages Miranda’s rape some forty years prior. He and his benign uncle Burley “enter, carrying a covered object,” which they set in front of Augusta and “expose.”266 The dollhouse is an odd present for Augusta, who is likely in her seventies or older. Its entrance signals ulterior motive—as Jack explains as he presents it, “I give you Hobb’s Ark, beast-box, doll’s house—/ That little alchemy unhems a man. / Madame, your contagion.”267 The doll house is the “Ark,” which, suspended above the waters of the proverbial flood for forty-days-cum-forty-years has held the secret life of the Hobb’s family, in all its beastly machinations. The “unloading” of this vessel, Jack hopes, will prove the “alchemy” that forces Augusta to confront her crimes—the illness of guilt contracted through the “contagion” of the artifact. The presentation of the dollhouse turns Augusta into a child, as Jack lifts her onto the

265 OED, 2nd edn., s. v. “Esau.”
266 Barnes, The Antiphon, p. 91.
267 Ibid.
table it rests on, and “Cross-legged she sits before the toy.” The dollhouse and Augusta’s reverted state when Jack puts her in front of it should present a tale that is accessible to the older woman, as the miniature tableau reduces a difficult concept to a more apprehensible apparatus. And initially the dollhouse does its designed work, agitating Augusta, who attempts to cover it and dismantle it with her body: “Augusta throws herself over the doll’s house, beating at it with both hands.” The scale of the dollhouse is an ironic site of revelation for the play’s agenda, as it presents itself as a site of legibility in juvenilia, but remains small enough for Augusta to mask with her body, re-covering and again refusing recognition of her past wrongs. And while the toy promises revelations to its target audience within the play, the actual audience has little access to the “window pane” against which Augusta “put[s her] wink” to (re)witness Miranda’s rape. *The Antiphon* restages this rape through the proliferation of representations that continue to rehash the trauma. Like *Nightwood*, this repetition manifests in the proliferation of settings for its enactment. In *Nightwood*, these “settings” are the forms of Robin’s lovers, but in *The Antiphon*, they are dramatic devices, in which the play’s whole narrative and style participate. This kind of reproduction is non-teleological in the sense that it repeats the trauma without achieving its aims of reckoning and catharsis.

*The Antiphon* is obsessed with reprising Miranda’s rape, which her brothers Dudley and Elisha maliciously simulate in act two. Donning a pigs and an ass’ masks, “as if the playthings would make them anonymous,” the two assault Miranda, knocking away her cane, “seizing her and pinning her arms behind her.” As Elisha holds her hostage, he presses his knee into her lower back, threatening to sodomize her with it:

---

268 Ibid.
269 Barnes, *The Antiphon*, p. 95.
270 Barnes, *The Antiphon*, p. 86.
Now then, my somewhat well-used spinster,
Now that your precious uncle Jonathan
Has for the moment turned down his metronome
And bushel’d off, what shan’t we do with you?
You’d never listen to your brothers, would you, Toots?
Tick-bird, riding out the Grand Conception,
Which father, for lack of guts, left in your corner.

[Raising his knee]

Let us see, if by your scumber, you are fox!  

Elisha’s rant paints Miranda as “riding” during her rape, which he designates as the “Grand
Conception” in terms of both its status as a planned and sexual event (“conceived”). To this
assault and shaming, Augusta, who is dancing with Dudley, only quips that Miranda “never
would / Listen to [her] brothers,” once again refusing to intervene in her daughter’s assault.  
The violence of the scene escalates until Elisha seizes Miranda again, shouting, “Manless,
childless, safeless document— / I’ll staff you!” Her rape is not repeated, as Miranda fends off
her brother, but the restaging brings the traumatic past to the fore once again, and rather than
effecting change in the interactions between Miranda, her family’s (new) aggressive patriarchs,
or Augusta, this representation falls on the face of its own iterability.

271 Barnes, *The Antiphon*, p. 87. “Scumber” is an obsolete term for dog or fox feces (OED, 2nd edn., s. v. “scumber.”
The last entry is dated 1825.).
272 Barnes, *The Antiphon*, p. 87.
273 Barnes, *The Antiphon*, p. 89.
Over and over, *The Antiphon* stresses its own rehearsability until the exhausted death of its main female characters. Contrary to critics’ assertions that the play is unperformable, it is inseparable from the idea of its own staging. But this sentiment is also married to *The Antiphon* as “theater based upon the authority of the text,” in which the text is both the written play and the unwitnessed original moment of rape. This is the antiphonal structure, sung again and again to the same tune, with different words but without modulation. Akin to the reproductive logic Robin represents in *Nightwood*, this repetition can produce no cathartic, originary identity for its characters—it will not unmask Jack/Jeremy, rescue Miranda from the scene of her victimization, or bring Augusta to task for her complicity. What this form does create is a system of reproduction that muddles the lines between characters and their disguises and events and their recreations, performing the unreliability of identity and narrative.

Children in *The Antiphon* and *Nightwood*

The kind of lateral, non-teleological reproduction that occurs through Robin and the hoaxic structure of self-identity she promises, but can never deliver, also manifests in the literal and figurative progeny of characters in *Nightwood* and *The Antiphon*. Children in these texts proffer a similar figuration of self-reproduction through the extension of the genealogical line, but ultimately refuse to participate in the evolution of the family tree. Children in late Barnes carry the promise of what Lee Edelman calls “reproductive futurism,” wherein the child becomes a clarion call for futurity. Edelman explains:

---

274 Artaud, p. 106.
The signifier … only bestows a sort of *promissory* identity, one with which we can never succeed in fully coinciding because we, as subjects of the signifier, can only be signifiers ourselves … Politics names the social enactment of the subject’s attempt to establish the conditions for this impossible consolidation by identifying with something *outside* itself in order to enter the presence, deferred perpetually, of itself. Politics, that is, names the struggle to effect a fantasmatic order of reality in which the subject’s alienation would vanish into the seamlessness of identity at the endpoint of the endless chain of signifiers lived as history.²⁷⁵

Children are the limitless extension of genealogy into a future made meaningful precisely because of this perpetuity. In this formulation, they pledge the production of meaning, representing an ideological and imaginary telos of the individual’s existence.

In *Nightwood*, Felix is obsessed with the genealogical system and its potential to validate, through extension, his ersatz lineage. Robin’s body becomes the vector through which he may pay homage to his own past by continuing it. For Felix, a son would, as Edelman puts it, “fill up the hole in the Symbolic”—the narrative of barony and Catholicism that Felix anxiously preserves to pay homage to the name-of-the-father.²⁷⁶ Felix’s son quite literally fulfills this tribute, as he is named after his grandfather, Guido. As Felix insists, “To pay homage to the past is the only gesture that also includes the future.”²⁷⁷ He tries to impart this awareness to Robin on

---

²⁷⁶ Edelman, p. 15.
²⁷⁷ Barnes, *Nightwood*, p. 43.
their walks around Vienna: “talking to her, drawing her attention to this and that, wrecking himself and his peace of mind in an effort to acquaint her with the destiny for which he had chosen her—that she might bear sons who would recognize and honour the past. For without such love, the past as he understood it, would die away from the world.”  

278 Per the doctor’s insistence that “[Felix] must have a son,” because nobility is “the few that the many have lied about well and long enough to make them deathless,” Robin’s and Guido’s purpose for Felix becomes the propagation of his history via the “deathless[ness]” of the continued pedigree.

Guido the child, however, is anything but the celebrated progeny of any pedigree. Felix realizes “as time passed … that his child, if born to anything, had been born to holy decay. Mentally deficient and emotionally excessive, an addict to death; at ten, barely as tall as a child of six, wearing spectacles, stumbling when he tried to run, with cold hands and anxious face.”

280 This is not “the Child as the obligatory token of futurity,” but a wimpy, daft boy, too frail and strange to carry on the historical weight placed on his birth. In addition to Guido’s sickliness, his decision to enter the Catholic Church signals his refusal of the responsibility of his heritage and a rejection of heteronormative futurity in favor of the homosociality of the priesthood or monastery—a lifelong commitment to celibacy historically reserved for the second son of landed nobility. Acknowledging his son’s chosen vocation, “the Baron saw that he must accept a demolition of his own life.”

282 Guido is a reproductive failure in his projected failure to reproduce. With his queerness, he terminates three generations of the “pretence to Barony.”

---

278 Barnes, Nightwood, p. 49.
279 Barnes, Nightwood, p. 43.
280 Barnes, Nightwood, pp. 114-5.
281 Edelman, p. 12.
282 Barnes, Nightwood, p. 115.
dismantling is the ironic role Guido plays for his father, reproducing the anxious moment of the genealogical farce.

Guido is an only child, but other, symbolic offspring appear in Robin’s relationships with Jenny and Nora. With Jenny, the child is Sylvia, who has “fallen in love” with the Baronin. Robin speaks to and spends time with Sylvia, who is enraptured and changed by their meeting: “A little girl (Jenny called her niece, though she was no relation) sat at the far end of the room. She had been playing, but the moment Robin entered she ceased and sat, staring under her long-lashed eyelids at no one else, as if she had become prematurely aware.”283 In its brief mentions of Sylvia, the novel forefronts the child’s loss of childlike qualities, due to the influence of Robin and Jenny. When Jenny attacks Robin for showing preference to an “English girl” in a carriage, Sylvia cries out, “Let me go!” in “a voice not suitable for a child.”284 Sylvia’s interactions with Robin stymie age-appropriate cognition and affective response. The presence of the Baronin becomes a barrier to typical childhood behavior, and with both Guido and Sylvia; Robin’s influence, be it biological or social, effectively precludes the “natural” comportment of children. Instead, both real and symbolic children in Nightwood are embodied representations of Robin’s love affairs. Jenny uses Sylvia to determine “whether or not [Robin] had a heart”—and experiment that fails to prove Robin’s capacity for compassion, as, much to Sylvia’s sorrow, Robin completely forgets about her.285 Sylvia’s inability to retain Robin’s interest is a condensed reproduction of the dynamic between Robin and Jenny. As such, their symbolic child is but a formal duplication of the anxieties of their relationship, translated and revised into the body of the child.

283 Barnes, Nightwood, p. 76.
284 Barnes, Nightwood, p. 83.
285 Barnes, Nightwood, p. 123.
Between Nora and Robin, a symbolic offspring also signals Robin’s eventual abandonment in the figure of the doll. Nora is obsessed with making Robin’s flesh her own—a union that would incarnate in a living child, were their relationship procreative. For Nora, therefore, the doll Robin gives her carries special weight: “when a woman gives [a doll] to a woman, it is the life they cannot have, it is their child, sacred and profane.” Later, when Nora finds a doll at Jenny’s house, the toy becomes a symbol of Robin’s infidelities, a reproduction of Nora’s anxiety that another will take part in the flesh of their union. The doll is a method of communication between the two women. It delivers messages about the state of their union, serving not so much the role of child as a medium. Robin uses the doll to express her frustration; sometimes she “hold[s] the doll … high above her head, as if she would cast it down, a look of fury upon her face.” At a certain point near the end of their relationship, Robin follows through on this threat: “She picked up the doll and hurled it to the floor and put her foot on it, crushing her heel into it; and then, as I came crying behind her, she kicked it, its china head all in dust, its skirt shivering and stiff, whirling over and over across the floor.” Here, the doll-child’s emblematic promise of the futurity of Robin and Nora’s relationship becomes instead a loaded infanticide that rejects the imposition of the family narrative onto the queer space of all of Robin’s affairs. *Nightwood* refuses to allow children to stand for the hope for the future. These literal and symbolic reproductions are instead copies of their “parents’” will to multiply their own egos.

Children in *Nightwood* thus function similarly to Robin’s role regarding the connection between reproduction and revision in Barnes’ corpus. Guido, Sylvia, and the doll are figures

---

286 Barnes, *Nightwood*, p. 151.
287 Barnes, *Nightwood*, p. 156.
meant to reproduce in actuality and/or symbolically the futurity of Robin’s lovers’ lineages and relationships with Robin, but instead, these “children” are merely duplications of their parents’ inability to reproduce with a “productive” edge. With children in Barnes’ oeuvre, as well as her ethos of revision, there is no moving “forward,” only a rehashing that can never signal the end or successful completion of an individual telos.

This revision of the subject in the place of one’s own reproductive output continues in The Antiphon. Like Nightwood, The Antiphon exposes identity as malleable and farcical through the extent to which it is both constructed and dismantled through identification with the other. But unlike the novel, the play casts this process through play itself, in act three when mother and daughter don each other’s roles to restage the past without the progress of catharsis. Creating another play with the play, Augusta goads Miranda to “Come, play me daughter.”289 The ambiguity of this line—whether Miranda should “play” Augusta or “play me daughter,” as in play my daughter, reflects in the subject confusion in the dialogue of the rest of the tragedy from this point, throughout which the question of who is “acting” as whom is clear only about half of the time.290 Demonstrating this slippage in the blocking, Augusta removes Miranda’s shoes, hat, rings, and cane, piecemeal, and dons them herself as the costume change of their doubly-staged encounter. She likewise places her own shoes on the feet of Miranda, who acquiesces to the role change. This play is Augusta’s idea, and she means its staging to defer further discussion of her complicity in Miranda’s rape. The older woman proposes, “Let’s jump the Day of Wrath. Let us pretend. / The play is over and the boys are put to bed. / Let’s play at being Miranda and Augusta. / Say we’re at some hunting box with lords.”291 Augusta’s playing cannot stymie her

290 See Caselli, p. 233.
291 Barnes, The Antiphon, p. 103.
surfacing guilt, however. As the final minutes of the play approach, she speaks in metaphor about her “brim[ming]” realizations:

AUGUSTA:

And how am I, in this kingfisher night,

To brim me to the brim and stay uncaught?

My calendar is hulled, my lands in plague;

The locust, jacket-jumped, claws to my stile

So we stare on each the other with unbuttoned eyes

In such abandoned case as kills the heart,

Would you call a plague of absence, company?²⁹²

The “kingfisher night” in which Augusta is caught is the staging of the hopeful rescue and rehabilitation of a “king,” Miranda, who suffers from the genital wound of her rape. Augusta realizes the inevitability of her inability to “stay uncaught” by the recognition of her own past turpitude. At this moment of recognition, her metaphor flips, and she becomes the Fisher King instead of the fish (which the play on “brim” references)—her barren, diseased lands standing in for the age and condition of her body.²⁹³ This metaphor continues the work of “contagion” at the beginning of the act, shifting from contaminant to plague to a locust, that, having shed its exoskeleton, is the memory Augusta had buried, freed from her mind’s repression, staring at her with knowing, “unbuttoned eyes.” The “abandoned case” is thus both the past rape scene and the

²⁹² Barnes, The Antiphon, p 119.
²⁹³ OED, 2nd edn., s. v. "brim."
insect’s brittle shell. The last line therefore signals the overwhelming presence of the “abandoned case” as a plague of the absent returned.

The watershed moment that these lines of recognition purport, however, does not continue. As the characters in Nightwood desire Robin for their own personal quests for self-identification, so does Augusta’s play-acting appropriate her daughter’s character, but not to the effect of revelations of the past and the transformance of Augusta. What’s more, this failing actually reproduces a version of the original event—their metaperformance revises Miranda’s rape. Miranda’s death at the hands of her mother is the delayed antiphonal response, uncannily repeating the form of parental trauma—a connection intensified by the location of the murder, a bed. Augusta’s assumption of the role of her daughter in their “playing” has been, from its incipience, a sexual perversion. Augusta undresses her daughter and then wears her clothes, and even brings their play into an early moment of her courtship with Titus:

AUGUSTA:

Say we’re at some hunting box with lords—

Say duck sniping—on a lake, or snaring

Woodcock in the hills—shooting and kissing—

Your father wore the trappings, but his aim was wild.\(^{294}\)

Titus was a philanderer and a polygamist from whom his first wife, Augusta, could glean little affection after a certain point in their marriage. Augusta’s attempts at “playing” Miranda are the manifestation of her wish to be an object of sexual desire to her (deceased) husband. The return

\(^{294}\) Barnes, The Antiphon, p. 104.
to the site of Titus’ voyeuristic interest in his daughter’s virginity becomes a moment for Augusta to stage that interest as if it were in her own character. Augusta playing Miranda rehearsing Augusta “kissing” Titus retrains the “wild” “aim” of the father from daughter back to mother via role play, righting the scene for Augusta’s sexual neglect while rehearsing the symbolic force behind the original trauma for Miranda—the father’s sexual interest in the daughter. Miranda’s murder at the hands of her mother thus becomes a second incestuous crime of finding sexual gratification in the violation of the daughter.

Akin to Nightwood, in The Antiphon, the parental impulse is a reproduction of the primary anxiety. As Guido represents the potential to authenticate a history of hereditary deceit, so does playing Miranda proffer the chance for Augusta to rectify the misdirected sexual attention of the women’s past. In each case, the repetition of the anxious event, whether lineage or voyeuristic incest, is a failed attempt to recreate an originary moment that never existed—the “pretence to a barony” and the retained sexual interest of Titus. For The Antiphon, this process must happen through performance, which, like the gryphon bed on which Augusta and Miranda die, “joins two natures in one form”\textsuperscript{295}

\textbf{Revision}

Barnes’ late major works function within the logic of a lateral, non-teleological reproductive aesthetic. This kind of reproduction is ineffectual, in the sense that it can neither confirm nor create identities for characters, nor proffer any proposed catharsis. Instead,

\textsuperscript{295} Dante Alighieri, The Vision of Purgatory, trans. H. F. Cary (Project Gutenberg, 2004), Canto XXXI, line 81. Kannenstine discusses the gryphon’s reference to Purgatorio (p. 146).
Barnesian reproduction is the habitual revision of the self-same, nullifying pretenses to originary status and self-identification, as well as abjuring possibilities of goal-oriented futurity. In Barnes’ work, reproduction and revision share essential principles that identify these logics as a Barnesian mode of authorship, connecting writing process to written content. The “2,400 drafts as well as miscellaneous writings” that were moved from Barnes’ residence at Patchin Place after her death signal Barnes’ refusal to participate in publishing standards that could never capture the variance of her aesthetic output.\footnote{Scott Herring, p. 71.} Her rejection of this norm favors the infinitely reviseable, renewable, process-as-product of constant reworking—an ethos of never-ending replication in which the characters of Nightwood and The Antiphon participate.

Phillip Herring and Stutman’s description of Barnes’ writing process, in which she began each day with a new draft of what she had been working on the day before, is a key element for understanding how integral revision is to Barnes’ processes. But like many editors and academics who work on Barnes’ corpus, Herring and Stutman misunderstand the role of revision for the author, evinced by the diction they use to describe her process, as well as their editorial approach. Citing Barnes’ revisions as “corrections” and her process as one that confuses any “sequential order” fails to grasp the importance of the process of repetition with which she handles each work. Each day, the writing is new, not “corrected,” but reverberated without consideration of finality, and certainly not “order.” Like Robin, Barnes’ child characters, and the effect of The Antiphon’s metatheatricality, reproduction via revision serves to obscure the positing of “correct” versions—to oppose the very ideas of progress through reworking that Herring and Stutman’s volume wishes to document. Collected Poems imposes a telos on a body of work that resists just this structure. Herring and Stutman would have been more faithful to the
Barnesian mode if they’d followed the editorial process Moore scholars have been utilizing for over a decade now, which Robin Schulze inaugurated in *Becoming Marianne Moore* and Heather Cass White has continued for Moore’s poetry through 1941: a careful reproduction of poem facsimiles, complete with lists of variants and the inclusion of substantial revisions in full. Herring and Stutman understand Barnes’ revision as a barrier to the “correct” representation of her poetry, an obstacle to overcome through editing instead of an integral part of the work that should be preserved.

What Moore’s and Barnes’ archives reveal is that the moment of revision is the recreation of a fundamental iteration that destroys the definitive existence of a text. After revision, the text ceases to exist in a singular form, but inhabits its own shadow as an archival haunting. Within this haunting, revised material is an alternative form of writing—one that academic and editorial communities have, with the exception of some smart work on Moore, devalued and disregarded. Revision creates a text that is irreducible to a singularity, but which, paradoxically, promises an originary status due to the publishing industry’s teleology, best evinced in the fraught production of Barnes’ and Moore’s *Collected* and *Complete Poems*. These collections are not definitive texts because they deny the poetry’s life in limbo; like the morbid lepidopterist, they fail to capture the insect in flight. Editorial methods can never accurately represent the revised text—even the meticulous practices of Schulze and White, although their efforts are a vast improvement on past endeavors. This is because revision is multiplicity—the production of an unresolvable excess that cannot be fully harnessed and worked back into the system of representation. This excess is the source of a great anxiety for the Barnesian scholastic community, which seeks to force the unaccountable surplus into “corrected” singular versions of Barnes’ texts.

---

What’s particularly odd about these anxieties is their misplacement onto the Barnes/Eliot relationship, which, instead of recognizing Barnes’ revisionary ethos, understands it as an unfortunate symptom of unequal power relations between the two authors. Given the fact that Barnes continued revising her work when she was not sending it to Eliot, the exorbitant amount of attention scholars have paid to Eliot’s part in the material “necessities” of Barnes’ rewriting is a fetishization of his role, which has since become a critical Oedipal angst.

The scholarship on Barnes and Eliot’s relationship paints Eliot’s assistance to Barnes’ career as a veritable adoption—a “Daddy Warbucks” situation of beneficial but ultimately negative support. Most scholarship on their relationship indicates that “Barnes’s attachment to the eminent man of letters who became her editor at Faber and Faber was largely the result of Eliot’s legitimizing what previous readers had criticized as obscure or incomprehensible.”

Lines like these imitate Eliot’s own introductions to Barnes’ work—prefaces in which he positions himself as the editorial mitigation of her inscrutability and therefore the reader who most clearly understands her work. Eliot’s role in editing Barnes’ work did serve as a stamp of approval for the struggling author, but, as many scholars argue, his role was less about comprehension than other factors. Catherine Hollis contends that “Eliot’s excisions … were designed to make the work more publishable (which, in this case, means less subject to censorship).” Leigh Gilmore has discussed Eliot’s positioning in Nightwood’s introduction as legal positioning in case the novel went the way of Radclyffe Hall’s The Well of Loneliness, which, after it was published in 1928, was banned in Britain for lesbian content censors deemed

---

298 Fuchs, p. 289.
299 Hollis, p. 236.
obscene. Similarly, Cheryl Plumb maintains that Eliot’s editing worked to reduce emphasis on the lesbian relationships in the novel.

The popular understanding of the relationship between Eliot and Barnes paints a connection of dependence, and in so doing, reproduces the sexist dynamics already present in their association. Reading Barnes through Eliot forces academics to adopt Eliot’s own misunderstandings of Barnes’ writing and writing processes. Miriam Fuchs contends that “Barnes came to need Eliot or to believe that she did … [she] started to view Eliot as the instigator of her creative ‘magic.’” Fuchs also argues that this dependency was at least partially to blame for Barnes’ “failures” around the time of her friendship with Eliot: “She published virtually nothing in the twenty years between the two texts that Eliot edited—Nightwood and The Antiphon—which is the period of her association and correspondence with him.” Scholars disagree about how much Barnes’ relationship with Eliot hindered or helped her oeuvre just as much as they quarrel about how much influence Eliot wielded in his editing of Nightwood. Some estimations assert that Eliot cut as much as a third of Barnes’ original manuscript—from 190,000 words to 65,000—and that Eliot titled the novel Nightwood, rejecting Barnes’ initial proposal, Bow Down. But as Georgette Fleischer’s careful study of the novel’s revision history argues, these supposed facts may not be true.

There is less scholarship on this aspect of The Antiphon, but the reports are similar. Linda Curry has found that Barnes reworked the play in five substantial revisions she grouped from the

---

301 Plumb, Introduction to Nightwood: The Original Versions and Related Drafts, by Barnes, pp. vii-xxvi.
302 Fuchs, p. 298.
303 Fuchs, p. 296.
305 Fleischer, p. 411.
twenty-nine individual versions in Barnes’ archive. This “text-bashing,” as Mary Lynn Broe dubs Eliot’s edits to the play, “succeeded in getting the work close to the size Eliot had recommended,” but “cost the play a great deal in character development, theme.” Curry insists that Eliot’s final excisions created “gaps … in the play that the uninitiated reader would be hard-pressed to fill. Language and logic became condensed, even abbreviated to such an extent that in some passages the words turned into a kind of shorthand, indecipherable for a first-time reader, impossible for a listening audience.” For Curry, The Antiphon “never recovered” from Eliot’s proverbial red pen, and articles like hers form the major impetus for scholars to rush into the archive to “recover[]” Barnes’ texts.

Although Eliot served as Barnes’ literary imprimatur, as his introductions to her work evince, he doesn’t “get” Nightwood or The Antiphon. Despite the effect Eliot’s “introduction” had on Barnes’ publishing career, and despite her apparent gratitude for his assistance, the six pages preceding the American edition of Nightwood are not a glowing recommendation of Barnes’ talent or the novel’s virtues. Eliot’s introduction contains more than a few oddities that pose questions of his commitment to the text, the most glaring of which is his assertion that upon first reading, there were aspects of the text he didn’t like: “When I first read the book I found the opening movement rather slow and dragging, until the appearance of the doctor … and

---

306 Curry, p. 404.
307 Broe, Introduction to Silence and Power, p. 8; Curry, p. 295.
308 Curry, p. 297.
309 Curry, p. 287.
310 “Imprimatur” is Aaron Jaffe’s useful term for describing Eliot’s position as the veritable stamp of approval for Barnes’ work in the modernist community.
311 Before Eliot agreed to act as her editor for the former in 1936, Barnes had circulated what was then called “Bow Down” among potential publishers, “trying without much success to revise the novel after rejections by Scribner, Simon & Schuster, Viking, and Covici. Emily Coleman had given the typescript to the publisher Ben Huebsch to consider, but he, too, was uninterested. Boni & Liveright sent a negative report, demanding a complete rewriting of her book” (Phillip Herring, p. 218).
I believed the final chapter to be superfluous.”312 Sentences like these that explain the editor’s initial reticence in appraising the novel positively have no place in an introduction, one of the purposes of which is to recommend the book in hand. Each recounting of initial reservation precedes a remark of his eventual appreciation, creating a narrative about the path to awareness of the novel—a story recounting his (eventually) pleasant surprise at finding the book’s virtues, despite its multiple foibles. As Aaron Jaffe argues, “Eliot claims to offer readers his own experience rather than an interpretation per se. He offers them a script to imitate, a quasi-romance plot between reader and literary object—overcoming indifference, habituated attraction, and mutual fulfillment—implicated by his privileged access to Barnes’ work.”313 Jaffe explains how the introduction paints Eliot’s own literary celebrity status through his insistence that Nightwood is difficult to understand and his insinuation that he understands it completely, “subordinating” both readers and text to what Jaffe calls Eliot’s status as “preferred reader.”314

What Jaffe doesn’t focus on is Eliot’s central message to the introduction: you must reread Nightwood. In at least three distinct moments in the six-page introduction, Eliot mentions the many times he has read the novel: “I have read Nightwood a number of times, in manuscript, in proof, and after publication”; “the other characters, on repeated reading, became alive for me”; and “to have read the book a good many times does not necessarily put one in the right knowledge of what to say to those who have not yet read it.”315 For Eliot, rereading is the access point to the difficulty of Nightwood, which, as he promises, will improve and reveal itself in this “repeated” action. Per his recommendations, lack of enjoyment or understanding can be solved by rereading. This move assumes the comprehension of Nightwood is beyond the average

313 Jaffe, p. 113.
314 Ibid.
315 Eliot, introduction to Nightwood, pp. xvii, xviii-xix, and xxii.
readers’ capacity, and within this suggestion, belies Eliot’s own apprehensions about not grasping the text. His repeated return to his own moments of rereading are symptomatic of his anxious relation to the text.

Eliot’s relationship to the publication of *The Antiphon* is similar, but more egregious. He expressed a continued reticence in accepting Barnes’ many versions of the play, and his restrained appreciation of the piece continued up to and through its moment of printing. The initial blurb he wrote to preface its publishing with Faber & Faber reads like a cheeky bad review:

We are firmly persuaded that in 1936 when we published Miss Djuna Barnes’s novel *Nightwood*, there was no other publishing house, on either side of the Atlantic, which would not have rejected that book out of hand. To people of conventional manners *Nightwood* was shocking, to people of conventional taste in fiction it was tedious and incomprehensible … After many years of silence the author has given us *The Antiphon*, a Verse Tragedy. From the point of view of the conventionally minded, *The Antiphon* will be still more shocking—or would be if they could understand it—and still more tedious—because they will not understand it—than *Nightwood*.

It might be said of Miss Barnes, who is incontestably one of the most original writers of our time, that never has so much genius been combined with so little talent. Her writing shatters the normal structure of the English (or of the American) language. Nevertheless, *The Antiphon* is the nearest thing written in our time, to the grimmer and grislier masterpieces of Jacobean tragedy: the author
has more in common with Middleton, Ford and Tourneur, than with any living
writer.  

Nightwood’s initial requisite rereading is now absorbed into literary acculturation, and this novel thus becomes a marker of difficulty that identifies the impossibility of the drama. The “they” of the end of the first paragraph is a nonexistent group, disparaged for an invisible crime that reminds one of the emperor’s new clothing: no one wants to be “they” who cannot understand or appreciate The Antiphon. Yet despite this, albeit odd, praise, a sizeable chunk of the blurb is patently disparaging. Eliot’s insistence that no one else would publish Nightwood, that The Antiphon is that text’s illegibility magnified; that the author has not written much lately; that she is not representative of modern work, that she is “original” but imitative of a style popular 350 years prior; and that she has no “talent” for wielding the craft of writing (an accusation that echoes throughout scholastic articulations of Barnes’ career)—all of these translate to a poor recommendation of the play. Additionally, Eliot’s preface does not mention a single facet of the play’s subject matter—not a single character or plot piece—even though by the time of publishing he should have been intimately familiar with the text. Eliot’s posturing, extreme emphasis on Barnes’ difficulty, and repeated mentions of the necessity of his own rereading identify him as a poor reader of Barnes’ work. But ironically, fetishizing Eliot’s role in the service of “saving” Barnes’ revisions from his inadequate editorship overemphasizes his importance to her oeuvre. And attempts to rewrite Nightwood and imagine scholastic revisions of The Antiphon without his influence repeats, editorially, exactly what this kind of scholarship

316 Quoted in Phillip Herring, p. 276.
laments about Eliot’s involvement—a heavy external hand on Barnes’ shoulder and a neglect of actual engagement with her aesthetics/textual interpretation.

Understanding revision as Barnes’ own mode of authorship reinstates an authorial agency that much Barnes scholarship hands to Eliot. One useful tool in this regard is recent work on modernism and revision that identifies the practice of rewriting as an integral modernist aesthetic. Placing Barnes within this system is one step to moving her work from the margins of high modernism—a position partially determined by Eliot’s influence—to the fore. Hannah Sullivan’s 2013 *The Work of Revision* argues that “the association of revision and literary value is the legacy of high modernism and the print culture that nourished it. Modernist writers revise overtly, passionately, and at many points in the lifespan of their texts. They used revision, an action that implies retrospection, not for stylistic tidying-up but to *make it new*.“317 Sullivan’s arguments integrate revision into the culture of modernist genius, and she points to several canonical high modernist texts that address the process of rewriting and/or incompleteness in their very titles: “The preference for future over past time, for the text-to-come rather than the one achieved, is observable even at a bibliographic level, in tentative titles that propose themselves merely as staging points: *Work in Progress, A Draft of XVI Cantos and Draft of XXX Cantos, ‘Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,’ and ‘Part of a Novel, Part of a Poem, Part of a Play.’“318 In her investigation of how “a text’s thematic or formal concerns are linked to its genesis,” Sullivan makes a strong case for revision as an integral and overlooked component of literary modernism. What Sullivan’s text doesn’t attempt is to open a theoretical discussion of the hermeneutics of revision. This is what Barnes’ oeuvre, especially her later works, published and unpublished,

---

318 Sullivan, p. 33.
offers to this emergent field. *The Work of Revision*, as well as Scott Herring’s “Djuna Barnes and the Geriatric Avant-Garde” are evidence of the growing interest in the place of revision in the modernist milieu. Barnes should occupy a central position in this field of inquiry.
Conclusion

Alternative Forms of Writing

Marianne Moore, Edith Sitwell, and Djuna Barnes wrote prolifically, and their aesthetic output took a variety of forms, from poetry to novels, literary criticism, revision, reviews, contributions to little magazines, and journalism. These writers forged their own paths through the landscape of literary modernism, despite the critical climate that sought to devalue their contributions. This navigation required recourse to strategies that instantiated these women in literary modernism and paved spaces for the expression of their unique artistic output. Playing into and against institutions that both devalued women’s writing and barred women’s participation from formal critical discussions of modernism, Moore, Sitwell, and Barnes utilized different forms of writing to assert the authority of their critical voices. This kind of agency is apparent in Moore’s and Sitwell’s corpuses, in which revision, poetics of censure, and literary criticism emerge as affronts to the modernist critical community and its academic wake.

The case of Djuna Barnes is more complicated. Her resistance to playing what decades of what editors and academics understand as T. S. Eliot’s failed protégé occurs in a Bartleby the Scrivener approach to publishing later in her life. In contrast to Moore, who cooperated with institutional pressures, and Sitwell, who rejected these pressures in favor of creating her own systems of exegesis, Barnes eventually declined to participate. Scholarship and biographies on Barnes often neglect to proffer other reasons for the author’s dubbed “hermitage,” preferring to promote the sexier idea of her misanthropy. Whether or not Barnes was a misanthrope later in her life is not the issue, but rather the academic recourse to explaining aesthetics and aesthetic activities through the female author’s biography. Tantalizing as these anecdotes and gossipy
crumbs may be, the first tasks of scholarship are to read and interpret the text at hand, and not to use writing as psychotherapeutic access to the maladies of the deceased. This is scavenger-hunt-academicism that offers rewards for finding a predetermined list of vaguely-defined items in broad-reaching corpuses.

The task now is to begin to uncover how modernist modes of critical thought dictate contemporary academic practice, and to interrogate and resist interpretive methods based in sexist early-twentieth-century cultural and political practices. A hundred years of critical thought should have led academics to this path already, but there’s something about modernism that has prevented responsible criticism of many of its tenets. The period’s close relationship to—even identification with—the foundational structures of our discipline has been the major barrier in this regard. The irony of exegesis that seek both to acknowledge the death of the author and find her personality in her work is a modernist precept largely unchallenged in contemporary practice. Our objectives now in reading modernist women’s writing against these damaging systems of analysis are fourfold: to resist pathologizing female authorship and interrogate this kind of existing scholarship; to read modernist women’s critical responses and alternative forms of writing and include them in the modernist canon; to employ better editorial systems for the representation of modernist women’s texts; and to interrogate the public face of modernism, demystifying and dethroning the “founding fathers” of the literary studies discipline.

While pathologizing modernist women’s writing is a major academic problem, not all biographical scholarship does a disservice to the subject on which it focuses. Understanding authors and their work in the context of their relevant historical milieu and political and cultural periods is often vital to learning how texts are interrelated and the kinds of pressures and ideals to which an author’s work responds, consciously or unconsciously. Although autobiographical
expression is not an inferior aesthetic form, modernist modes of criticism categorized female authorship as intuitively implicated in the autobiographical genre and then proceeded to deride this very medium. The tendency to reduce women’s art solely to biographical expression participates in early-twentieth-century excuses for devaluing women’s writing.

Furthermore, the trend of reading women’s writing biographically doesn’t even consider all potential modes of this kind of analysis; instead, many academics, especially from the mid-1980s on, specifically zero in on sites of trauma and/or possible anxieties, treating texts as particular, and often inadvertent, expressions of defining pathologies. In Moore scholarship, the focus remains on her relationship with her mother and her ingratiating persona; for Sitwell, academics harp on her early family life traumas and brazenness in dealing with critics; and for Barnes, the emphasis is on her relationship with her grandmother, her rape, her early marriage, reclusiveness, and “failure” as an author. For the modern-day academic, biographical elements are juicy targets that allow for an easier conceptualization of the “author function” that demands a “principle of unity in writing,” which, for the female writer, seems as though it must always unite the physical and textual corpus. The struggle against pathologizing women’s writing is a bifurcated endeavor that involves both careful scholarship and the cross-examination of four decades of academic writing. Interrogating assumptions academics have made about various female modernists who have passed in and out of scholastic vogue since the ‘70s reveals as much about the prejudices we still retain today about women’s writing as do examinations of modernist critical modes.

It would be more productive to begin to examine female modernists’ alternative forms of art as important critical and aesthetic contributions. The recourse to pathology has dismissed many of these different forms through ageist claims. Readings of Moore’s revision of “Poetry”
too often fall into this category. Academics explain the poet’s decision as the failure of an intellect deteriorating with age, or as a move in the interest of making her poetry more accessible to the reading public. To this day, the revisions Moore completed almost fifty years ago have not been sufficiently theorized, although they have been explained away repeatedly. In both scholarship and classroom approaches to Moore’s work, academics must highlight the intricacies and importance of revision to her work.

Although a major modernist figure in her time, Edith Sitwell has all but completely disappeared from the modernist canon. Much of this disappearance occurred in the ‘80s, and often for reasons such as those that Richard Ellmann and Robert O’Clair cite in their 1988 edition of *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*: “Among the English poets of this century, Edith Sitwell occupied for a time an eminent but precarious place. It would seem now, since her death, that her significance is small and eccentric. Her poetry suggests some indecision as to who she was … The oddity of her verse has shown staying power … no doubt, because of the extraordinary personality of the poet, which gives the lines—or at least the poems—a memorability that they might otherwise lack.”

Ellmann and O’Clair skewer Sitwell for inconsistencies in her forty-four year history of publishing poetry (from *Clowns’ Houses* in 1918 to *Outcasts* in 1962), which, as they claim, rather than demonstrating growth and/or maturity in a dynamic poetics, “suggests some indecision as to who she was.” The editors’ issue with diversity in Sitwell’s poetic œuvre resides largely in the fact that her work does not provide a stable conception of her identity—as though the revelation of her personality were the main task of her poetry. The end of their blurb on Sitwell then lauds her “extraordinary personality” as a vessel

---

through which to discount her work. At every turn, Ellmann and O’Clair find ways to downplay the importance of Sitwell’s poetry and emphasize her “eccentric[ity],” relegating her work to a status tangential to her person.

The editors make one accurate observation in their blurb, however—Sitwell was a major figure of modernism. Except for the break between Five Variations on a Theme (1933) and Street Songs (1942) (in which time she published three novels and a volume of criticism), she published a book of poetry at least every three years from 1918-1954. Major periodicals reviewed her works, she published in prominent little magazines, and served as editor for her own, Wheels. She appeared regularly on BBC radio and was frequently featured in newspapers and popular magazines. Benjamin Britton set her most famous poem, “Still Falls the Rain,” to music in 1954. And, while not as popular as Natalie Barney’s or Gertrude Stein’s, Sitwell’s salons in London were popular meeting grounds for artists. She also served as a mentor for poets influential in the ’40s and ’50s, including Dylan Thomas. Her fairly recent disappearance from the annals of modernism is thus a perplexing fact, much of which can be chalked up to editors’ negative appraisal of Sitwell’s persona. It’s hard to imagine this scenario occurring with a male author, and a survey of Ellman and O’Clair’s volume reveals that the blurbs for male modernists discuss personality far less often than those of female authors. What the canon needs now is a redirection of emphasis from damaging pathologies of female writers’ “eccentric” personalities to serious considerations of their aesthetics, critical contributions, and contemporaneous significance.

But it’s not just the (re)inclusion of female modernist authors that’s at stake in the canon; the forms of their writing are equally important. Traditional modes of representing writing do not and cannot fully support many forms of alternative writing. The volumes Robin Schulze and
Heather Cass White have produced on Moore are exemplary of the kind of careful scholarship and innovative presentation that the oeuvres of both Moore and Barnes require. *Becoming Marianne Moore* (2002), *A-Quiver with Significance: Marianne Moore 1932-1936* (2008), and *Adversity and Grace: Marianne Moore 1936-1941* (2012) track over twenty years of Moore’s publishing and revisions, noting first presentations and variants, from complete overhauls of poems, to changes of commas, spelling, and article use. Creating such a volume for Barnes’ *Nightwood* or *The Antiphon* would prove an unwieldy endeavor on the page, but digital formats might open up publishing possibilities for revised texts, which hard copies can offer only at great expense. Web pages could easily offer access to all of these texts’ versions, color code edits recommended by outside readers, or even provide a palimpsestic overlay of revisions, enabling easier comparison of drafts.

************************************************

Female authors experienced a very different modernism than their male peers. For decades, scholarship has not fully understood the magnitude of this difference, but has instead contributed to its scale, not only failing to interrogate modernist structures that sought to devalue women’s writing, but also unwittingly participating in this process of devaluation. As the scholastic treatment of Moore’s revisions, Sitwell’s impressionistic criticism, and Barnes’ writing habits evince, scholarship is still interested in passing judgment on the perceived failures of modernist female authors. But the time for adjudication is over—the verdicts were already dispatched by the modernists themselves and/or the critico-literary institution that arose with
them. Scholarship on these women writers must keep in mind the factors of this modernist climate that cast female authorship in a shadow of conclusions that are based on dogged perceptions in which integral moments in women writers’ oeuvres become both sites of failure and expressions of pathology. Now, the task is to avoid rereading these women’s works through similar structures—a process by which attempts to “save” women’s authorship from the verdicts of their peers end up repeating the very prejudiced configurations this scholarship would often like to refute. What’s needed is an awareness of the context that necessitated these writers’ modes of authorship, which challenge predominating understandings of successful aesthetic production. Recognizing what these women were working through and against is the first step. Actually reading their work as a critical aesthetic that has an intellectual life beyond the confines of pathology is the second. Only then can we restore agency to the critico-aesthetic of the female modernist author’s oeuvre by resisting the series of structures that has refused her hermeneutic capabilities for a hundred years.

Moore, Sitwell, and Barnes’ alternative forms of writing are both aesthetic and critical contributions, as they implicitly (or explicitly, in Sitwell’s case) critique hegemonic institutions of modernism. For too long, women have been left out of the critical history of modernism. Louis Menand and Rainey’s 2000 Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: Volume 7, Modernism and the New Criticism is a recent case in point. Of the twenty chapters in the nearly 600 page volume, only two are devoted to women’s critical voices, and these are, of course, Virginia Woolf’s and Gertrude Stein’s. Far more female modernist authors than these two were participating in the critical formation of both their period and the evolution of literary analysis. For example, Laura Riding Jackson wrote A Survey of Modernist Poetry with Robert Graves in 1927, as well as the philosophical Anarchism is Not Enough in 1928. Cambridge History
mentions the former volume as a source “to which [William] Empson attributed the ‘invention’ of his method,” but in a dependent clause, labels *Survey* “a quirky and interesting book.” Even in traditional forms, women’s contributions to literary analysis face disregard and belittlement. Including more women in the founding of modernism and the construction of critico-literary institutions is a key step toward amending the false understanding that the incipience of modern literary critical methods was populated almost exclusively by men. However, as a result of both the modernist refusal of female critical agency (including participation in many university settings) and a decades of relegating modernist women authors’ works to the confines of their biographies, the project of resurfacing women’s critical contributions is heavily archival. As the cases of Moore, Sitwell, and Barnes evince, this venture also requires a revised conception of what “counts” as writing—of what we decide to read, how we choose to read it, and, within these reformulations, how to ensure our readings contribute to the reclamation of modernist women’s authorship.

---

Selected Bibliography


Bazin, Victoria, Marianne Moore and the Cultures of Modernity (Farnham UK: Ashgate, 2010).


Bradshaw, Melissa, Amy Lowell, Diva Poet (Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2011).


Rupprecht, Caroline, Subject to Delusions: Narcissism, Modernism, Gender (Evanston IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 2006).


Street, George Slythe, review of *The Feminine Note in Fiction*, by Courtney, in *The Times Literary Supplement* (25 November 1904), p. 361.


