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“I Just Have a Lot of Feelings”: Reflections on the Modernist Poetess

Our seminar on The Feeling(s) of Modernism intersects with some research I am beginning on the figure of the poetess in Modernist literature, and specifically in the periodicals that are accessible in [The Modernist Journals Project](#). While “poetess” may, in its simplest denotation, indicate just a female poet, the term is loaded with the deleterious judgment of critics, who associate “the poetess” with sentimental, poorly wrought verse saturated with uncontrolled emotions. This figure was derided, of course, not only by serious literary scholars but also in the broader culture of the nineteenth century, as evidenced by Mark Twain’s famous parody in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Emmeline Grangerford, whose phrases rather inevitably end with the word “alas”: “she warn’t particular,” says Huck, “she could write about anything you choose to give her to write about, just so it was sadful.” The counterpart in Modern poetry is certainly Fresca (elaborated in a section of *The Waste Land*’s Fire Sermon until Ezra Pound advised T. S. Eliot to remove it), whose portrait defecating on the “needful stool” mirrors Eliot’s judgment of her own “sadful” writing, an exercise as divorced from context, and as rote, as the counting of sheep for insomnia:

From such chaotic misch-masch potpourri,
What are we to expect but poetry?
When restless nights distract her brain from sleep
She may as well write poetry, as count sheep.
And on those nights when Fresca lies alone,
She scribbles verse of such a gloomy tone
That cautious critics say, her style is quite her own.

“Women grown intellectual,” writes Eliot, “grow dull, / And lose the mother wit of natural trull.”¹

It is not only derision of the poetess that runs from the nineteenth century into the period we call Modernism, though studies of that figure are centered in nineteenth-century and, especially, Victorian literary studies.² In fact, many of these women—among them, we might place Sara Teasdale, Alice Meynell, and even Edna St. Vincent Millay—were actively publishing in the twentieth century, when their traditional poetics were arguably more suspect amidst the intense experimentation of the Modernists.³ As I move through early stages of this research, I ask: if we look at women poets from this era, who, as the evidence in the MJP shows, were publishing their own creative work, reviewing other publications, and engaged in contemporary questions about politics and literature, but who have been squeezed out of canonical definitions of literary Modernism, how does it change our sense of the development in the early twentieth century of aesthetics, form, experimentation, sociopolitical commitment, and more?

I see a number of junctures between that research and our seminar on affect, emotion, and feeling—first, the embodiment of affect. Eliot's stricken or suppressed lines from his Modernist masterpiece underscore the ways in which the body of the poetess, the female body that produces poetry, is ground for anxiety and ridicule; in addition to discussing her defecating, Eliot explains that Fresca, whose true "mother wit" is that of a "trull," or whore, uses her morning routine to "[d]isguise the good old hearty female stench." The poetess is generally defined by her biological body, her emotions, and her poetic style. The body is a necessary component—as Virginia Jackson and Eliza Richards note, in arguing for the lyric of the Poetess as a generic mode more than an identity, the work of many male poets of the nineteenth century was "stylistically and thematically indistinguishable," but they were received quite differently.⁴ The revulsion Eliot expresses for Fresca is not just for her physical body, but for her body of poetic work as well. The insistence that affect is something embodied, primitive, and demanding, uncontrolled by reason or intellect (in these ways, much like defecation or odor), has not been, in our readings, a gendered concept. But of

course the words expressive, emotional, instinctual, hysterical, sensitive, demonstrative, moody, responsive, intuitive, affectionate, weepy are all terms that are culturally attached to the feminine and, however reductively, to the female body, and they are contrasted to the masculine reasoned, rational, analytical, intellectual, logical, systematic—those attributes that are the purview of the mind rather than the body. As Laura C. Wendorff notes, though to some degree tenderness and feeling were treasured in all writers in the nineteenth century, it was more expected of women, who were understood to have strong emotions but underdeveloped minds (118).⁵

In the theories of affect we are using to frame the seminar, the body is acted *upon* (by sound, color, sentence). The (to me, uncomfortable) language of violence that permeates the discourse is violence done *to* a viewer's/reader's/listener's body, and the passivity or receptivity of this body is also indicative of the feminine.⁶ Because a primary cultural role of the poetess was producing verse that comforted and consoled others in times of grief or hardship, the poetry is explicitly intended to act upon its audience's feelings—not with violence, but with soothing comfort. But the poetess, the maker of the verse, was not immune to its affective, and physical, powers as well. She must, herself, sympathetically identify with the bereaved or lovelorn enough to internalize their emotions, and then to channel that into composition. This process was not figured as intellectual or mental; Wendorff says that the poetess was to write “spontaneously, rather than thoughtfully or carefully,” “dashing off verse as if it welled up, uncontrollably, from the very nature of their beings” (117). One of the early anthologists of women's poetry, Rufus Griswold, explained in *Female Poets of America* that though a male poet rooted his verse in “creative intelligence,” the work of a poetess flowed instead from the “vivid dreamings of [her] unsatisfied heart” (qtd. in Wendorff 110). The poetess is called an *improvisatrice*: feminine, spontaneous, extemporaneous, writing from an uncontrolled and embodied surge of sentiment. With this figure, then, the role of the body, and the unrestrained or engulfing emotion that brims within it, is as characteristic of the creator as of the audience. Both are

acted upon, both are, to borrow a phrase from Lauren Berlant, at the “preideological nexus of overwhelming feeling.”

“Overwhelming feeling” is obviously one of the strongest characteristics of the poetess, her “sentimentalism, or the expression of ‘tender’ emotions,” which, says Wendorff, contemporary critics like Ann Douglas “have come to equate [with] a gratuitous, even nauseating, expression of emotion indicative of substandard literature” (118). Strong sentiment is abhorrent to the dominant modes and theories of Modernist poetry, privileging object and image over emotional expression—to some degree, the sentiments of the poetess are outlaw feeling(s) of Modernism. Yet the persistence of the poetess into the periodicals that launched Modernist literature suggests that an audience still existed for affective verse. The work of Sara Teasdale, to take just one instance, appears in *Harper’s Magazine* (1911), *The Little Review* (1914), and *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* (1914, 1915, and 1917). In 1917, Harriet Monroe, a highly influential editor of Modernist literature, devotes several pages of *Poetry* to discussing a \$50 prize “Miss Teasdale” has won for her volume *Love Songs*, beating out, among others, H.D., Ezra Pound, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Louis Untermeyer, Vachel Lindsay, and Witter Bynner. Monroe decides that Teasdale is “certainly worthy of a prize”: “Her art is of an absolute and most refreshing simplicity; and sincerity also, except when the emotion is frayed by a tempting facility. Though of an old fashion, it is a fashion that endures” (267-68).⁷ That prize, from the Poetry Society of America, is now considered to be the first ever Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. *The Little Review* self-consciously developed as a vehicle for the avant-garde, taking as its defiant motto, “Making No Compromise with the Public Taste,” but in 1914 it published a sonnet by Teasdale, paired with another by Eunice Tietjens, in which the women seem to address one another, each assuming the role of both poet and audience.⁸ Teasdale’s sonnet, “To E,” says that “like the sun your sweetness overcame / My shy and shadowy mood / [. . .] / My eyes

caught light from yours, within whose flame / Humor and passion have an equal flare.” Tietjens replies in “To S”:

Then I who still had loved your distant voice,
Your songs, shot through with beauty and with tears
And woven magic of the wistful years,
I felt the listless heart of me rejoice
And stir again, that had lain stunned so long,
Since I had you, yourself a living song.

The sonnets have a few commonalities that resonate with our discussion, including, in each, an assertion of being flooded with sensation or feeling and of experiencing that emotion in the body (for instance, as sunshine, in the eyes, or in the heart). Furthermore, in the latter sonnet, the poems of Teasdale are figured as being, themselves, emotional and of being inseparable from the poet’s body or self: the poems/songs are “shot through with beauty and with tears” and the poet is “yourself a living song.”

A last question or emerging thought about these poet(esse)s is how the traditional form that nearly always characterizes their work, a form that was already becoming belated according to canonical narratives of Modernism, conveys or blights their sentiment and affective power. If artists and theorists are correct that color, line, narrative voice, and other formal elements prompt, cause, or transmit powerful unconscious or somatic reactions, how do the predictable rhymes, standard stanza forms, and regular lines of traditional poetry factor into the work of such highly expressive texts, each, by definition, a spontaneous welling of emotion meant to evoke the same in its reader? Certainly one might speculate that the form maims or forcibly contains the affective power, muting expression in favor of aural or metric perfection. Or perhaps the safety of the traditional form contains the violent potential of strong emotion and embodied affect, allowing the work of the poetess rather to soothe and gently stir, as more befits her gendered cultural position.

Placing my very early work on the poetesses of Modernism into the context of this seminar has revealed to me my own discomfort with their sentiment, my desire to decode the poems for a hidden feminism or progressivism, to read them (as does A. Alvarez) in relation to Imagism or another foundational Modernist movement. What is our tolerance, as readers today, for these particular feelings of Modernism, and what can we discover, through archives like the MJP, was the tolerance, or indeed enthusiasm, at the time for them? If the sentiment of the poems no longer has the power to move, to make us feel, in a more skeptical era, how does it shape our critical and cultural understanding of the poetess, to whom such an effect on her audience was crucial—and how does this question ask us to interrogate altogether the concept of affect as transcendent, universal, timeless? What role does gender play in our characterization of what constitutes acceptable or productive feelings, and how does terminology like “violence” and “power” vs. “melodrama” or “hysteria” encode those judgments?

¹ These lines appear in the facsimile of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, published by Harcourt (now OP), which also shows the editing of Pound and of Eliot’s first wife Vivien.

² This is one of the things prompting my research, but it also means that much of the cultural and literary analysis of the poetess, including what I draw in here, is focused in the prior century.

³ Interestingly, but beyond the scope of this brief paper and requiring much further study, my early research in the MJP suggests also a racial and/or exoticizing component to the term in the Modernist era: though “poetess” seems to be used freely, and without pejorative intentions, in the magazine *Crisis* that grew from the Harlem Renaissance, and in other publications for female poets who are, for instance, Persian or Russian, its usage for English and American Caucasian poets, from popular magazines to the highly influential journal *The Little Review*, is nearly always dismissive.

⁴ Virginia Jackson and Eliza Richards, “‘The Poetess’ and Nineteenth-Century American Women Poets,” *Poetess Archive Journal* 1.1 (April 2007). Ed. Laura Mandell. Web.

⁵ Laura C. Wendorff, “‘The Vivid Dreamings of an Unsatisfied Heart’: Gender Ideology, Literary Aesthetics, and the ‘Poetess’ in Nineteenth-Century America.” *ATQ: Nineteenth Century American Literature and Culture* 15.2 (June 2001): 109-129. Print.

⁶ Speaking of uncomfortable: Eliot says that Fresca, awakening, “blinks, and yawns, and gapes, / Aroused from dreams of loves and pleasant rapes.”

⁷ Harriet Monroe, "Sara Teasdale's Prize," *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* XII.V (August 1918): 264-269. The Modernist Journals Project. Web.

⁸ *The Little Review* 1.2 (April 1914): 17-18. The Modernist Journals Project. Web.