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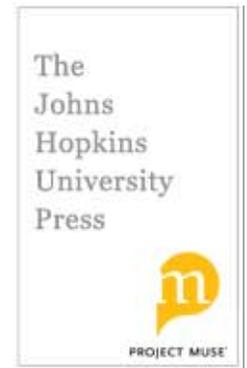
Outselling the Modernisms of Men: Amy Lowell and the Art of  
Self-Commodification

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# Outselling the Modernisms of Men: Amy Lowell and the Art of Self-Commodification

MELISSA BRADSHAW

The famous 1912 New Poetry Fire kindled by the good and great Harriet Monroe was burning up the prairie, and anything any poet did was temporarily news, at last. New Books of Poetry were popping like Popcorn. Amy Lowell was telling Massachusetts just where to get off. Ezra Pound had broadcasted imagism from London. In just two months [Edgar Lee Master's] Spoon River [Anthology] was to start in Reedy's Mirror, and to be read to tatters in Chicago and London before it came out in Book Form. Frost was coming out in England and was about to be lionized in Boston, Sandburg was soon to receive his first prize, that for His poem on Chicago, from Harriet Monroe, and all the poets in America for the first time in thirty years were looking one another in the eye.

Vachel Lindsay<sup>1</sup>

PERHAPS THE MOST STRIKING FEATURE OF VACHEL LINDSAY'S GLOWING description of the American poetry scene during the first few decades of the twentieth century is the way Ezra Pound, Edgar Lee Masters, Robert Frost, and Amy Lowell peacefully coexist in the same paragraph. There is no sign here of the bifurcation between high art and popular culture that characterizes canonical modernism. Lindsay's letter takes for granted that these poets appear in the same periodicals and enjoy a collective audience. He also, significantly, describes this movement in terms of commodification and the poets' interactions with a larger public: new books of poetry are "popping," apparently both off presses and bookstore shelves; Pound broadcasts a new style of poetry as Poetry's foreign correspondent; Lowell tells Massachusetts where to get off, presumably in her controversial speeches before local poetry societies and university audiences; Masters' verse novel is serialized; and so on. Lindsay only references a specific poem when he notes that Sandburg won Poetry's annual cash prize for his poem "Chicago."

While it would be naive to ignore issues of canonicity and the power exercised by figures like Pound and Eliot and Ford Madox Ford in shaping current understandings of modernist poetics, and while the paper trail left behind in letters by Monroe, Lowell, Pound, Frost, John Gould Fletcher,

and Margaret Anderson, among others, certainly deflates Lindsay's claim that American poets were "looking one another in the eye" (p. 455), I want to indulge in the reconceptualization of modernist poetry hierarchies suggested by his narrative. Doing so levels the playing field and allows us to imagine the cultural space of early twentieth-century poetry not as an oligarchy presided over by alienated expatriates writing against the philistinism of the masses, but as a capitalist marketplace in which poetry is a commodity.

Recently, literary critics have begun deconstructing canonical modernism's disavowal of marketing strategies, what Michael Murphy calls "classic market-phobic modernist discourse" which insists on a pure art, unfettered by the demands of a mass audience.<sup>2</sup> This critical juncture, when the legend of the modernist artist as impervious to public opinion and oddly untouched by the commercial realities of a capitalist society is fading rapidly, marks the perfect moment for a reconsideration of Amy Lowell, a woman so utterly unabashed in her approach to poetry as a business as to exclaim, "Publicity first. Poetry will follow." T. S. Eliot dubbed her the "demon saleswoman"; she herself conceded, "I made myself a poet, but the Lord made me a business man."<sup>3</sup> While this commitment to the business end of poetry has been used to distinguish Lowell from "real" poets, and has served to justify her exclusion from anthologies and genealogies of modern poetry, in this essay I argue that the categories of entrepreneur and poet need not be mutually exclusive. I begin by exploring the specific strategies by which Lowell marketed herself and her poetry, drawing on accounts of her infamous public lectures and readings. I then read these public appearances and literary proclamations alongside those of her contemporaries in the new poetry movement, Ezra Pound in particular, suggesting that Lowell was not alone in her commodification of modern poetry, only exceptionally skilled.

#### "Poetry is at once my trade and my religion"<sup>4</sup>

Lowell's earliest childhood journals reveal an anxiousness to find a career. In her fifteenth year she vacillates between wanting to be a poet, a photographer, and a competitive coach racer.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, she could not help but be aware of the expectations and limitations placed on her as a woman and as a Lowell, a family whose wealth and social prominence certainly precluded their female members from having careers. Those same "limitations," however, afforded her the time and space to hone her artistic talents, even if they were never meant to be more than private accomplishments. Having decided definitively to become a poet at twenty-eight, Lowell spent the next ten years slowly and methodically schooling herself. By the

time she felt ready to publish her first volume of poetry, *A Dome of Many-Coloured Glass* (1912), her parents had died, her siblings had left to start their own families, and she had bought out their shares in the family estate. As the head of her own household, she had the economic wherewithal to eschew social strictures and pursue a career as a professional poet. Had she been born male, her biographers suggest, it is possible she might have put the same kind of energy into pursuing medicine or law or business. As Harriet Monroe puts it, “the force which Miss Lowell’s New England ancestors put into founding and running cotton-mills, or belike into saving souls, she [put] into conquering an art and making it express and serve her” (Monroe, p. 79). Poetry became the consuming passion of Lowell’s life, and when she was not writing it, she was promoting it—both her own and that of those contemporaries whose projects complemented hers, among them Sandburg, Masters, Lindsay, Frost, H.D., D. H. Lawrence, and John Gould Fletcher. In magazine reviews, short articles, two prose volumes of poetry criticism, and most especially on the lecture circuit, Lowell preached the gospel of the new poetry. Her friend, the actress Eleanor Robson Belmont, describes her as “perform[ing] the service of a barker at a circus, as from the lecture platform, in the press, and almost the street corner, she cried aloud, ‘Poetry, Poetry, this way to Poetry.’”<sup>6</sup>

From the beginning of her career, Lowell’s poetry readings were theatrical events. In fact, in her first public reading she arranged to have a musician friend stand behind a curtain and simulate the sound of bombs dropping by beating on a bass drum as she read a series of war poems.<sup>7</sup> Coached by her companion, Ada Dwyer Russell, who retired from a successful career as an actress in order to move in with Lowell, she turned her readings into dramatic performances. According to biographer C. David Heymann, Russell

showed her how to incorporate song, chants, shouts, silence, breaks (aposiopesis), stops, starts, and whispers into her act in an effort to push back the boundaries of coherence. Amy learned how to vary her volume, increase her pitch and tempo, shift tone with dramatic suddenness. Ada demonstrated the use of gesture, pace, mime, taught Amy how to cakewalk and how to stamp out the rhythm of her beat.<sup>8</sup>

Lowell’s narrative poems especially lent themselves to dramatic interpretations. “Appuldurcombe Park,” a soliloquy of a woman yearning for love while caring for her invalid husband, titillated audiences with its refrain, “I am a woman, sick for passion,” and its themes of adultery and abandonment.<sup>9</sup> “After Hearing a Waltz by Bartok” chronicled the rising hysteria of a murderer in time to a waltz tempo: “One! Two! Three! Give me air! Oh! My God!” (CPW, p. 57). “Patterns,” Lowell’s most requested poem, ended its narration of an eighteenth-century noblewoman learning of her fiancé’s death in battle with the daring exclamation, “Christ! What

are patterns for?" (CPW, p. 77). Her lyrics shocked audiences as well with their sensual imagery and their lavish descriptions of female nudity, as in "A Bather," (CPW, p. 223) where she describes the advance of a naked woman through a garden:

A knee or a thigh, sudden glimpsed, then at once blotted into  
The filmy and flickering forest . . .  
Cool, perfect, with rose rarely tinting your lips and your breasts,  
Swelling out from the green in the opulent curves of ripe fruit (ll. 4-8)

Such theatricality, along with the forcefulness of her sweeping pronouncements about the state of contemporary poetry, weakened Lowell's credibility among academics and austere, conservative poetry-types, but it also earned her a devoted, almost fanatical following of fans who mobbed train stations in search of her autograph, often necessitating police escorts, and who packed auditoriums to standing-room-only capacity in order to hear her speak. Poet John Brooks Wheelwright joked that she was "the Biggest Traveling One-Man Show since Buffalo Bill caught the Midnight Flyer to Contact Mark Twain," while Van Wyck Brooks writes, "she whizzed and she whirred, and she rustled and rumbled, and she glistened and sparkled and blazed and blared" (Heymann, pp. 225, 239). Louis Untermeyer insists that she was "not merely a lecturer, she was an event, a national phenomenon, a freak of nature, a dynamo on the loose."<sup>10</sup> In articles written after her death, he often refers to Lowell's showmanship, claiming this very boisterousness in life as justification for her critical neglect after her death: "When she died her poems died with her because they needed her flamboyant personality; they needed all her feminine-masculine vigor."<sup>11</sup> She herself once told an admirer, "I enjoy reading poetry to an audience as I should enjoy acting a play to an audience, because it is one side of my genius."<sup>12</sup>

Even the preparations for Lowell's readings were theatrical. S. Foster Damon, her official biographer, reports that although she was always uncharacteristically punctual for these events (arriving with an entourage consisting of her companion, Ada Russell, one or two maids, and as many extra hands as needed to carry her props), audiences inevitably waited while first, the traditional slanting lectern was replaced by a large table, (which usually had to be carried in over the heads of the audience) so that there was no danger of her papers falling to the floor, out of her reach. Then her high-powered reading lamp had to be plugged in (Damon, p. 392). At one reading, with a horrified Frost standing by, the lamp short-circuited the building's electricity, leaving the two poets to entertain the audience by trading wise-cracks in the dark until the lights came back on (p. 602). During the course of a reading Lowell went through a series of increasingly strong, color-coded pince-nez, which she carried with her in a basket,

explaining to the audience, “These are my eyes!” (p. 392). Throughout these preliminaries, Lowell often joked with her audience, but once she began reading her poems, they often did not know how to respond. She ended their confused silence by admonishing them with what soon became a trademark phrase, “Well!—Clap or hiss, I don’t care which; but do something!” (p. 393).

The reading-lamp, the eye-glasses, the infamous cigars she smoked before and after the readings (and which fans clamored to see), as much as the witty repartee and the intensity of her dramatic readings, endowed Lowell’s public performances with an aura of spectacle. She had to have been aware of the extent to which these trademarks shaped the general public’s perception of her. For example, although biographers disagree over whether or not she smoked the huge, black cigars so often attributed to her in newspaper reports, most insisting that she preferred instead small cigarillos, she must have appreciated the value of the mistake in bolstering her reputation as a no-nonsense, hard-driving business woman. She also appears to have recognized the leeway that eccentricity could grant her, a woman whose birth dictated that she should have been a society matron, a patron of the arts, not an artist.

It was not only the spectacle of her readings that shocked some listeners and enthralled others, it was the kind of poetry she read. For although she may have appeared to be following in the footsteps of popular turn-of-the-century poet-entertainers like James Whitcomb Riley, she was, she continually reminded her listeners, different, representative of an entirely new, modern poetry. Prominent in avant-garde journals like *The Egoist* and *The Little Review* this poetry aggressively marketed itself as high culture. Consequently, Horace Gregory remembers, it was a “poetry few people knew and few people cared to read” (p. 117). Lowell took upon herself the task of teaching audiences to appreciate it. While Pound, as I will discuss in the second half of this essay, “fought the standards of merely ‘popular taste,’” Lowell fought to transform them (Gregory, p. 85).

In analyzing the effectiveness of Lowell’s excessive theatricality it is helpful to think of her as the Liberace of modern poetry. Like the pianist, who often reminded his audiences that classical music was his first love, that he had learned to enjoy popular music, Lowell clearly aligned herself with the highbrow, but presented it in such a way as to make it appeal to a broad audience. Using props, theatrics, and a flamboyant personality, she rendered an otherwise inaccessible (or rather, intimidating because marked as high culture) art form accessible. Liberace, after all, had plenty of Chopin, Strauss, and Debussy in his repertoire, but by encasing classical music in mind-boggling spectacle—colored fountains; mink and diamond-covered capes; multiple, rotating stages; the on-stage appearance of antique limou-

sines—and interspersing it with popular songs like “Let Me Call You Sweet-heart,” he removed it from its conventional signifiers and repackaged it for his middle-class audience. This is not to say that either Lowell or Liberace necessarily dismantled categories of “high” or “low” in their performances. In fact, their effectiveness hinged on a recognition of their transgressing such boundaries, as Margaret Thompson Drewal explains in Liberace’s case, illuminating the arbitrariness of these categories while “at the same time preserving the distinctions for those who wanted to distinguish.”<sup>13</sup>

Describing Lowell’s popularity as a lecturer, Damon writes that even the most skeptical audiences were quickly won over by the accessibility of her readings. They were “converted left and right by the relief of hearing verse they could enjoy without getting into any special and suspect state of mind” (p. 393). He similarly praises her prose writings. In *Six French Poets*, for example, he contends that she surprised audiences by being “clear, sincere, direct, and absolutely intelligible” (p. 321). Familiar with her only through her poems, he explains, they could only suppose that she was a frail, nerve-wracked poetess. Or conversely, seeing that she had written a book of criticism, they expected it to be unapproachably academic and were startled to see that she did not “treat poetry as some Pentecostal descent or Platonic seizure, nor yet as finger-counting and source-tracing. Instead she spoke of it familiarly, as something sane people do” (p. 322). Damon’s ambiguous tone is telling: while ostensibly praising Lowell, he seems to imply that she succeeded with a mass audience because she wrote for the lowest common denominator, that high modernist poetry demanded a certain level of concentration and thought which hers did not. That Lowell’s most fervent supporter (some would say apologist) has difficulty reconciling her status as a popular culture icon with his volume’s aims to memorialize her as a major canonical poet, not to mention his obvious struggle with what he seems to think is a paradox—the possibility of being a female poet and a strong, level-headed woman—demonstrates the extent to which Lowell frustrated stereotypes of how a public intellectual, a poet, a female poet, should look, talk, and act.

On the flip-side of Lowell’s extravagant stage persona was an earnest professional with an indomitable business acumen. As fond as she was of describing art as an impulse, something to be obeyed (“I do not suppose that anyone not a poet can realize the agony of creating a poem. Every nerve, even every muscle, seems strained to the breaking point”), her romanticization of poetry never precluded turning a profit or negotiating a deal, for herself as well as for others.<sup>14</sup> Although generous in donating to causes she deemed worthy, particularly literary magazines, she resisted being cast as everybody’s benefactress, a role which she perhaps feared would undermine her relevance as a poet, reducing her tentative acceptance in

high modernist circles to a condition of her being generous with her money. Ford Madox Ford's vicious depiction of a London dinner party given by Lowell as an affair at which "several someones were intensely anxious each to get money out of the monstrously fat, monstrously moneyed, disagreeably intelligent" host, directing all their after-dinner speeches "at [her] breeches pockets" shows that this fear was not unfounded.<sup>15</sup> Whether or not these nameless "someones" were after Lowell's money, Ford's 1919 *English Review* essay suggests that it was at least a rumor and that the issue lurked below the surface of her relationship with other moderns.

Certainly financial issues, as much as power, were at the root of her problems with Pound, who gravely underestimated her ambitiousness by writing her off as an easily manipulated rich woman who would fund a journal and allow him to run it. In a letter to Margaret Anderson, editor of *The Little Review*, he explained his plans for Lowell: "Re/Amy. I DON'T want her. But if she can be made to liquidate, to excoriate, to cash in, on a magazine . . . THEN would I be right glad to see her milked of her money, mashed into moonshine, at mercy of monitors."<sup>16</sup> In turn, Lowell dismissed Pound as financially naive: "Like many people of no incomes, Ezra does not know the difference between thousands and millions, and thinks that anyone who knows where to look for next week's dinners, is a millionaire" (Damon, p. 237). She was, however, generous with more tactful poets who struck up an alliance with her. As general editor for *Some Imagist Poets 1915, 1916, 1917*, she meticulously divided the profits between the six contributors, John Gould Fletcher, H.D., Richard Aldington, D. H. Lawrence, F. S. Flint, and herself, often including a little more of her own money for H.D., Aldington, and Lawrence, as they struggled through World War I in England (Damon, p. 368). Her generosity with these poets extended beyond finances as she walked their manuscripts to American publishers, checked on delayed royalty checks, and relentlessly promoted their work during her lectures.

Significantly, Lowell demanded that she receive a portion of the profits as well. She also insisted that her work as a lecturer be compensated. In the brief ten years of her career as a public speaker her rate quadrupled, gradually increasing from fifty dollars per engagement to two hundred. While she would sometimes speak for less at an educational institution, she rarely spoke for free and expressed deep resentment on those occasions when she did (Damon, pp. 364, 394-396). This insistence on being paid for her time and efforts reflects not only her desire to be taken seriously as a poet, but the depth of her commitment to poetry as a legitimate vocation. It reflects as well her heritage as a Lowell, one of Boston's oldest and most financially powerful families. At all times she shows an awareness of herself as circulating within, and profiting from, a capitalist economy.

Lowell's books were published by Houghton Mifflin and Macmillan and Company, but she retained ownership of them for the first half of her career. Although she wholly fronted the cost of printing, she received eighty-five percent of the profits, ninety percent through her London publishers (Gregory, pp. 107, 123). She relinquished ownership only when it became apparent that her publishers would push the books harder if they owned them. In a letter to her brother, Lawrence, she attributes her publishers' sudden change of heart to the fact that in the past year she had sold over seven thousand volumes. "I have been through all the burden and heat of day with these books, and backed them when they had no sale, and now I naturally want to reap the benefit" (qtd. in Damon, p. 545). Lowell's involvement in the production of her books extended well beyond turning in her completed manuscripts. She picked the paper, the typeset (enough space between words to not strain the eyes, but print small enough to allow a whole line to be seen at a glance), the format (she commissioned the illustrator Berkeley Updike to model all her books on the first edition of Keats's *Lamia*, small and light enough to fit into a coat pocket, differing only in color and label fonts) and all the minute details in between, from insisting that the printers drop stanzas which began at the top of a page a few lines to having the pages pre-cut (Damon, p. 186).

Lowell similarly left little to chance when one of her books hit the stores. The publication of each new book was preceded by an elaborate trip to New York where she summoned reviewers, newspaper editors, columnists, and publishers to her hotel suite so that she could discuss what she felt needed to be stressed in reviews, as well as explain any nuances of the poetry that she was afraid they might miss. Joyce Kilmer is one such reviewer who fiercely resented Lowell's dictatorial approach to reviews, complaining to Louis Untermeyer that not only had she tried to run the interview by insisting that he question her specifically about the new poetry, but that she had wrangled from him a promise to let her see the manuscript and approve it before submitting it to *The New York Times* (Untermeyer, p. 106). Lowell once justified this type of blatant self-promotion to Untermeyer, explaining that she had to be her "own impresario. There's no point in having a trumpet—or any brass—if you don't blow it" (qtd. in Heymann, p. 240). Chiding Pound on his tactlessness, she told him, "I consider you an uncommonly fine poet who ought to have an impresario, for your knowledge of how to 'get yourself over,' as we say in this little country, is *nil*" (qtd. in Damon, p. 600).

As such comments reveal, Lowell strategically constructed her public image. Above all, she sensed that literary success, measured in terms of sales and public recognition, had very little to do with the inherent merit of a work. In a letter to John Gould Fletcher she warns him that being

expatriate is a mistake with regard to his popularity in America:

You went away just at the moment when your reputation was being made; if you do not come back soon you will lose what you have gained . . . It is the excellence of the work which will keep you in a permanent place, if you once gain it by your own efforts otherwise; but if you wait for the excellence of the work alone to put you where you want to be, it will be a posthumous thing. (Damon, p. 372)

Reputations, then, are based on the cumulative effect of repeated exposure and the ability to draw return audiences. However, Lowell is just as adamant in encouraging artists to carefully monitor what they are remembered for. Though much of the drama from her poetry comes from themes of adultery and sexual longing, she scolds Aldington for writing poetry that is too sexually explicit, warning him that in doing so he will alienate the average reader. She points to the example of D.H. Lawrence, whose novel *The Rainbow* could not find a publisher because it was considered obscene (Damon, p. 449). Anticipating Aldington's response as "Oh Lord, Puritan New England!" Lowell insists she is not a prude. She sanctimoniously adds that, in fact, only she and a few other very discerning readers actually understand what Lawrence is trying to do, but that without an appreciative popular audience, he cannot succeed. To Lawrence she writes,

I think you could top them all if you would be a little more reticent on this one subject. You need not change your attitude a particle, you can simply use an India rubber in certain places, and then you can come into your own as it ought to be. . . . When one is surrounded by prejudice and blindness, it seems to me that the only thing to do is to get over in spite of it and not constantly run foul of these same prejudices which, after all, hurts oneself and the spreading of one's work, and does not do a thing to right the prejudice. (Damon, p. 483)

This is a pivotal quote in readings which posit Lowell as, above all, a lesbian poet who imbues her love lyrics with coded sexual allusions.<sup>17</sup> Reading this passage as an admission of her own commitment to sublimating sexual themes in her work, and using it to authorize sexual decodings of her poetry, has been crucial in recuperating Lowell's writings. At the same time, I believe it is important not to take for granted the extent to which this advice sums up Lowell's marketing imperatives: she has things to say and she will say them, but she will not do so at the expense of her career. This places her on the opposite end of the spectrum from Pound, Lawrence, and most especially, James Joyce, writers who made much of their refusal to compromise the integrity of their work in order to gain public acceptance. But as I will discuss more fully later, their refusal is as much of a marketing strategy as Lowell's writing with a popular audience in mind. Nor should it be forgotten that in the case of Joyce, the loss in finances and reputation fell not on him as much as on his female patrons: Sylvia Beach, Harriet Weaver, Margaret Anderson, and Jane Heap. In this light, Lowell's reticence appears

less a matter of prudishness, or lack of integrity, than as a strategy of self-preservation, a recognition that there is no safe space outside of the literary marketplace, that believing in such a place is a fantasy contingent on someone else doing the work of finding publishers, fronting costs, directing advertisements, and shielding artists from controversies provoked by their work.

“A modern of the moderns”<sup>18</sup>

Michael Levenson observes that modernist intellectuals routinely issued manifestos, each one a definitive, final word, rather than offering malleable opinions. “Beliefs changed markedly, only the tone of conviction was unchanged. . . . The critical pronouncements were not the insights of Olympian minds, but more often the hasty formulae of polemicists.”<sup>19</sup> A *Genealogy of Modernism*, Levenson’s detailed, manifesto-by-manifesto analysis of the rhetoric of modernist poetic theory, notes that the most stable feature of any version of modernism is that it reifies itself by repudiating an immediate past and erasing its origins.

In broadest terms, modernist poets position themselves against their contemporaries, in particular the Georgian poets, by accusing them of following in the footsteps of such nineteenth-century giants as James Russell Lowell, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and John Greenleaf Whittier and essentially reiterating themes and styles of British poetry. Amy Lowell describes these earlier poets as “English provincial poets, in the sense that America was still a literary province of the mother country.” By the beginning of the twentieth century, writes Lowell, American “poets were largely phonographs to greater English poets dead and gone.”<sup>20</sup> Decrying most of contemporary poetry as overly sentimental and morally didactic, Lowell maintains that in modern poetry, “because the artist speaks no moral, it does not mean that none exists. . . . The world of ‘The New Poetry’ is like the world of reality: the morals are there, but it is for us to pronounce them” (qtd. in Damon, p. 339). By this she means that any moral lesson or significance beyond aesthetics must be a product of the reader’s interaction with the poem. Pound similarly insists that “*beauty should never be presented explained . . . Always the desire to know and understand more deeply* must precede any reception of beauty. . . . woe to that artist whose work wears its ‘heart on its sleeve.’”<sup>21</sup> The modern poet, Lowell writes, has “a passionate desire for truth, and a dispassionate attitude toward whatever his search for truth may bring him. He records; he does not moralize. He holds no brief for or against, he merely portrays” (qtd. in Damon, p. 339). The imperative toward objectivity, toward impartiality, emerges as the primary litmus test of a “modern” poet and a particularly pliant one at that, as a work may even include the objective presentation of the artist’s subjectivity. Pound attempts to palliate this contradiction by describing the modern artist as

“scientific in that he presents the image of his desire, of his hate, of his indifference as precisely that, as precisely the image of his own desire, hate or indifference.”<sup>22</sup>

Levenson paraphrases T. E. Hulme’s characterization of the new poetry as a “modern retreat from ‘epic subjects,’ ‘heroic action,’ ‘big things’” and the valorization of personal expression, a poetic strategy “founded on a radical literary individualism” (p. 46). One of the most consistent assertions of this individuality is poets’ championing of “everyday speech.” In fact, the first principle of the 1915 Imagist credo calls on poets to not only “use the language of common speech, but to employ always the *exact* word, not the nearly-exact, nor the merely decorative word” (*Tendencies*, p. 239). Lecturing in the United States in 1935, Gertrude Stein explains that because “after hundreds of years had gone by and thousand of poems had been written, [the poet] could call on . . . words and find that they were just wornout literary words,” the contemporary poet “has to work in the excitingness of pure being; he has to get back that intensity into the language. . . . You have to put some strangeness, something unexpected, into the structure of the sentence in order to bring back vitality.”<sup>23</sup>

Although Eliot’s arrival on the poetry scene in 1914 and his alliance with Pound would mark a vehement revalorization of classical forms, in the early stages of the poetic renaissance modern poets championed free verse and a movement away from rhyme and set meters. As Pound remembers in *The Pisan Cantos*, “To break the pentameter, that was the first heave.”<sup>24</sup> In language that demonstrated poetry’s alliance with abstractionism in sculpture and painting, this change in poetic form was conceptualized in terms of having the courage to break away from rhyme, allowing thoughts to develop into new and invigorating shapes. Shifting subject matter to reflect life in the twentieth century, focusing on images rather than establishing character or narrative, and experiments with poetic forms became codified in memorable catch phrases like Pound’s “make it new” and William Carlos Williams’ “no ideas but in things.”

In answer to the question “What is the new poetry? and wherein does it differ from the old?” Harriet Monroe and her coeditor in the 1917 *New Poetry Anthology*, Alice Corbin Henderson, offer similar features to those mentioned above: form, diction (“the truly modern poet rejects the so-called ‘poetic’ shifts of language—the deems, ‘neaths, forsooths, etc.’”) and subject matter. But ultimately, they claim, the difference lies far deeper than these details as “the new poetry strives for a concrete and immediate realization of life.”<sup>25</sup> The new poetry “has set before itself an ideal of absolute simplicity and sincerity—an ideal which implies an individual, unsteretyped diction; and an individual, unsteretyped rhythm. . . . It looks out more eagerly than in; it becomes objective” (p. xxxvi).

Certainly, staking claims to one's identity by setting oneself up as revolutionary, and creating value for one's own work by insisting on its absolute originality and integrity in the face of innumerable lesser, derivative artists, is an old story. In the 1802 Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth cloyingly worries that his poems, "so materially different from those upon which general approbation is at present bestowed," will not meet the expectations of the average reader, accustomed to "the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers."<sup>26</sup> The attempt to capture the nuances of everyday life in common language again echoes Wordsworth in his commitment "to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as possible, in a selection of language really used by men" (p. 115). Lowell and Pound's sanctimonious repudiation of moral didacticism in poetry is also a common cry of romantic poets, most famously as the premise of Keats' "Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason."<sup>27</sup>

These similarities are not lost on at least one disgusted letter-writer to the *New York Nation* who accuses the new poetry of being "the morbid hypertrophy of romanticism."<sup>28</sup> Nor are they entirely lost on the poets making these claims. The 1915 Imagist credo, for example, states: "These principles are not new; they have fallen into desuetude" (*Tendencies*, p. 240). In public lectures Lowell often traced a lineage for Imagism, citing Coleridge, Poe, Whitman, and Dickinson not merely as ancestors of the new poetry, but in some cases, practitioners (Damon, p. 360). She once went so far as to claim Theocritus as a progenitor (p. 442). Monroe and Henderson also take great pains to convince readers that the new poetry differs only from its immediate predecessors, reminding them that now-canonical poets like Burns, Coleridge, Keats, and Shelley at first met with critical contempt. They even push the historical model as far as Chaucer and Langland in order to convince readers that poetry "is older than rhyme, older than iambic measure, older than all the metrical patterns which now seem so much a part of it" (p. xxxviii).

Predictably, the new poetry's claims of raw artistic integrity in the face of academic sloth and decay incited controversy. And according to Pound, at least, this was the desired response: "We artists who have been so long the despised are about to take over control. . . . And the public will do well to resent these 'new' kinds of art" (qtd. in Levenson, p. 76). Sending Harriet Monroe a batch of poems in 1913 for her magazine, *Poetry*, he writes, "I give you your chance to be modern, your chance . . . to produce as many green bilious attacks throughout the length and breadth of the USA as there are fungoid members of the American Academy" (qtd. in Perkins, p. 299). Tellingly, Pound presents this as a gift, anticipating that the ensuing

controversy over his polemical poems will not only incite members of the “fungoid” academy to fight back, but will simultaneously create, radicalize, and/or panic a readership that previously may not even have been interested in poetry. The hope is that people will not only read poetry, but develop strong opinions about it. Ford Madox Ford remembers this as exactly what happened: “In 1914, *Les Jeunes* had succeeded in interesting a usually unmoved but very large section of the public—and had forced that public to take an interest not in the stuff but the methods of an Art” (qtd. in Levenson, p. 137). In her autobiography, *A Poet’s Life*, Monroe quotes an angry letter writer who begs readers to “throw aside the products of distorted imaginations, even if they are fascinatingly novel and full of color and noise” (p. 302). She quotes this particular letter in order to point out the irony of the author’s attack. Is she, Monroe’s inclusion of the letter implies, really so corrupt in wanting to bring audiences “fascinatingly novel” poems “full of color and noise”?

Amy Lowell’s public lectures and readings, which inevitably ended with conservatives leaping to their feet, accusing her of attempting to destroy poetry, are the extreme version of how poets courted, manipulated, and capitalized on controversy. In a letter to Fletcher she describes the atmosphere of her lectures as “a gladiator fight and wild beast show” (qtd. in Gould, p. 188). Commenting on this phenomenon, Louis Untermeyer mused, “It does not seem possible that this set of honest and almost platitudinous principles (the Imagist credo) could have evoked the storm of argument, fury and downright vilification that broke after the indomitable Miss Lowell began to champion them.”<sup>29</sup> Lowell’s effect seems less surprising, however, given the rhetoric of her lectures, the sharpness of her responses to rebuttals, and the context in which she delivered them.

For example, her first “public row,” as Damon calls it, took place at the 1915 meeting of the Poetry Society of America, a conservative group of poets and poetry readers. Eager to plug the first installment of *Some Imagist Poets*, Lowell talked the society’s secretary, Jessie Rittenhouse, into letting her have five minutes at the end of the already full program. Once there, Lowell used her allotted five minutes to read several Imagist poems, including “Bath,” a bather’s meditation on sunlight reflected in bath water which shocked and scandalized the audience who could not separate the nude speaker in the poem from Lowell. In addition, she outlined the principles of Imagism. Rittenhouse reports that she did this in a manner that “bristled with so much provocative dicta that the right wing was stirred to action and primed for reply” (qtd. in Damon, p. 292). Or as Damon puts it, “the little Chams who felt their prestiges endangered rose and thundered against this power that shocked and surprised them” (p. 293). Heymann claims that audience members were so enraged that they charged the podium

after Lowell finished speaking (p. 212).

That Lowell's impromptu speech, the specifics of which have not survived, was deliberately polemical is corroborated by accounts that emphasize the lack of controversy in the preceding speeches, even though they were about Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*, whose subject matter (government corruption, adultery, religious hypocrisy) and free verse rhythms made it as potentially controversial as Imagism. Says Damon, "So skillfully did these two men [who preceded Lowell] speak, that . . . the more conservative were hardly made aware that it was free in form and content" (p. 292). Lowell, on the other hand, made freedom of form and content, which she believed most defined the new poetry and distinguished it from the rest of contemporary verse, the primary focus of her brief comments. As a result, "the conservatives . . . rose in clamorous unity to attack Imagism, and Amy Lowell's poetry in particular, far beyond the allotted five minutes" (Damon, p. 293).

On another occasion, invited to speak before the MacDowell Club in New York, on the assigned topic "Poetry and Polemics," Lowell bypassed subtlety and began her speech by addressing the conflict directly, thus putting the audience on the defensive before she even began her lecture:

I realized that under the guise of poetry you were all asked here to witness a cockfight, with the odds running high against the imported bird. And yet how you have worked to make these odds secure! Here are nine poets lined up against the bottom of your postcard, of which one, possibly two, may fight on my side. That leaves seven. Seven lusty natives to down one alien woman. Thank you for the compliment. (Damon, p. 338)

Being compared in rapid succession to first cockfight enthusiasts and then natives would have been unspeakably offensive to Lowell's 1916 audience (The racial and class assumptions of her metaphors are obviously still disturbing today, though for different reasons.) With the cockfight metaphor Lowell undermines the class pretensions of an audience gathered to hear a poetry lecture. After all, the kind of crowd that goes to a cock fight would not be seen as respectable as, say, an audience at a tennis match, a game which might have served her purpose just as well. She also questions their motives. This is not about advancing the cause of poetry, it is about turning bloodshed into sport. She strips away any the possibility of rationalizing the ensuing conflict as enriching either the audience or the participants, leaving them stronger after having learned from each other: a cockfight lasts until one of the cocks dies. With her next breath she similarly degrades the other poets on the program. They too fall under the heading "uncivilized" as her words transform them into not only natives, but "lusty natives." They are barbaric, driven by primal passions; she (and here she plays a trump card), the Lowell, is genteel, cultivated, intellectual. If they are natives, then she is the colonizer and ultimately she will subdue their

savageness and teach them her ways.

In her last “public row,” at the Contemporary Club of Philadelphia’s 1920 celebration of the Whitman Centenary, Lowell stood before club members, knowing they were fiercely proud of Whitman having belonged to their organization, and gave a lecture on how little an influence he exerted on contemporary poetry (Damon, p. 515). Insisting that Whitman “was chiefly propagandist and only afterwards poet,” Lowell dwelt at length on his success in legitimating the American experience as a proper object of poetry.<sup>30</sup> But at the same time she took great pains to distance his work from her own, stopping just short of calling him an idiot savant, insisting that his “mind was of too harsh and primitive a texture to grasp fully” his own poetic innovations (p. 65):

I believe that Walt Whitman fell into his own peculiar form through ignorance, and not, as is commonly supposed, through a high sense of fitness; in this point he is at complete issue with the moderns who are supposed to derive from him, since they are perfectly conscious artists writing in a medium not less carefully ordered because it is based upon cadence and not upon metre. (p. 62)

As usual, Lowell’s comments led to intense debating, with the other speakers abandoning their prepared speeches in order to denounce Lowell and the new poetry—one even called her a “literary hand-grenade thrower.” “And then I slammed back good and plenty,” Lowell later told Carl Sandburg (Damon, p. 517). The next day the story made Philadelphia papers with headlines reporting “Tears Punctuate Stormy Spots in Vers Libre Debate” and articles depicting Lowell sobbing on stage, some even swearing she had a nervous breakdown. Lowell was upset by these claims, and spent the next afternoon trying to refute them (“Do I look as if I were a weeping woman?” she asked the reporters whom she summoned to her hotel room). But the immediate effect of the speech, controversy, and newspaper coverage demonstrates how the furor surrounding Lowell’s lectures worked to her advantage: her books quickly sold out in Philadelphia, with booksellers shipping books in from New York to meet customers’ demands (Damon, pp. 518-519).

Amy Lowell’s attitude towards such public rows is complicated. By all appearances she seems to have invited conflict and profited from the ensuing publicity. But after the first few years of being a “storm centre,” as she called herself, Lowell began accepting speaking invitations only if there were to be no question and answer periods afterwards. As she wrote H.D. after the Whitman lecture, “I had especially stipulated that there should be no discussion. I think that the time for discussing the new poetry has gone by. I am willing to talk about it, even explain it, anything, but I will not stand up to be badgered even with the result, as always happens, of my beating my opponents” (qtd. in Damon, p. 515). Striking back at

journalists who, Damon reports, “found the New Poetry excellent material for . . . wise-cracks” and Lowell “particularly good copy,” she ended an interview in the New York *Evening Post* by threatening, “If I had my way, there would be no mention of literature at all in the American newspapers” (Damon, p. 523). Journalists, of course, called her on this stance, claiming her anti-publicity tirade was merely another strategy for publicity. Comments like this suggest that although Lowell initially used public debates and controversy generated in newspaper gossip columns to bring attention to her cause, as she became more secure in her role as a public lecturer and a best-selling poet she increasingly demanded the right to issue polemics without being contradicted. A memorial tribute to Lowell in *The Literary Digest* describes her power in the “principality of modern poetry” as “almost autocratic,” a characterization with which Lowell apparently would have agreed.<sup>31</sup>

It is not surprising, then, that some of her poems echo the polemicism of her public persona. In “The Dinner Party” (*Men, Women and Ghosts*, 1916), for example, she caricatures conservative academics’ resistance to the new poetry. With a stanza for each stage of the evening, she, as representative of the new poetry, faces the contempt and disdain of the academy, which she characterizes as “ghouls batten[ing] on exhumed thoughts,” “mildly protesting against my coarseness / In being alive” (ll. 39, 33-34). During “Fish” the staid, snobbish champions of tradition bait the outsider with feigned interest in her project:

“So . . .” they said,  
 With their wine-glasses delicately poised,  
 Mocking at the thing they cannot understand.  
 “So . . .” they said again,  
 Amused and insolent. (ll. 1-5)

With “Game” the attack begins as a “gentleman with grey-and-black whiskers / Sneer[s] languidly over his quail,” his cool, impenetrable, demeanor driving the narrator into an emotional outburst:

Then my heart flew up and laboured,  
 And I burst from my own holding  
 And hurled myself forward.  
 With straight blows I beat upon him,  
 Furiously, with red-hot anger, I thrust against him.  
 But my weapon slithered over his polished surface,  
 And I recoiled upon myself,  
 Panting. (ll. 12-19)

By the time dinner is over and they have retired to “The Drawing Room,” the narrator has retreated into herself, nursing her wounds. Here the narrative switches to the third person:

In a dress all softness and half-tones,  
 Indolent and half-reclined,  
 She lay upon a couch,  
 With the firelight reflected in her jewels.  
 But her eyes had no reflection,  
 They swam in a grey smoke,  
 The smoke of smoldering ashes,  
 The smoke of her cindered heart. (ll. 20-27)

Lowell uses this sudden switch to the third person in order to show that this defeated woman whose “eyes had no reflection” is not her, but is instead a projection of how her antagonizers want her to be: passive, soft, and vacuous. They want her to be “indolent,” causing no commotion, reverent towards tradition, satisfied with pretty words and phrases, content to sip “blackness out of beautiful china” (l. 32). They want to believe that they have extinguished her passion, reducing her to “smoldering ashes” and a “cindered heart” (ll. 26-27). But as the narrative slips back into the first person Lowell insists that her hosts, with “dead men’s souls / . . . pinned . . . on their breasts for ornament,” are intellectually dead, so certain of themselves and their opinions that they cannot conceive of something new. She, on the other hand, as she reminds herself by running her palms along the sharp metal of the railing as she leaves the house, “again and again / Until they were bruised,” is alive, “for only living flesh can suffer” (ll. 52-53, 56).

But in Lowell’s narrative of modern poetry, paralyzing smugness and intellectual stasis are not solely the domain of conservative academics. Her poem “Astigmatism,” dedicated “To Ezra Pound with Much Friendship and Admiration and Some Differences of Opinion” depicts her rival as so fixated on his narrow definition of art as to be unable to see the beauty around him (CPW, p. 34). The poem tells the story of a poet who goes out walking, with his “walking-stick / Of fine and polished ebony,” looking for roses. Although he never finds exactly what he is looking for, the poet encounters several other flowers on his journey: “daisies, / Open-mouthed, wondering,” “Dahlias ripened against a wall, / Gillyflowers stood up bravely for all their short stature, / And a trumpet-vine covered an arbour / With the red and gold of its blossoms” (ll. 23-24, 42-45). The poet brutally destroys each flower with his walking stick because “They are useless. They are not Roses” (l. 29). Each stanza ends with the refrain “Peace be with you Brother,” and a swipe at Pound as the narrator simultaneously claims kinship with the poet and distances herself from his actions, as in stanza three where she warns him, “Peace be with you Brother. / But behind you is destruction, and waste places” (l. 55). Later that night, the reflection of candlelight in the cane’s ivory head momentarily gives the impression of life, “But these things are dead, / Only the candle-light made them seem to move” (ll. 63-64). As the poet laments his luckless day (“It is a pity there were no roses”), the

poem ends with a remonstrance: "Peace be with you Brother. / You have chosen your part" (l. 66). Pound's infamous cane, remembered vividly in H.D.'s *Asphodel*, *HERmione*, and *End to Torment*, of course symbolizes the damning power of Pound's opinion:

For years the Poet had wrought upon this cane.  
His wealth had gone to enrich it,  
His experiences to pattern it,  
His labour to fashion and burnish it.  
To him it was perfect,  
A work of art and a weapon,  
A delight and a defence. (ll. 12-18)

As the inclusion of this poem in Lowell's 1917 *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed* demonstrates, modern poets also manipulated, courted, and exploited controversy within the ranks of "high" culture, compelled not only to distinguish themselves from their more obvious conservative nemeses, but from each other as well. As the claim of modernity was itself a marketing strategy, poets had to continually redefine what it meant to be modern in order to maximize its effectiveness, refining and revisioning in ever more exclusive and particular terms. In this way their current projects and interests become quintessentially "modern." And in order to be truly modern, the edge against which they sharpened their blades ultimately had to be other moderns.

I want to consider this poem's twofold function as, on the one hand, it very publicly disavows any sympathies with an increasingly elitist Pound, while on the other, it memorializes (cashes in on?) their brief alliance.<sup>32</sup> In this way Lowell doubles her odds of maintaining cultural currency. Pound's zealous pronouncements and seemingly ineffable sense of what is "modern" make him a feared and respected leader of the new poetry movement. By this poem's publication in September 1914 he had earned a reputation as a poetic talent scout, ushering in the newest, most progressive trends, most visibly through his key editorial roles in prominent contemporary literary journals: *Poetry*, *The Little Review*, *Blast*, and *The New Freewoman*, which he wrested away from Dora Marsden and turned into *The Egoist*. By asserting her connection to such a dominant cultural figure—the epitome of modern in the general public's eyes—and denigrating his artistic judgment as a fatal flaw that keeps him from appreciating all but the most narrow definition of art, Lowell sets herself up as a more competent, because wiser, more careful, judge. She becomes more modern than the most modern.

As we will see, this goes both ways: Lowell and Pound's infamous clash of wills provides each of them with an easily-identifiable Other against whom they define themselves. But what especially interests me about their "war" is the way it echoes the cultural conflict between high art and mass

culture, particularly as the terms of this conflict are saturated with gender stereotypes. As Andreas Huyssen explains in *After the Great Divide*, during the nineteenth century “a specific traditional male image of woman served as a receptacle for all kinds of projections, displaced fears, and anxieties (both personal and political), which were brought about by modernization,” as well as social conflicts, such as the rise of the new woman, and movements for reform among the working classes.<sup>33</sup> Mass culture became more and more closely associated with passivity, subjectivity, and emotion, representing vague, nebulous forces encroaching upon male ascendancy and privilege. High art, then, became the cherished refuge of objectivity, virility, and intellect.

Pound’s infuriated reaction to Lowell’s proposal that in future Imagiste<sup>34</sup> anthologies, after the original, *Des Imagistes*, each poet receive equal space, and that they collectively choose the poems to be included suggests just this sort of anxiety as he insists that he wants “the name ‘Imagisme’ to retain some sort of meaning. It stands, or I should like it to stand for hard light, clear edges, I cannot trust any democratized committee to maintain that standard.”<sup>35</sup> Just a year earlier, however, in “The Serious Artist,” Pound’s position is considerably less emphatic. In this essay he carefully mediates between “hardness” and “softness,” calling for poetry that evokes images in an indeterminate way—“you can be wholly precise in presenting a vagueness”—producing an “*impression* as hard and definite as a tin-tack.”<sup>36</sup> That Pound’s unequivocal valorization of hardness coincided with his anger at females challenging his authority—Lowell, Monroe, and Marsden in particular (“damd female tea parties who . . . committeeize themselves”)—is over-determined, to say the least.<sup>37</sup> Declaring that the new artist “must live by craft and violence. . . . He has dabbled in democracy and he is now done with that folly,” he next turned to Vorticism (Levenson, p. 75). As Shari Benstock observes, Pound’s new poetic theory “preserved that which was masculine about Imagism (its hard, clear, concrete, and unsentimental treatment of the subject).”<sup>38</sup> It also, most importantly, repositioned him as the authority on what it means to be hard and unsentimental, on what qualifies as a “clear edge” in a poem. Pound must rally against what he calls a “democratic beer garden” approach to art because it suggests that the value of art is subjective and undermines the value of authoritarian pronouncements such as good/bad, authentic/inauthentic, hard/soft (qtd. in Levenson, p. 147). It is not enough that he disassociate himself from Imagism: he must denigrate it by feminizing it as “Amygism,” that is to say, “emotional slither,” “mushy technique,” and “general floppiness” (pp. 152-155). It is “the fluid, fruity, facile stuff we most wanted to avoid,” he rages in a letter to Aldington.<sup>39</sup> Pound endows Lowell, her poetry, and that of her “followers” with qualities associated with mass culture: “monolithic,

engulfing, totalitarian, and on the side of regression and the feminine” (Huysen, p. 58).<sup>40</sup>

Pound’s dislike of Lowell, then, runs far deeper than a personality conflict; it smacks of what Huysen calls the “anxiety of contamination” in an almost absurdly literal sense (p. vii). Notice the words he chooses to bash Amygism. He describes it as floppy, mushy, soft, without clear lines. Certainly Pound tosses around phrases like this before meeting Lowell, and certainly the misogyny they suggest runs far deeper than their encounters, but when he continues to use these words (which more completely describe Lowell’s five foot, two-hundred pound body, than say, H.D.’s) in the context of his specific dislike of Lowell, they take on a more sinister cast. Their use suggests that Pound’s antagonism, his anxieties of being overwhelmed and supplanted by Lowell’s money, her American publishing connections, or even by the sheer force of her personality, are informed as well by a fear and loathing of her on the most basic and primary of levels: a fear of her in her very embodiment. Perhaps all women threaten Pound, but with a body like the Venus of Willendorf, Lowell is the ur-woman: excessively fleshy, excessively female. Just as Pound’s beloved Odysseus (whom he compares himself to in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberly* and “Canto I”)<sup>39</sup> must battle female forces which threaten to keep him from his destiny—Calypso, Circe, the Sirens—so must Pound escape the “damd female tea-parties” which threaten his mission to champion a poetry “as much like granite as it could possibly be” by diluting it and rendering it soft (Levenson, p. 155).

Lowell’s shameless self-promotion and her willingness to market herself to a commercial audience threaten to contaminate his project, since Pound’s self-commodification strategy hinges on erasing any evidence of self-commodification, on naturalizing his opinions as nondebatable artistic truths. He has an investment in casting himself as the “artist-philosopher-hero, the suffering loner who stands in irreconcilable opposition to modern democracy and its inauthentic culture” (Huysen, p. 51). This is not to say that Pound claimed to be above propagandizing, however. In a letter to William Carlos Williams he talks about having to “work hard . . . to escape, not propagande, but getting centered in propagande” (qtd in Materer, p. 27). Trying to talk Lowell out of using the term Imagisme for her anthology, he admits that the term’s chief value is as a marketing tool, and that her appropriation of it “would deprive [him] of [his] machinery for gathering stray good poems and presenting them to the public in more or less permanent form” (qtd in Levenson, p. 147). He certainly appreciated Lowell’s marketing abilities when they worked in his favor. She “would advertise us like HELL. It is her talent,” he wrote Margaret Anderson in 1917 (LRL, p. 141). But Pound’s methods are at odds with Lowell’s: his cultural indispensability is contingent on continually producing new and

improved criteria for artistic excellence and marketing himself as the only person who can understand/interpret/disseminate them. Once these criteria have gained widespread acceptance, however, they become obsolete. This method builds up an audience that thrives on defining itself against the vulgar tastes of the masses, that sees itself as select and elite, a demographic which responds approvingly to vintage Pound sound bites like “There is no misanthropy in a thorough contempt for the mob. There is no respect for mankind save in respect for detached individuals.”<sup>42</sup> In fact, shortly after accepting the position as foreign editor for *The Little Review* he changes the masthead to read “Making No Compromise with the Public Taste” (Materer, p. 23). In order to maintain his status as a true avant-garde he must court this readership and vehemently disavow any connection to “Amy-just-selling-the-goods.”<sup>43</sup>

Amygism, therefore, serves as a catch-all term for everything Pound defines himself against; it represents the actualization of his worst nightmare, that “of being devoured by mass culture through co-option, commodification, and the “wrong” kind of success” (Huysen, p. 53). But if Lowell represents Pound’s worst nightmare, she is also his dream-come-true in that she serves as the perfect foil. Canonically, she helps crystallize his position as the ultimate high modernist. According to this formula, what she considers successes become evidence of her failure: if she fills auditoriums to standing-room only capacity, if her volumes sell out within days of publication, this serves as evidence either of her lowering her standards to conform to the demands of popular culture, or of popular culture’s lack of discernment.

Conversely, Lowell has an investment in Pound as a forbidding, menacing arbiter of high culture. Next to him, she comes off as a reasonable, fair, benevolent leader in the new poetry movement. While Pound and Eliot’s writings become more and more elitist with their return to classical meters and allusions, aimed at an educated, multi-lingual audience, Lowell carves a niche for herself as introducing poetry to “people with a spark of poetry in them, be they blacksmiths or millionaires” (qtd. in Damon, p. 486). Lowell criticizes Harriet Weaver and Margaret Anderson for allowing Pound to control their magazines, *The Egoist* and *The Review* respectively, and refuses to publish in them as long as he and Wyndham Lewis are in heavy rotation and their elitist attitudes condoned (Damon, p. 423). As she explained to Richard Aldington, chastising him for writing poetry she believed would alienate the average reader, “Great poetry is and must be universal, above the customs and cliques of the initiated” (qtd in Damon, p. 449).

Horace Gregory, in many ways one of Lowell’s less-sympathetic biographers, attempts to position Lowell as a minor poet by characterizing her

poetry and prose as aimed at women's clubs (p. 144). But to a certain extent, I believe, this is precisely the point: this is Lowell's primary marketing strategy and, if we cast off Gregory's narrow canonical value system, her greatest triumph. That Lowell, a cigar-smoking, opinionated, outspoken, publicity-seeking woman who eschews the dictates of her upper-class birth by speaking in public, reading poems about female nudity, and living openly with another woman (an actress no less), finds an audience among early twentieth-century ladies clubs is no minor feat.

Lowell's initial success with this demographic came from her appropriation of Imagism. Pound introduced Imagisme gradually, in bits and pieces—the first edition of *Poetry* printed two "Imagiste" poems by Pound, the next featured one by Richard Aldington, two months later a batch of poems signed H.D. Imagiste appeared. Finally in March 1913 the magazine printed two seminal articles: Pound's "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste" and F. S. Flint's "Imagisme." In this way Pound slowly built suspense, teasing readers into wanting to know more about these mysterious poets. Flint's article, in addition to stating the basic premises of Imagisme—"direct treatment of the 'thing'. . . .To use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation," to use an organic rhythm, not that of a "metronome"—hinted at an undisclosed "Doctrine of the Image" "which they had not committed to writing; they said that it did not concern the public, and would provoke useless discussion."<sup>44</sup> Timothy Materer points out that cloaking Imagism in mystery, insinuating that there was more, if only readers were prepared to accept it, was merely a rather obvious, but successful, marketing strategy (p. 18). In fact, Lowell journeyed all the way to England in 1913 hoping to learn the secrets of this doctrine, which probably never existed beyond its name.

When Lowell brought the movement back to America, however, she switched gears. If the original Imagists garnered attention by being enigmatic, she would employ precisely the opposite strategy and stress the common sense behind its principles. Defining Imagism as a movement only in the loosest of terms, Lowell explains in *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry* that it "refers more to the manner of presentation than to the thing presented," and places highest importance on "a clear presentation of whatever the author wishes to convey" (p. 244). Further, she insists Imagism is "only one section of a larger movement" (p. 249). With this move she loosens the term, making room for Frost, Sandburg, Masters, and Robinson in the above-mentioned book and in her poetic pantheon. Armed with a concept that already has proven name-recognition, she makes it even more pliable, more useful as a buzz word. To Pound's mind she empties it of meaning, returning to America "with the Imagist ark of the covenant, varnished and empty," but I think, rather, that she rescues a term on the verge

of self-destructing because of its vacuousness and makes that very weakness work for her (EP/ACH, p. 142). Now her poetry, as well as H.D.'s or Aldington's or Pound's, qualifies as Imagist as long as it offers a clear presentation of whatever she wants to say—an impossibly easy “rule” to comply with.

In the same way, Lowell can gain even more credibility for the term by claiming Dickinson, Coleridge, Whitman, and Poe as practitioners as well. In Damon's words, “having got the best out of Imagism, Miss Lowell used it for her own ends” (p. 253). She justifies this appropriation by asserting that Pound's version of Imagism lacks “the quality of soul, which, I am more and more fain to believe, no great work can ever be without” (p. 254). John Gould Fletcher describes Lowell's own poetry as a hybrid of Imagism, “an encyclopedia of poetic modes rather than a mode in its own right.”<sup>45</sup> Interestingly, once the term is solidly identified with Lowell, she works to distance herself from it. The preface to her second volume of poetry, *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed* (1914), makes no mention of Imagism. She even goes so far as to claim “schools are for those who can confine themselves within them. Perhaps it is a weakness in me that I cannot.”<sup>46</sup>

As self-proclaimed promoter of the new poetry, Amy Lowell aims for the public's trust by fostering a sense of dialectic between the conservatism of the academy and the elitism of the avant-garde. She positions her brand of poetry as the only logical response to these two extremes. In this Lowell is rather too successful, as she inspires audiences once intimidated by the complexities of poetical meters and forms not only to read poetry, but to write it as well. Horace Gregory contends that one of Lowell's more unsavory triumphs was unwittingly prompting “a children's crusade for ‘free verse,’” as “her spontaneously written verses encouraged school girls to write millions of impressionistic fragments” (p. 144). Damon captures the enthusiasm spawned by the new poetry campaign when he breaks from his narrative of Lowell's life to exclaim, “Free Verse suddenly had taken! . . . [People] found that all their lives they had been talking poetry. Fresh cadences fitted fresh subjects: in Free Verse one could write of shoes and automobiles and skyscrapers and one-self, whereas in meter and rhyme one could mention only sandals and winged horses and Greek deities” (p. 309). But in her response to this phenomena, Lowell proves to be just as invested as Pound in differentiating between “true” artists and those who dabble as a hobby.

Macmillan's book-jacket advertisement for *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed* claimed Lowell as “the foremost member of the ‘Imagistes’—a group of poets that includes William Butler Yeats, Ezra Pound, Ford Madox Hueffer” (qtd in Perkins, p. 332). When an irritated Pound suggested that he might have grounds to sue Lowell for stealing the term she responded, “So far as I

know you have not copyrighted the name 'Imagiste.' . . . But if you should feel inclined to sue, I should be exceedingly delighted, as then they would put new jackets on the book, which I would greatly prefer. Also it would be a good advertisement" (Damon, p. 275). However, within a year she herself made legal inquiries into the possibility of copyrighting the term in order to safeguard it from weak imitators, complaining to Richard Aldington, "all the questionable and pornographic poets are trying to sail under the name just now" (qtd in Damon, p. 311).

Returning a batch of poems to Barrett Wendell, who had forwarded them from a young female poet soliciting Lowell's critical perspective, she firmly explains why these poems are not "true" poetry. The young poet's writing is apparently infused with emotion, but this, she claims, "is not enough; one must also be an artist. . . . The writer belongs to the large class of amateurs, namely, those people who write to relieve a strain of feeling, whereas, to my mind, a professional in art is a person who writes in obedience to the impulse of the creative faculty" (qtd in Damon, p. 417). That self-expression should not be mistaken for artistic creation she again emphasizes in her advice to another aspiring poet, insisting that the urge to create is not the same as the urge to "free [oneself] from an oppressive state of mind." The "great artist . . . is creating something outside of himself" (qtd in Damon, p. 651).

In her poetry as well she repeatedly describes the impulse to write as an all-consuming power coming from outside the artist. In "The Poet" she asks, "What instinct forces man to journey on, / Urged by a longing blind but dominant! / . . . Forever done / With simple joys and quiet happiness" (CPW, p. 20). In "Fatigue" she pleads with the poetic muse, "Dower me with strength and curb all foolish eagerness— / The law exacts obedience. Instruct, I will obey" (CPW, p. 3). Lowell seems to suggest that one is called to be a poet, but in thus romanticizing the vocation of poetry she contradicts her insistence elsewhere that she made herself a poet. This contradiction reveals that she too has anxieties about her success in selling the new poetry. The gentle banter with her audiences, the encouragement to voice their reactions through boos or hisses, and the memorable, quotable sound bites on modern poetics put Lowell's audiences at ease, but what follows is a tricky balancing act. Her struggle is to maintain her place as a popularizer of poetry—to continue to bring poetry to a wide audience, to make it accessible—but to maintain as well a certain distance, to keep intact the hierarchical division between the artist/performer and the audience.

Through her critical writings and public lectures Lowell must construct a readership that understands its role in modern poetry: they "are not the creators, they are the appreciators" (qtd. in Damon, p. 341). This

strategy attempts to circumvent enthusiastic audiences from mistaking themselves as poets and producing inferior imitations that detract from what she considers true, pure art. She must make audiences care enough to listen and buy, all the while keeping their own creative impulses in check. Like Pound, she “tries to stake out [her] territory by fortifying the boundaries between genuine art and inauthentic mass culture” (Huysen, p. 53). Although Lowell expends a great deal of energy promoting the idea that poetry is for everyone, in her speech before the MacDowell Club, discussed earlier in this essay, she discloses her belief that ultimately

No art can be democratic. Is it possible that there is anybody so blinded by a beloved theory as to think for a moment that the great mass of people has any artistic desire, any real artistic taste? . . . That there are men in every walk of life with real poetic feeling in their hearts I do not for a moment deny, and it is to these men that poets with the welfare of the people at heart should address themselves. For poetry should try to lift men to its level, not sink itself to theirs.” (pp. 340-341)

My inclination as I began reading and thinking about Amy Lowell was to romanticize her as a hero of the down-trodden, a poetic Robin Hood who stole ideas from High Culture and brought them to the starving denizens of popular culture. I did this, in part, because I had an investment in reading Lowell as the anti-Pound, in reading her career as the feminist/populist response to the arrogance and misogyny of canonical modernism. But this narrative of modern poetry that I had hoped to suggest as an alternative to the Pound/Eliot continuum would have merely switched the key players and the targeted demographic. Rather than romanticizing Lowell’s role in modernism—claiming her as representative of a more inclusive modern poetry movement which sought to democratize poetry’s audiences, as well as revolutionize its forms—a reconsideration of her career needs to be willing to consider the ways her and Pound’s ends, if not their means, are similar as they manipulate the terms of the twentieth-century literary marketplace. Here, for example, we see her lecturing other poets that “average” people exist in a debased state, that it is the noblesse oblige of artists to raise them out of their filth. As much as Lowell courts the general public and markets herself for a mass audience, she, too, violently disidentifies herself from that mass culture.

My point here is not that Lowell was a hypocrite, that she put on one face in order to exploit the public and then put on another in order to gain critical currency. Nor even do I want to single out Lowell as exceptional in this regard. Andreas Huysen observes that “mass culture has always been the hidden subtext of the modernist project” (p. 47). By this he means that the success of high modernism is always contingent on its ability to deny or erase its own embeddedness in commercial culture. “The autonomy of the modernist art work, after all, is always the result of a resistance . . . to the

seductive lure of mass culture, abstention from the pleasure of trying to please a larger audience” (Huysen, p. 55). Lowell stands out in that, while she is every bit the modern in disassociating herself from the masses, she remains forthright about targeting them as viable consumers of her product. While one can almost imagine *Poetry* in its first few decades of publication, for example, as a popular magazine, as it came to look next to *The Little Review*, *The Egoist*, and *Blast*, it is important to remember that when Harriet Monroe first conceived of it, she envisioned an alternative to the “ordinary magazines [which] must minister to a large public little interested in poetry” (Monroe, p. 251). Even that most humble of poets, Vachel Lindsay, who traveled on foot so that he could truly be among “the people” and who so eschewed materialism that he traveled penniless, trading his poems for bread and lodging, called his product “high vaudeville” and saw his role as one of elevating popular tastes (Perkins, p. 61).

The very act of singling oneself out, insisting on one’s identity as a poet, attaching one’s name to a poem, invokes a hierarchy between artist and audience, putting into play an economy of ownership. A signed work of art is a commodity; it participates in a system of exchange. Monroe’s insistence on paying her contributors well for their poems, Lindsay’s literally trading poems for bread, Lowell’s involvement in the printing, design, marketing, and distribution of her poems, to name just a few examples, make this explicit and frustrate the high modernist project of defining itself as autonomous from, as flourishing despite, commercial mass culture. This, of course, is why there are few contemporary narratives of modern poetry which posit these figures as central. What is so exciting about the Vachel Lindsay letter cited at the beginning of this essay is that it describes a modern poetry far removed from what Cary Nelson so succinctly describes as “the extraordinarily restricted (and exclusively male) canon of American modernism that came to dominate academic literary study in the 1940s and 1950s and that has been aggressively marketed as the entirety of modernism ever since.”<sup>47</sup> Instead, Lindsay offers us a glimpse of a dynamic cultural movement in which poetry captured the public’s attention and in which poets appear to be consciously marketing tastes and constructing audiences. And in this narrative Amy Lowell emerges as a major presence: a popular lecturer, a best-selling poet, a prolific literary critic, and a market-savvy business woman.

## Notes

- 1 Nicholas Vachel Lindsay, *Letters of Vachel Lindsay*, ed. Marc Chénétier (New York: Burt Franklin, 1979), p. 455.
- 2 Michael Murphy, “One Hundred Per Cent Bohemia” in *Marketing Modernisms: Self-*

- Promotion, Canonization, and Rereading*, ed. Kevin J. H. Dettmar and Stephen Watt (Ann Arbor: Univ of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 61.
- 3 Stanley Olsen, *Elinor Wylie: A Life Apart* (New York: The Dial Press, 1979), p. 218; David Perkins, *A History of Modern Poetry* (Boston: Harvard Univ. Press, 1976), p. 327; Harriet Monroe, *Poets and Their Art* (New York: Macmillan, 1926), p.78.
  - 4 Amy Lowell, "The Poetry Bookshop," *The Little Review* 2 (May 1915): 19.
  - 5 S. Foster Damon, *Amy Lowell: A Chronicle, with Extracts from Her Correspondence* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1935), p. 91. Commissioned by Lowell's companion and literary executor, Ada Dwyer Russell, and written by a friend of Lowell's, this exhaustive, day-by-day account of her life is the standard biography.
  - 6 Eleanor Robson Belmont, *The Fabric of Memory* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1957), p. 187.
  - 7 Horace Gregory, *Amy Lowell: Portrait of the Poet in Her Time* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1958), p. 122.
  - 8 C. David Heymann, *American Aristocracy: The Lives and Times of James Russell, Amy, and Robert Lowell* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1980), p. 208.
  - 9 Amy Lowell, *The Complete Poetical Works of Amy Lowell* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1955), p. 234. Subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text as CPW.
  - 10 Louis Untermeyer, *From Another World* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1939), p. 113.
  - 11 Susan Edmiston and Linda D. Cirino, *Literary New York: A History and Guide* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), p. 226.
  - 12 Jean Gould, *Amy: The World of Amy Lowell and the Imagist Movement* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1975), p. 258.
  - 13 Margaret Thompson Drewal, "The Camp Trace in Corporate America: Liberace and the Rockettes at Radio City Music Hall," *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyer (New York: Routledge, 1994), p.154. This essay analyzes Liberace's performances, and argues that while they are ostensibly campy, they remove camp from its queer signifiers, ultimately disseminating the ideology of corporate capitalism.
  - 14 Amy Lowell, *John Keats* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1925), quoted in George H. Sargent, *Amy Lowell: A Mosaic* (New York: William Edwin Rudge, 1926), p.14.
  - 15 Ford Madox Hueffer (Ford), "Henri Gaudier: The Story of a Low Tea-shop," *The English Review* (October, 1919): 297.
  - 16 Ezra Pound, *The Letters of Ezra Pound to Margaret Anderson: The Little Review Correspondence*, ed. Thomas L. Scott and Melvin J. Friedman (New York: New Directions, 1988), p. 178. Subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text as LRL.
  - 17 See Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, chapter two, "Writing Lesbian" (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1981); Judy Grahn, *The Highest Apple: Sappho and the Lesbian Poetic Tradition* (San Francisco: Spinsters Ink, 1985).
  - 18 Caption underneath Lowell's picture in an unsigned memorial tribute, "Amy

- Lowell," published in *The Literary Digest*, May 30, 1925, eighteen days after her death.
- 19 Michael H. Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine 1908-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984), p. ix.
  - 20 Amy Lowell, *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry* (New York: Macmillan, 1917), p. 5. Subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text, abbreviated as *Tendencies*.
  - 21 Quoted in Glenn Richard Ruihley, *The Thorn of a Rose: Amy Lowell Reconsidered* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1975), p. 80.
  - 22 Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot, (New York: New Directions, 1954), p. 46.
  - 23 Quoted in Renate Stendahl, ed., *Gertrude Stein in Words and Pictures* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 1984), p. 165.
  - 24 Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1975), p. 518.
  - 25 Harriet Monroe and Alice Corbin Henderson, eds., *The New Poetry: An Anthology of Twentieth Century Verse in English* (New York: Macmillan, 1932), p. xxxv.
  - 26 William Wordsworth, *Wordsworth's Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*, ed. W.J.B. Owen, (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1957), p. 114.
  - 27 John Keats, letter to George and Thomas Keats, December 21, 1817, in *The Selected Letters of John Keats*, ed. Lionel Trilling (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), p. 103.
  - 28 Harriet Monroe, *A Poet's Life: Seventy Years in a Changing World* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), p. 302.
  - 29 Clement Wood, *Amy Lowell* (New York: Harold Vinal, 1926), p. 29.
  - 30 Amy Lowell, *Poetry and Poets: Essays by Amy Lowell* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1930), p. 64.
  - 31 See note 18.
  - 32 "Astigmatism"'s over-determined phallic imagery, and the feminization of the hapless flowers who never know what hit them ("they lay/Dying, open-mouthed, wondering") suggest Lowell's consciousness of the misogyny behind much of Pound's editorializing/artistic authority, a point taken up by Andrew Thacker in his essay "Amy Lowell and H.D.: the Other Imagists," *Women: A Cultural Review* 14, no. 1 (1993): 49-59.
  - 33 Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1986), p. 52.
  - 34 Pound used the spelling Imagisme/Imagiste, hinting at a French origin for this type of poetry. When he refused to participate in Lowell's series of anthologies and protested against her using the term, she deferred to him only by dropping the final "e." I therefore spell the term with the final "e" only when referencing Pound's use of the term.
  - 35 Ezra Pound, *Selected Letters of Ezra Pound: 1907-1941*, ed. D. D. Paige (New York: New Directions, 1971), p. 38.
  - 36 *Literary essays of Ezra Pound*, p. 44; Levenson, p. 119, my emphasis.
  - 37 Timothy Materer, "Make It Sell! Ezra Pound Advertises Modernism," in *Marketing Modernisms: Self-Promotion, Canonization, and Rereading*, ed. Kevin J.H. Dettmar and

- Stephen Watt (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 20.
- 38 Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1986), p. 317.
- 39 Quoted in E. Claire Healey and Keith Cushman, eds., *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence and Amy Lowell* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1985), p. 8.
- 40 Levenson's chapter "The War Among the Moderns," demonstrates the persistence of such characterizations as well as the continuing tendency to make gross generalizations about modern poets who do not find their way into the Pound/Eliot continuum. Throughout this chapter he uses the term "Lowellites" to describe an unspecified group of poets whose only identifiable feature, as far as I can tell, is that their poems fall beyond the scope of the critical writings of Pound, Eliot, and Harold Monroe that he builds his chapter around. As this is a term I have not run across in any other poetical studies, I assume it is Levenson's creation. Its use implies a homogeneity among poets who associated with Lowell, however loosely, that would be impossible to substantiate with concrete examples.
- 41 Although he gestures towards Odysseus in the first section of *Hugh Selwyn Mauberly*, "E.P. Ode pour l'élection de son sepulchre," where he describes himself as briefly swayed by the siren call of the classics early in his career, he returns to it more fully in "Canto I" where he translates Andreas Divius' translation of Homer. Blurring the lines between himself and Odysseus, Pound appropriates the prophecy of Tiresias, "Lose all companions," for himself.
- 42 Margaret Anderson, ed., *The Little Review Anthology* (New York: Hermitage House, 1953), p. 102.
- 43 Ezra Pound, *The Letters of Ezra Pound to Alice Corbin Henderson*, ed. Ira B. Nadel (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1993), p. 137. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically in the text, abbreviated as EP/ACH.
- 44 F. S. Flint, "Imagisme," in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, 1, no. 6 (March 1913): 198-200.
- 45 John Gould Fletcher, *Selected Essays of John Gould Fletcher*, ed. Lucas Carpenter (Fayetteville: Univ. of Arkansas Press, 1989), p. 215.
- 46 Amy Lowell, *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed* (New York: Macmillan, 1914), p. xii.
- 47 Cary Nelson, "The Fate of Gender in Modern American Poetry," in *Marketing Modernisms*, p. 324.