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Radclyffe Hall

Richard Dellamora

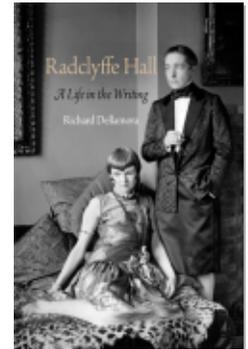
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Reading the Poetry

Some echoes of her simple lay will reach the farthest future.

— *Sussex Daily News*, March 22, 1913

Desires

In view of Hall's uncertainty about the durability of close ties between women, it is not surprising that one finds in her early volumes of verse not only poems that celebrate a singular relationship with another woman but also those that imagine sexual and emotional ties as fleeting. Hall's personal life during her twenties and early thirties resembles the High Victorian Bohemianism exemplified by Charlotte Cushman (1816–1876), an actor celebrated for her performance in Shakespearean trouser roles. With the wealth that she earned on the stage, Cushman retired to Rome, where she supported various American relatives and Emma Stebbins, the female sculptor whom Cushman chose to be her long-term partner.¹ Cushman also supported other female artists, friends, and lovers, including at times their husbands. She spoke of the members of this entourage as her “belongings,” a colloquial term that suggests the degree to which Victorian bourgeois life fell within the traditional terms of domestic alliance as described by Michel

Foucault.² One's relations belonged to one by virtue of blood and/or legal connection—and one belonged to them too. For a financially self-supporting woman such as Cushman, one's female lovers were also “belongings,” to be retained if possible as friends once an affair played itself out. Transient desires implied longer-term claims. This practice evokes a second meaning of belonging—that of longing, yearning, desire.

When Hall entered into her majority, she used her newfound wealth to move out of her mother's house and into one of her own. She took her grandmother Diehl with her, and she surrounded herself with women she met while traveling in the United States: Jane Randolph, a widowed cousin with children, and, after a second trip, another cousin, Dorothy Diehl. Both women became Hall's lovers, then friends, and Hall supported them in England. Jane eventually returned to the States and married a rich man. Diehl married Robert Coningsby Clarke, a promising young composer, who set a number of Hall's poems to music.³ For Hall, as for Cushman, these complex arrangements implied a capability and interest in both enduring and short-term relationships.

Hall's lyric poetry focuses on both brief and lasting attractions. The doubling, which can seem contradictory, is especially marked in her third volume, *Poems of the Past & Present* (1910).⁴ Shortly after publication of the book, abrupt changes occurred in the lives of Mabel Batten and Hall—namely, the deaths of Hall's grandmother and of Batten's much older husband, George. These events freed the pair to live together in a de facto female marriage until Batten's sudden death six years later. *Poems of the Past & Present* memorializes the romance, which is signified in the title and arrangement of the volume. The collection is framed with a dedication and with poems of the present that celebrate the couple's mutual devotion as well as Batten's collaboration in preparing the poems for publication.⁵ *Poems of the Past* refers most specifically to a sequence of Sapphic verses called the “Fruit of the Nispero.” This group, written earlier, celebrates a playful, sometimes painful and fleeting, pagan love; the framing poems affirm long-term commitment.

Hall dedicated the book “to Mrs. George Batten.” The “Mrs.” and the “George” are diplomatic touches. Marriage offered financial and emotional security to Batten as well as useful cover for extramarital affairs.⁶ The opening poem, entitled “A Dedication,” sets out the book as inspired by—and written in gratitude for—Batten's love. Book-ending the volume, “Post-script” acknowledges her role in revising, editing, and compiling the poems:

POEMS OF THE
PAST & PRESENT

BY
MARGUERITE RADCLYFFE-HALL



LONDON
CHAPMAN AND HALL
1910

3. Marguerite Radclyffe Hall [sic]. *Poems of the Past & Present* (1910). Title page. Stanford University Library, Stanford, California.



4. Marguerite Radclyffe Hall [sic]. *Poems of the Past & Present* (1910). Facing table of contents. Stanford University Library, Stanford, California.

with Woodhouse that likely ended in bed.¹⁰ The account that Hall provided of the book suggests that it may chart the trajectory of an affair. In Baker's words, her "idea was that the poems represented someone's recollection of a previous incarnation on a mythical island like Lesbos and, taken as a whole, they told the story of a love affair which runs from the heights of passion to the dull yearning for new pastures" (57).

In contrast to the newly discovered relationship announced in *Poems of the Past & Present*, in her final book of poetry, Hall is filled with "eager,

sweet longing,” a phrase that brings to mind the “sweetbitter” character of desire in Sappho.¹¹

XLVII

A ship is a lovely thing, great with adventure.
 I cannot behold the white sails of a vessel
 But lo! I am stirred with an eager sweet longing
 For that which may wait on the hour of my coming.

E'en thou, my belovèd, when thou art beside me,
 The spell of thy presence restrains not my spirit;
 My spirit goes out with the wind to the masthead—
 Mine eyes turn away to the ship that is passing!¹²

Teasers of this sort help account for the fact that almost all the attention directed to the poetry to date has been biographical in character. The invitation to read the poems in this way, however, can lead to error. Baker, for example, believes that *A Sheaf of Verses*, Hall's second book, grows out of the early days of her sexual intimacy with Batten: Hall “dedicated the collection to ‘Sad Days and Glad Days.’ In spirit the poetry reflected the latter: ‘Believe me, the world is a place full of joy, / And happiness stretches afar.’ The technique and the emotion revealed a growing maturity. The love poems suggested greater confidence. John’s homosexuality received an oblique mention” in poems in which “she alluded to her abnormality as a thing of symbolic beauty, a cause of pride not shame, ‘a path to gained respect’” (36). *A Sheaf of Verses*, however, was published in fall 1908, only a short time after the two women first became lovers, in August 1908 (Baker, 36).¹³ Much of the book must already have been written by that date. Accordingly, the connection with Batten is not responsible for what Baker regards as Hall's coming out as homosexual in the book.

Constructing the poetry in terms of sexual identity misses more complex views that Hall takes of human relationality and selfhood. Consider, for instance, the poem “Re-Incarnation.” In it, she writes:

Meeting you I felt a thrill,
 Strangely sad, and strangely sweet!
 Some compelling force of will,
 Sprung from sympathies complete,

Sympathies, that rose again
 After death's ennobling pain. (35)

These lines express a troubling double awareness of the power of sexual attraction. On the one hand is a telepathic ideal of spontaneous and complete affective sharing—an ideal that has haunted twentieth-century affirmations of lesbian sexual identity.¹⁴ On the other hand, the speaker experiences psychical fusion as a potentially threatening subjection to the “will” of another. In the case of the poem, this other is not only or possibly not even primarily the person referred to as other; it is also a spectral visitant.¹⁵ The twosome may and will be several, and that several will consist of women and likely men as well who lived in other times and places. Hall does not always sustain this view of multiple selfhood, but the apprehension shapes her work.

The concept of reincarnation in the early twentieth century is most familiar within the context of Theosophy. Whether Hall believed in theosophical doctrine is an open question. What is definite is that the idea of reincarnation familiar within Theosophy provided a frame within which Hall could explore aspects of speculative psychology, in particular, the multiplicity of human selfhood. Spiritualist belief functions similarly for Hall as a vernacular mode in which to pursue questions being worked on in very different ways in the new science of psychoanalysis. Because of the limiting effects of dyslexia on Hall's education and reading, little information exists about the intellectual grounding of her thought. It is known, however, that in part through Batten, a talented singer and sponsor of contemporary music,¹⁶ Hall was thoroughly familiar with musical culture at a time that has been referred to as the “English musical renaissance.”¹⁷ Similarly, although it was not until after Batten's death that Hall became immersed in the work of the Society for Psychical Research, from the first book of poetry onward, she shows a keen interest in speculative psychology.

New English music at the turn of the twentieth century was strongly antimodernist in character, a trend within modernity that Hall embraced. In *Songs of Three Counties and Other Poems* (1913), she emphasizes this aspect of her outlook in poems modeled on those of the Classicist and homophile poet A. E. Housman. Poems from *A Shropshire Lad* were frequently set to music by the new generation of composers. Hall's relation to Aestheticism and the Decadence in late Victorian culture shows not only in

the Sapphism of her verse but more broadly as well in her participation in another renaissance, namely, the Hellenistic Revival in English poetry at the turn of the century.¹⁸ From her first book onward, she frequently writes in the genre of Theocritean pastoral, with intimations of same-sex desire cloaked in gender-neutral or sexually conventional terms. In an early poem, “Ode to Sappho,” and in *The Forgotten Island*, she elects for herself the lyric tone of Sappho, a founding voice of Greek poetry that through the genre of pastoral and such figures as Catullus, comes to have strong late antique associations. Hellenistic too—and in congruence with the poetry of Michael Field (Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper) and the feminist anthropology of Jane Harrison—is Hall’s conflation of pagan with Christian sentiment in her poetry.

The most significant of Hall’s poems from an intellectual point of view is her “Ode to Swinburne.” In it, she offers a convincing account of Swinburne’s secular humanism that is all the more impressive in view of the fact that she converted to Roman Catholicism not long after publishing the poem. As with other neo-Hellenistic poets, such as Field and the Alexandrian Greek poet C. P. Cavafy, who received his early schooling in England, Hall was capable of holding more than one idea in her mind at a time. This openness to possibility, complexity, and contradiction are important to bear in mind in view of the tendency, evinced by Baker, to narrow Hall’s position to that of a writer preoccupied above all with questions of sexual identity. Hall was deeply religious. But as her sympathy with Swinburne’s radical humanism suggests, her faith was heterodox. This combination of faith and self-consciously modern thought is characteristic of the Hellenistic Revival.

In her poetry, Hall’s spirituality is most powerfully expressed in “The Blind Ploughman,” the final poem in the sequence entitled “Rustic Court-ing” in *Songs of Three Counties*. In the final section of this chapter, I consider how the poem unexpectedly took on a second life as a populist hymn during World War I. In contrast to Ivor Novello’s “Keep the Home Fires Burning,” another wartime anthem written by a subject of same-sex desire, Hall’s poem emphasizes not domestic sentiment but the solitary encounter of the individual with God. This lyric poem, with whose male protagonist Hall was strongly to identify, figures in a set of circumstances that brought forcibly home to her the disadvantages that she faced as a female writer in the music publishing industry.¹⁹

Aesthetic Desire

Hall desired to make art and to become known for doing so. In the writing of Frederic Myers, the leading psychological theorist among the founders of psychical research, she found persuasively combined an interest in artistic genius, conscious and unconscious mental processes, and dissident desire. In his posthumously published work, *Human Personality* (1903), Myers writes:

Genius—if that vaguely used word is to receive anything like a psychological definition—should rather be regarded as a power of utilising a wider range than other men can utilise of faculties in some degree innate in all;—a power of appropriating the results of subliminal mentation to subserve the supraliminal stream of thought;—so that an “inspiration of Genius” will be in truth a *subliminal uprush*, an emergence into the current of ideas which the man [sic] is consciously manipulating of other ideas which he has not consciously originated, but which have shaped themselves beyond his will, in profounder regions of his being. I shall urge that there is here no real departure from normality; no abnormality, at least in the sense of degeneration; but rather a fulfilment of the true norm of man, with suggestions, it may be, of something *supernormal*; of something which transcends existing normality as an advanced stage of evolutionary progress transcends an earlier stage.²⁰

With slight changes in terminology, Myers’s emphasis on mental processes outside consciousness is close enough to Freud to help explain the dialogue that he entered into with leading members of the Society for Psychical Research after 1910.²¹ In 1912, he responded to an invitation from the Society to submit a paper to its *Proceedings*.²² As Ernest Jones warned Freud, however, Myers’s and, later, Hall’s recognition of unconscious mental processes was compatible with vernacular belief systems rejected by Freud, such as Spiritualism and Theosophy.²³

As the discussion continues, Myers suggests the possibility that genius is not restricted to a play of rational and unconscious elements in the mind of the individual. Creative thinking also depends in part upon one’s being permeable to a selfhood capable of existing outside of time and space.

“Sometimes,” he writes, “we seem to see our subliminal perceptions and faculties acting truly in unity, truly as a Self,—co-ordinated into some harmonious ‘inspiration of genius,’ or some profound and reasonable hypnotic self-reformation, or some far-reaching supernormal achievement of clairvoyant vision or of self-projection into a spiritual world. Whatever of subliminal personality is thus acting corresponds with the highest-level centres of supraliminal life. At such moments the *subliminal* represents (as I believe) most nearly what will become the *surviving Self*” (73). In the early years of the twentieth century, the primary object of the Society was to demonstrate by means of objective experiments whether there was good evidence to believe in the survival of human personality after death. Some members of the Society, however, already harbored this belief. In the preceding quotation, Myers indicates that he is one of these. He does so first by use of the phrase “a spiritual world,” which is drawn from spiritualist rhetoric where it refers to the spirit world. Second, at the end of the paragraph, he openly states his faith in survival after death. Myers further combines spiritualist axioms with theosophical ones. Theosophy distinguishes between the individual soul, referred to by Myers as the “Self,” and its manifestations in selves that exist in time and space. Through recollection, these material selves could momentarily access the embodied experience of prior selves with all their differences of sex and gender. These beliefs could be used to explain why a woman felt masculine or a man felt feminine.

The scientific rhetoric within which Myers’s discussion of genius occurs is that of anthropology, evolutionary biology, and, more specifically, degeneration theory. The aesthetic rhetoric is that of the Decadence. Two major tropes within decadent writing are those of the decay of reason and the contamination of enlightenment thought by an upsurge of primitive instinct and feeling. Myers uses both, although, as often happens within decadent thought, access to primitive emotion and affect is seen as necessary in order dialectically to surmount the deleterious effects of modern civilization. In this way, the resurgence of primitive psychic material is seen as necessary to evolutionary progress. The modernist artist functions as an exemplary figure of individual and, in due course, general improvement. Her exemplarity may also include sexual and gender nonconformity. This fact is signaled in the defensive tone that Myers takes in rejecting the contemporary view of the “degeneration” of artists and philosophers, such as Richard Wagner, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Oscar Wilde. Myers insists to the contrary that in vanguard work there is “no real departure from normality.”²⁴

For Myers, genius is not a condition peculiar to great artists; it exists to a degree in all human beings. Moreover, rather than assuming it to be confined to male artists or to a universal “man,” as Myers’s rhetoric has it, one might argue that both womanly women and manly women with sexual and emotional ties to other women enjoy a similar ability to coordinate conscious with unconscious mental processes in the production of ideas. Seen in this way, the self-development of both sorts of Sapphists could be recognized as free of “abnormality.” Likewise, the achievements of such women might well be regarded as “transcend[ing] existing normality as an advanced stage of evolutionary progress transcends an earlier stage.” Hall effects precisely this translation of Myers’s theory into her own politics of gender.

She formulates this line of thought in a programmatic statement in *The Well of Loneliness* that occurs immediately after the protagonist, Stephen Gordon, has discovered that she belongs to the category of those whom the sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing defines as female sexual inverts. Puddle, Stephen’s companion and former teacher, choosing this moment to come out to Stephen, offers her the following words of consolation: “You’ve got work to do—come and do it! Why, just because you are what you are, you may actually find that you’ve got an advantage. You may write with a curious double insight—write both men and women from a personal knowledge. Nothing’s completely misplaced or wasted, I’m sure of that—and we’re all part of nature. Some day the world will recognize this, but meanwhile there’s plenty of work that’s waiting. For the sake of all the others who are like you, but less strong and less gifted perhaps, many of them, it’s up to you to have the courage to make good, and I’m here to help you to do it, Stephen.”²⁵

Hall and Antimodernism

At the beginning of this chapter, I cited the confident view of one of Hall’s contemporary readers that her poetry would reach “the farthest future.” That confidence stemmed from Hall’s ability, both canny and spontaneous, to tap a vein of English antimodernist sentiment. This reaction began before World War I but became a major cultural factor during and after the war. In the music of two generations of English composers, the turn in

contemporary music-making, both pastoral and rustic, enabled a specifically localized reaction against the brutalizing effects associated with modern life in the northern industrial towns and the East End of London but most pointedly against the mechanized slaughter of trench warfare. It is easy to mistake this music as nostalgic, and at times it is. But as Jackson Lears writes, “The antimodern impulse was both more socially and more intellectually important than historians have supposed. Antimodernism was not simply escapism; it was ambivalent, often coexisting with enthusiasm for material progress. And it was part of a much broader quest for intense experience which ranged from militarism and ‘Progressive’ social reform to popular occultism and the early fascination with depth psychology. Far from being the nostalgic flutterings of a ‘dying elite,’ as historians have claimed, antimodernism was a complex blend of accommodation and protest which tells us a great deal about the beginnings of present-day values and attitudes.”²⁶ Antimodernism is best understood, in dialectical relation to early twentieth-century Modernism, as a series of moments of internal critique. The clearest point of difference occurs in the rejection of the notion that aesthetic Modernism is to be regarded as identical to formal experimentation.²⁷

Hall’s embrace of Violet Gordon Woodhouse says a good deal about Hall’s attitude toward publicity at this time. Artistic sexual nonconformity was an open secret to be courted in the course of building a reputation for “genius.” Along with the today better-known Wanda Landowska, Woodbridge was one of the two most important performers on the harpsichord in England in the first half of the twentieth century. By invoking Woodhouse, Hall summoned the ideal of a serious, female, amateur but accomplished and original engaged in contemporary musical culture.²⁸ Moreover, Woodhouse’s daily regimen of practice at the keyboards of early musical instruments betokened a professionalism that Hall looked to emulate as her career developed.

An important point of departure for the national movement in modern English music occurred with the publication by Ralph Vaughan Williams of “a small book on English folk song” in 1911. Already in 1910, when Woodhouse heard Thomas Beecham conduct Vaughan Williams’s *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis*, she recognized that like herself the composer had observed “the manner in which Elizabethan and Stuart music—with its freedom of rhythm and suppleness of phrasing—had evolved from folk tunes.” When Cecil Sharp, the most important collector of folk song and

dance in England, heard Woodhouse perform folk music in 1912, he immediately perceived the affinity between her approach and that of Vaughan Williams. Sharp introduced the pair to one another, and, in autumn 1912, the threesome “assembled a programme for an afternoon concert to be held in Stratford on 24 April the following year, . . . when Vaughan Williams was due to take up the position of musical director at the Memorial Theatre in Stratford. . . . The concert consisted mainly of English folk tunes collected by Sharp and arranged by Violet for the harpsichord as well as a number of early English pieces, in one of which she played the virginals.”²⁹

This concatenation of events offers a vivid example of Antimodernism in the ways in which Woodhouse and the others drew on new modes of engagement with early music, instruments, performance practice, and genres in creating a national school of modern musical composition. Such novelty changed the meaning of English national culture by means of invented traditions, which also included entrenched ideological elements.³⁰ Hall was eager to attach herself to these developments in music, sociality, and lyric. She does so both in the title of her next volume of poetry, *Songs of Three Counties and Other Poems*, and in choosing to dedicate the 1915 volume to Woodhouse.

In his biography of Lord Berners, the most formally modernist of early twentieth-century British composers, Mark Amory remarks: “There was, and had been for some time, an English musical renaissance. . . . The English set themselves against copying foreigners, instead looked for inspiration in English literature, English countryside, earlier English music, [often viewed through a Greek pastoral or Roman Catholic lens]. . . . Many had a sense of mission, an almost political wish to bring music to the masses. In 1904 Elgar had been knighted, . . . and in 1905, in a series of lectures, expressed his faith in the seriousness, earnestness and sincerity of the younger men.”³¹ When the work of such composers as Vaughan Williams or George Butterworth succeeds, antimodernist elements function primarily as form not content. That is to say, the thematic of rustic courtship, the ballad form in poetry, and elements of folk, medieval Catholic, and Elizabethan and Stuart music operate as modes of rhetoric to enable a critical response to the malaise of contemporary existence.³²

Hall’s Antimodernism is most evident in her fourth volume, *Songs of Three Counties*, published to good reviews in 1913 (Souhami, 58). The two-part structure of the book marks the continuing development of her relation with Batten as they entered what one might call the White Cottage, or

marital, phase of their relationship. Falling between the death of Batten's husband in October 1910 and the commencement of Hall's affair with Phoebe Hoare,³³ summers during this period were passed at the "perfectly darling big cottage" (Souhami, 54) that Batten and Hall purchased at Malvern in 1911. Part one of the volume is Christian, English, and chaste; the second is for the most part pagan, Mediterranean, and given to sensuous abandon. Like the preceding book, *Songs of Three Counties*, as its title suggests, is directed toward the market for middle-class domestic music-making. The book advertises three of the poems as already set to music.

The first and better-known section of *Songs of Three Counties* is entitled "Rustic Courting," a cycle of love poems set in the voice of country lads that connotes the idyll of rural life that Hall and Batten enjoyed at the time. The most obvious antecedent of the collection is Housman's popular classic, *A Shropshire Lad* (1896).³⁴ Housman writes in a rural, vernacular mold but uses familiar folk and church idiom, form, and thematic to communicate the modern, aestheticist, and decadent meanings of his and Swinburne's naturalist faith. Not only a naturalist, Housman is also an Epicurean in the ancient philosophical sense. The only constant is material flux. Metaphysical pretensions—and moral doxa—are just that, destructive, self-destructive illusions.

Like Walter Pater, Housman believed the purpose of humanistic education to be personal transformation, though, like Pater, he was also aware that such transformation is ethically equivocal in its effects.³⁵ As a young professor at the University of London in the early 1890s, Housman was critical of the focus of education in the public schools and the universities on Classical philology. At the same time, he affirmed the Greek value of self-development based on the appreciation of beauty.³⁶ Self-culture depends on aesthetic taste. In pursuit of this goal, Housman encourages his young men to refuse the path of work, career, marriage, and material gain:

Existence is not itself a good thing, that we should spend a lifetime securing its necessities: a life spent, however victoriously, in securing the necessities of life is no more than an elaborate furnishing and decoration of apartments for the reception of a guest who is never to come. Our business here is not to live, but to live happily. We may seem to be occupied, as Mr[. Herbert] Spencer says, in the production, preparation and distribution of commodities; but our true occupation is to manufacture from the raw materials of life the fabric of happiness; and if we

are ever to set about our work we must make up our minds to risk something.³⁷

Housman's aesthetic-ethical ideal is well expressed in the second poem of *A Shropshire Lad*, a favorite for musical settings during the period:

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
Is hung with bloom along the bough,
And stands about the woodland ride
Wearing white for Eastertide.

Now, of my threescore years and ten,
Twenty will not come again,
And take from seventy springs a score,
It only leaves me fifty more.

And since to look at things in bloom
Fifty springs are little room,
About the woodlands I will go
To see the cherry hung with snow.³⁸

In the poem, Housman concedes to the beauty of a tree in bloom in spring the power of individual transformation that is promised to Christians by the miracle of Easter. It is the significance of this change that validates the young, implicitly male speaker's aesthetic choice of visual sensation in preference to the sort of goal-directed behavior, including the choice of a wedding partner, that young men were expected to make. The speaker of the poem instead values sensation, contemplation, and being in the moment.

Hall too opposes rural values to commercial ones in "Rustic Courting," where she associates the threat of absorption in the race for money with heterosexuality—that is, with avaricious young women seeking to seduce a young man into abandoning the countryside. In "In the City," the male speaker recoils:

Oh! City girls are pale-like,
And proud-like, and cold-like,
And nineteen out of twenty
Have never been our way.
I tells them of the tall hills,

The green hills, the old hills,
 Where hawthorns are a-blossoming,
 And thrushes call all day.³⁹

The debate continues in “The Call to London,” the one poem in the sequence of which the speaker is female:

Oh! come to London, fine lad,
 Here’s where the money flows.
 But he said: “There’s gold in plenty,
 Gold enough and more for twenty,
 Where the kingcup grows.”

Oh! come to London, strong lad,
 I am wanting you.
 But he said: “It be a grand sight,
 When the stars at midnight
 Stretch along the blue.”

Oh! come to London, dear lad,
 I am fair to see!
 But he said: “Along of our way
 Trees are thick with white may,
 Wonderful they be!” (*Songs of Three Counties*, 25–26)

Hall’s Housman is not the collector of nineteenth-century male pornography and Victorian sexology, later donated by his brother Laurence to Cambridge University Library.⁴⁰ Nor is he the poet perhaps best known today for the imitation of a broadside ballad, written in 1895, in which he satirizes Wilde’s imprisonment by telling of the similar fate that befell a “young sinner” imprisoned because of “the colour of his hair.”⁴¹

Now ’tis oakum for his fingers and the treadmill for his feet,
 And the quarry-gang on Portland in the cold and in the heat,
 And between his spells of labour in the time he has to spare
 He can curse the God that made him for the colour of his hair.⁴²

Instead, Housman's poems in *A Shropshire Lad* celebrate yeomanlike ladship from the distanced vantage of a celibate, bachelor don.⁴³ The suffusion of the text with a chaste same-sex desire focused on young rural men was likely part of its appeal to Hall. Housman traced one direction in which same-sex desire could be expressed. Moreover, in "In the City" and "The Call to London," one catches a glimpse of another basis for Hall's identification with vigorous rural lads: namely, her elision of conventional femininity with a grasping egoism. While Hall shares Housman's negative reaction to the world of modern marriage and money, however, "Rustic Courting" is absent the vein of anti-imperial critique of *A Shropshire Lad*, with its repeated reminders that Housman's beloved young men were all too likely to meet an early death in the service of Britain overseas.

In the first poem of "Rustic Courting," Hall responds to "Loveliest of Trees'" in a way that discloses another part of the appeal for her of the male-female love lyric. In the private space of "walking out," aesthetic taste, physical touch, and visuality shift from the cherry tree to Hall's favored erotic object, an attractive young lass:

Walking Out

Upon a Sunday afternoon,
 When no one else was by,
 The little girl from Hanley way,
 She came and walked with I.

We climbed nigh to the Beacon top,
 And never word spoke we,
 But oh! We heard the thrushes sing
 Within the cherry tree.

The cherry tree was all a-bloom,
 And Malvern lay below,
 And far away the Severn wound—
 'Twas like a silver bow.

She took my arm, I took her hand,
 And never word we said,
 But oh! I knew her eyes were brown,
 Her lips were sweet and red. (*Songs of Three Counties* 1)

Sapphic Resurgence

Hall's Antimodernism functions as a specific articulation of modernist culture, one that defines itself for Hall in terms of desire. Batten set to music three lyrics from *Poems of the Past and Present*. Two are poems, one of them phallicized, in which a male figure (the wind in one, a pipe player in the other) makes music for his beloved, who sings a lyric in response. Batten clearly enjoyed playing the female beloved to the male wooer. One of the poems is from the "Fruit of the Nispero" series.⁴⁴ The song of most note, however, is the third, "To a Child." Late Victorian Sapphic verse often focuses on female chastity, by which is meant a body and spirit reserved from phallic sexuality.⁴⁵ "To a Child" exists in the moment before waking to sexual experience. Nominally addressed to a prepubescent girl, as sung by Batten, the poem's "Belovéd child" might refer to the much younger Hall, possibly a "child" in the mind of Batten; in this case, though, the child would be a boy-girl because Batten gave Hall the pet names of Johnnie (for use in the domestic circle) and John (in social settings), a name further implying David (as in the biblical pair of Jonathan and David). Batten styled herself Jonathan to Hall's David. John/David implied something both martial and heroic about Batten's young lover as well as their mutual commitment to a lifelong bond (Cline, 66).⁴⁶ In this context, "child" recalls *childe*, a term denoting a young candidate for knighthood. As directed by Hall to Batten, however, the poem's "Belovéd child" might be Batten herself, who enjoyed playing the role of the beautiful woman cared and provided for by her husband and lovers. In either case, the virginal chastity referred to is female.

Recontextualized as a public love exchange between an older and a younger woman, this poem of childhood takes on a scandalous, even perverse edge. Moreover, gender becomes scrambled in a maternal love that fondly observes a masculinity intrinsic to the embodiment of the young girl. This masculinity, moreover, is sexualized as characteristic of the embodied psyche of the virgin, like the "stain" of the hair that "Lies dark and splendid" over the child's unguarded "bosom's whiteness."

Belovéd child, I would not have you wake:

Stay closed sweet eyes, stay folded languid lips,
And let Love go a beggar for your sake.

Not even pausing once to kiss your hair,

That on your bosom's whiteness like a stain
Lies dark and splendid where the skin is fair.

Soft lotus lily, float upon the stream
 Of happy innocence to isles of peace,
 And let no lover wake you from your dream;

Nor part that mouth with kisses: 'tis too sweet
 To mate with any other. Ah! those lips!
 Love could but make their beauty less complete. (24)

Cherishing a moment before the advent of conscious sexuality, the poem is premised nonetheless on acknowledgment that such “innocence” cannot continue. It will be—as for Hall and Batten it already has been—imaginatively broken by a female “mate.”

Understood in this light, “To a Child” provides a complex view of the female psyche and of intimacy between women. The implicitly relational emphasis of the poem is notably different from the emphasis of Hall’s self-absorbed earlier signature poem published in 1908, “The Scar.” The castrating gesture at the end of the poem signifies in part the social and psychological construction of femininity and the female body within a phallogocentric economy, in part the physical and emotional isolation of the speaker, whose “secret needs / Quenched by the bleeding of that fountain are.”

Upon my life I bear one precious scar:
 Each night I kiss it, till anew it bleeds,
 And tell each drop of blood, as hallowed beads
 Are told by those dear few who faithful are.
 To me it seems to beautify, nor mar,
 My inner self, for from that deep wound leads
 A path to gained respect, my secret needs
 Quenched by the bleeding of that fountain are.

The fiery contest when that wound was won,
 Still burns within my brain, and robs of life,
 And terror, every lesser hurt that’s done
 To heart or spirit; let all harm run rife.
 I shall not fear again to look upon
 The gleaming edges of Fate’s sharpest knife.⁴⁷

“The Scar” is the utterance of a seasoned warrior, not a squire or childe; and its *amor* seems both sexual and blasphemously religious. The “precious

scar” that bleeds again nightly calls to mind the wound in the side of Christ, here a male-female one,⁴⁸ a reference bolstered by the comparison between the drops of blood that flow from the scar “as hallowed beads / Are told by those dear few who faithful are.” The poem is intensely inward-looking, its emphasis on how the scar beautifies “My inner self.” Despite the poem’s seeming solipsism, however, communication with others is also indicated. The speaker’s “tell”ing (i.e., counting) of “each drop of blood” connotes as well her telling (i.e., speaking) in verse, whose rhyme words form “beads” that tell the “bleeds.” “Those dear few” who tell their beads suggest the elect group of poets who, in “Ode to Sappho,” another signature poem published in the same volume, are linked to the Greek poet by beads that in this poem are not drops of blood but tears.

Oh! Sappho . . .
 Not thy deep pleasures, nor thy swiftest joys,
 Have made thee thus, immortal and yet dear
 To mortal hearts, but that which naught destroys,
 The sacred image of thy falling tear.

Beloved Lesbian! We would dare to claim
 By that same tear fond union with thy lot.⁴⁹

I have emphasized “The Scar” to be the poem of an *isolato*. However, it may also be read in relational terms, although in this case in terms of st(r)ains of pain. The vaginal scar nightly kissed by the speaker might be that of her lovers, who, “faithful,” worship in turn at the shrine of her wound, which bleeds *cyprine*. From the kisses of these lovers, the champion gains the “respect” necessary to overcome “The gleaming edges of Fate’s sharpest knife.” In “The Scar,” however, relationality is fraught with pain for both lover and beloved.

Hall’s poetry can be parsed within female poetic tradition in Victorian England. Emily Brontë and Elizabeth Barrett are important precursors, and *The Forgotten Island* is an imitation of Michael Field’s *Long Ago* (1889). Both books fashion Sappho’s island home of Lesbos as a landscape of desire, and the lyric personae of both works are often double-voiced as that of Sappho, who pursues the love of young maidens, and an ambiguously gendered poetic piper engaged in a similar quest. Important points of convergence also exist between Hall’s neo-Hellenistic version of Roman Catholicism and the Dionysiac Christianity of the devotional verse that the

couple wrote after their conversion to Roman Catholicism. In the programmatic “Prayer,” from Part 2 of *Songs of Three Counties*, Hall combines pantheistic, Christian, and pagan associations in affirming sexual love between women. The lyric voice apostrophizes “the Poet-God” responsible for all creation:

Whose image is revealed to all
 Great lovers in the loved one’s face,
 Whose passion mystical and deep
 Kindles the holy fires that sleep
 Within the heart’s most secret place.
 Whose breath is incense on the shrine
 Of earthly love, burning divine
 And changeless, through all time and space!⁵⁰

The English poet most significant to Hall’s Sapphic poetry, however, is a male, A. C. Swinburne. “Ode to Swinburne” revisits female masculinity in a new light: it sutures Hall’s Sapphism with the tradition of male Aestheticism and the Decadence. Echoing the rhetoric of “The Scar” and “Ode to Sappho,” Hall sees Sapphic subjectivity as channeled through Swinburne’s “Anactoria” and other Sapphic poems. Swinburne has “wakened” women to their identification with female same-sex desire, shameful in the eyes of Victorian propriety but a badge of “worth” to those prepared to claim their love. As usual in Hall’s work, this worth is accessed through “deep manhood,” both that of the male poet and that of the female lover. Finally, just as Myers defends genius against charges of abnormality and degeneration, Hall defends Swinburne against the notorious attacks on his “sterility.”⁵¹ Far from being sterile, Swinburne has generated a Sapphic progeny:

Round thy head
 The laurels of men’s thoughts, and tears that bled
 From souls thou wakened to their shame or worth.
 In thee was nothing sterile, and no dearth
 Was known to thy deep manhood, strong and fed
 Upon vast musings.⁵²

The “Ode to Swinburne” connects the emergence of Sapphic existence with the progress of the human race in the face of Swinburne’s usual gang

of antagonists in conventional morality, the police power of the state, and the crippling authority of institutional religion. This linkage motivates Hall's willingness to think the thought, so to speak, of human existence as a work of self-invention that constitutes *the* ethical project of the life of the species.

. . . Thou all gods did'st look
 Between the eyes, didst smite with thy swift breath
 Until they crumbled into less than death,
 And in thy hands their dim white ashes took
 And cast aside. . . .
 Though gav'st to man himself, eternity
 Of life in death, all things in one, that one
 A million millions, since time was begun
 A vast harmonious whole, less than a breath,
 And more than the great fires of earth or sun.⁵³

Popular Success and Lessons Learned

In closing this chapter, I turn to the single poem by Hall that, even before the outbreak of World War I, made the greatest impact on the British public, namely, "The Blind Ploughman." In addition to aspects mentioned in the first section of the chapter, "The Blind Ploughman" includes an element of vernacular religious mysticism that proved both adaptable and highly communicative. Hall would reprise key tropes of this work until the end of her career.

Set my hands upon the plough,
 My feet upon the sod;
 Turn my face towards the east,
 And praise be to God!

Every year the rains do fall,
 The seeds they stir and spring;
 Every year the spreading trees
 Shelter birds that sing.

From the shelter of your heart,
 Brother—drive out sin,
 Let the little birds of faith
 Come and nest therein.

God has made his sun to shine
 On both you and me;
 God, who took away my eyes,
 That my *soul* might see!⁵⁴

A dramatic lyric that introduces a Wordsworthian natural man to the reader, the ploughman speaks for the first time in the final stanza. As aesthetic statement, however, the lyric may be regarded as the words of the poet telepathically gaining entry to the countryman's subjectivity, then translating their communion into familiar diction and an accessible rhetoric. In this way, the poem becomes a collaboration between a fictional male subject and the poet. The final stanza can be read triply, as expressing the ploughman's sentiment, as the reader's should s/he make the choice of reading the poem with the necessary degree of sympathy, and/or as that of the poet/author. If the reader or the poet claims the stanza for themselves, literal blindness becomes metaphoric blindness; and the visionary capability that arises from affliction becomes a possibility for both reader and author.

At the time of publication of *Songs of Three Counties*, Hall was better known as a lyricist of drawing-room songs than as a poet. It is likely that "The Blind Ploughman" had already been set to music by Clarke before its publication, and it quickly became "one of the most famous ballads of the day" (Cline, 48, 88). On November 23, 1913, Hall accompanied Batten, her cousin Dorothy Diehl, and Phoebe Hoare to an evening concert at the Queen's Hall to hear the musical setting of the poem sung by Charles Tree (88). Appearing in public with her domestic partner plus one former and one current lover, Hall piqued the curiosity of members of the audience who might know or guess the details of her tangled private life. She also made a political point by tacitly claiming the countryman's experience for herself and for women like her. Hall had already explored the notion of a sexual disability that gives rise to higher powers in "The Scar." In attending the performance as she did, she implicitly claimed the spiritual, even visionary, capabilities of what a condescending onlooker might have regarded as a regrettable deviation from propriety. Sapphic readers or observers and

others in the know might listen to the song or read the poem as affirming the creative possibilities of Sapphic desire.

Earlier I suggested that the third stanza opens the possibility for the reader to claim the lines as expressing his or her own personal condition. In this respect, the poem may function not only as the utterance of a male rustic or a Sapphic writer; it can serve many other purposes as well. During World War I, “The Blind Ploughman” served the need described by Rosa Bracco for middlebrow literary texts that could sublimate the devastating effects of the war on combatants and noncombatants alike. Bracco argues that authors who produced such texts were committed to “a didactic literature of social communication . . . based on the assumption of values and experience shared with their readers.”⁵⁵ This middlebrow character helps explain the tension in the poem between the simplicity of form and diction, which recalls one of William Blake’s *Songs of Experience*, and the thoroughly conventional view of God proposed, which Blake rejected.

Combining English poetic tradition with populism and conventional religiosity, the song was perfectly suited to its use in a historic performance at Usher Hall in Edinburgh. The popular, ideological function of the piece, moreover, did not undercut other meanings it held for Hall. Into the 1930s, she continued to identify herself and other Sapphists with the image of the ploughman as a stricken but blessed worker/activist. In a bitter, unfinished public address to sexual inverts who were also World War I veterans, Hall’s manuscript breaks off, somewhat incoherently, as follows: “But I say & you say that we must be better. More faithful, more patient, more honest, more courageous. For we have a harder furrow to hoe—a hard, long grewelling [*sic*] furrow to hoe. And we dare not take our hands from the plough till the furrow is driven home straight & true—We dare not to relax our grip for a moment.”⁵⁶

In 1918, however, Hall’s sense of desperate, isolated mission lay in the future. At Usher Hall, “The Blind Ploughman” was sung by a blinded military officer, Captain MacRobert, before an audience of three thousand listeners. Confirming once again the intimacy of the world of song recitals, Hall’s new partner, Una Troubridge, was acquainted with MacRobert, whom both she and the American diva Mignon Nevada knew as “Laddie.” Nevada sent Hall and Troubridge a copy of a letter from MacRobert in which he discusses his experience of singing the song. The letter also contains a notice of a sighting at the concert experienced by “a great clairvoyant.”⁵⁷

Both the clairvoyant's vision and MacRobert's experience of singing the song are couched in the terms of contemporary spiritualist belief. In his letter, MacRobert uses the language of mediumship to describe the experience of singing the song: "I felt that I was just an instrument," he writes; "my friends . . . felt I was conveying a message." The song provides a means of linking audience, singer, the entire musical ensemble, composer, and lyricist in an experience of communal consolation. MacRobert continues: "I do wish to dedicate my voice to uplift and bring joy to humanity and I feel that I can and shall with that song. Of course foolishly, the audience thinks it was myself and my voice, they are not developed [*sic*] enough to see beyond the material side, whereas I know there was 'Someone' of the higher Angelic order that was really there and just used my vehicle!" At this point, his attention shifts to Hall, to his connection with her, and to her role in this psychical experience of channeling the "message" of those who have been sacrificed in war. "How I should love to meet Miss Hall. What a happiness it must be to her to feel & to know what a wonderful gift she has made to the world by her great, soul uplifting poem."⁵⁸

Experiences like this one corroborated Hall's initial conviction as a writer of the dependence of her poetry upon "inspiration." But the wartime success of "The Blind Ploughman" also shaped her sense of her role as the impersonal medium through which the experience of the suffering of some could be communicated to the public at large. The vehicles of belief for these exchanges were vernacular notions of Catholicism, Theosophy, and Spiritualism. This approach to communication was wedded to mass spectacle as in the Usher Hall concert and the dissemination of feeling and belief through the mass media. At Usher Hall, Hall's salon writing crossed over into the media of modern entertainment. A good example of how this process worked is afforded by the news clipping inserted in Nevada's letter, which reports on the concert as the occasion of a mass telepathic experience. During the late 1910s and 1920s, group experiences of this sort were frequently reported in the media, and spiritualists produced photographs, later debunked, of the faces of young men lost in battle hovering over the crowd at home. "Over the people's heads a grey haze [appeared,] that as it ascended higher gradually went from blue to violet and finally from pink to a dazzling yellow-white which seemed to be full of moving forms. Some looked like spirits, others like stars with 5 or 7 points to them, that were constantly vibrating and over the whole building there seemed a wonderful

feeling of Peace and Harmony.”⁵⁹ In this account too, the social aggregate is conciliated in the face of mass catastrophe.

I have spoken of the lyricist’s role in this social production as that of an impersonal point of transfer of the significance of collective loss. One might describe this function as existing outside the terms of ego-driven aspiration or intention. But the context of the circulation of Hall’s lyrics as mass entertainment also necessarily involves celebrity. In this way as well as through the networking of the small community of those involved in the private world of salon-music making, Hall’s orphic utterances are marked with the author’s signature as well as, more generally, by Sapphic cultural politics.

News of the response to “The Blind Ploughman” must have been unusually welcome to Hall in early June 1918, since there is evidence that she and Troubridge were highly disturbed by the outcome of a trial a month earlier involving Maud Allan, a dancer with sexual and emotional ties to other women. Allan had gained notoriety for her performance in the role of *Salomé* in Wilde’s play of the same name. She lost the libel suit that she launched against extreme right-wing politicians and polemicists who condemned her attempt to mount a private production of *Salomé* in spring 1918, when a major German offensive put the outcome of the war in doubt. The Allan trial opened on May 29, 1918, at a time when war weariness and hysteria were at their high point. Troubridge had been a house guest at Nevada’s home in Edinburgh in March 1917. Nevada added to her letter some gossipy questions as to “some rather queer things” that may have motivated the right-wing campaign against Allan. Of these efforts by Allan’s antagonists, one of whom was a relative of Una’s estranged husband, Nevada asked: “I wonder if Troubridge knew too much?? And if the explanation of his persecution won’t be found ultimately to lie at the bottom of all this muck heap?” By Troubridge she means Admiral Troubridge, from whom Una, who was living with Hall in spring 1918, was seeking a separation.⁶⁰ This web of connections demonstrates the tight interweaving of private and public politics and the barely submerged development of a lesbian public politics, one to which Nevada was sympathetic and which involved Troubridge and Hall as well.⁶¹

For a number of years, Hall had been pleased to see her lyrics set to music by a number of different composers. The extraordinary success of “The Blind Ploughman” prompted her to begin thinking about the possibility of earning money from sales of sheet music for this and other of her songs published by Chappell and Company. Accordingly, she wrote

to Chappell to raise the question of royalties for the lyrics of “The Blind Ploughman.” The reply that she received indicates how exploitative of lyricists music publishers were prepared to be. In a letter dated June 13, 1918, a representative of the company wrote Hall: “Unfortunately, we cannot afford to pay royalties to lyric writers. One or two other publishers may, but if we were to once introduce the principle, there would be no end to it. Many lyrics are merely a repetition of the same words in a different order and almost always with the same ideas. Hardly any of them, frankly, are worth a royalty, although once in a way [*sic*] they may be. It is difficult to differentiate, however. What I do feel is that you are quite entitled to have an extra payment for these particular words, and I have much pleasure in enclosing you, from Messrs. Chappell, a cheque for twenty guineas.”⁶²

In contrast, young Ivor Novello had a very different experience with a wartime hit. Born in 1893, Novello was just beginning his career in 1914, at the outset of World War I. He would become a dominant figure as the composer, lyricist, and star of West End vehicles by the end of the 1920s.⁶³ Like Hall, Novello did not conceal his affectional and sexual preference for members of his own sex. Like Hall too, Novello socially was an outsider who came from a musical background. He, however, earned a great deal of money as a result of the success of his tune “Keep the Home Fires Burning,” which became a sort of popular anthem for both soldiers at the front and civilians back home in England.

Unlike Hall’s undertaking as poet and lyricist, which focused on prestige, Novello’s was frankly commercial. In 1914, his mother urged him to write a hit song in support of the war effort. After initially resisting the injunction, Novello one day had an idea. In his biographer’s somewhat mythologized retelling, “Without hesitation [Novello] sat at the keyboard and played verse and chorus straight off. He felt immediately that this was the music he sought: a sturdy march rhythm that led to an eight-bar melody once repeated.” Novello then asked an American friend and collaborator, Lena Guilbert Ford, to write the lyrics, providing her with the lines, “Keep the home fires burning, while your hearts are yearning” (Harding, 28). When the song was complete, Novello arranged for its introduction at a music-hall performance. The occasion shares some features with the impact of Hall’s song on a mass audience at Usher Hall. After the singer, Sybil Vane,⁶⁴ began repeating the chorus, the audience, which was hearing the song for the first time, joined in; and the band of the Grenadier Guards, who were also appearing, improvised an accompaniment. “The audience

stamped their feet vigorously. In all they played and sang the piece half a dozen times” (29).

The music publishers Ascherberg, Hopwood and Crewe offered Novello a contract that included an annual retainer of £25 plus a royalty of three-pence on each copy of the sheet music. In all, Novello cleared £15,000–£18,000 on the song, a huge sum at the time. Like Hall, Ford did not fare as well: “She had little business sense and failed to insist on royalties for the words she contributed” (30). The similarities and contrasts between Novello’s experience, Ford’s, and Hall’s indicate the limits that Hall now encountered as a poet and lyricist working within a genteel, feminine context. Her humiliating dismissal by Chappell prompted her to start seeing herself differently as a writer. As she shifted her interest in writing from poetry to fiction, she thenceforth worked hard to control the financial terms on which her work was published. Inspiration was fine, but writing was a profession.

I began this chapter by asking what contexts are appropriate for reading Hall’s poetry. In discussing this early work, I have shown that Hall was already self-consciously playing with autobiographical reference in her work, pursuing celebrity, and attempting to establish a career as a writer.⁶⁵ Considered as an extended self-performance, her flagging of her sexual and emotional interest in other women plus the Sapphic program that she fashions in various ways in the volumes as they proceed, belong both to the history of the renewal of English music in the early years of the twentieth century and to the formation of mass and specialty listening and reading publics.