Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

From 1890 to 1910, as the United States hurtled into cultural modernity, American poetry underwent a serious crisis that many diagnosed as fatal. For the previous half century, the genre enjoyed a period of canonical prominence that had placed volumes of verse in nearly every middle-class parlor. But soon after 1890, poets, editors, publishers, and readers discovered they could no longer take this comfortable prominence for granted. Confronting the sudden inadequacy of existing accounts of poetry’s value, they found they had two choices: either reimagine poetry’s uses in a culture of dime novels, vaudeville halls, and nickelodeons, or watch it disappear. Over the next two decades they generated a debate about cultural value dominated by anxiety and suspicion toward tradition, convention, and orthodoxy. Indeed, they were so skeptical even of their own iconoclasm that they could seldom support verse experimenting with new forms and themes. Two powerful convictions—that the dominant genteel traditions of American poetry were moribund, and that no new directions were viable—formed an impasse that threatened to paralyze aspiring writers and to bring the production of American poetry to a halt. Yet I argue in this book that without undergoing this often lacerating phase of anxiety, disillusionment, and seeming futility, poetry in the United States could not have become modern. The period between 1890 and 1910 was crucial to the emergence of twentieth-century poetry’s dominant paradigms of cultural value, which adopted such "modern" qualities as uncertainty, marginality, and irony as central to artistic achievement. Participants in the vigorous "New Poetry" movement that emerged after 1910, while retaining this skepticism toward received ideas and conventional strategies, would rediscover a conviction in the value of their calling. But it was their "lost" predecessors of the
previous two decades who first broke the ground, struggling to use verse to articulate the ambiguous meanings of their own modernity.

My inquiry into American poetry, like any study of how cultural value is posited, maintained, and changed, takes up the analytic challenge outlined by Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s seminal *Contingencies of Value*. Like Smith, I treat the activity of evaluation as a central constituent of literary studies, as accessible to analysis and as needful of interpretation as the concept of meaning has been. Smith’s rigorously theoretical work invites historical application by emphasizing the multiple, shifting, and context-specific variables that affect patterns of evaluation. In this book I have sought to remain aware of the irreducible contingency of cultural value by being equally skeptical of two forms of disparagement common in the era I discuss: repudiations of elite forms, because they are valued by only a small percentage of the populace; and dismissals of the genres used by millions, because they don’t embody the best that has been thought and said. My analysis assumes that both elite and mass-marketed texts have their uses, their particular virtues and strengths, and their notable limitations. Both are compromised by their entanglement with capitalist ideology production; on occasion both challenge such ideologies. In this book I hope to suggest that the shifting value of each might be best understood by examining the points of contact between them.

My approach synthesizes Smith’s evaluative relativism with Jerome McGann’s redefinition of the literary work not as a thing or object but "as a complex event in socio-historical space" generated by "an interactive network of productive people and forces" (*Beauty of Inflections* 5, 10). My methodology, which might be called "value-history," aims to describe the discursive networks in which these texts, people, and forces, inevitably implicated in the histories and ideologies of their times (and ours), interact to produce cultural value. The task of value-history in this study is to analyze the ideological formations, structures of feeling, and institutional practices through which the value of verse writing was constructed in the United States a century ago. Between 1890 and 1910 these processes were especially urgent and illuminating, because to a great many people, poetry’s very existence was in serious question.

I divide this discourse of value into two interdependent categories of text: (1) the verses produced by Americans during these years, which articulate more or less explicitly the conditions of their own creation; and (2) a myriad other forms of writing (including but not limited to criticism, reviews, editorials, manifestos, anthologies, textbooks, parodies, fiction, biographies, private letters, cartoons, songs) that posited, denied,
and contested poetry’s value in the nation’s homes, public squares, periodicals, classrooms, and bookstores. Like McGann, Richard Brodhead has proposed that we understand surrounding discourses of value as integral to the nature and function of literary texts: "A work of writing comes to its particular form of existence in interaction with the network of relations that surround it: in any actual instances, writing orients itself in or against some understanding of what writing is, does, and is good for that is culturally composed and derived" (Cultures of Letters 8).

Each major section of the book examines these reciprocal categories to describe how and why turn-of-the-century Americans believed, and often despaired of believing, that poetry could be of continued value to their modern world. Part 1 traces the construction of a national ideology of poetic value in the decades before 1890, focusing on the reception and poetics of the nation’s first literary canon, the so-called Fireside poets, whose increasingly inhibiting shadow dominated U.S. cultural institutions beyond the end of the century. Part 2 mounts an analysis of what American poetry was thought to be “good for”—or no good for—between 1890 and 1910. This account of the genre in crisis provides an interpretive framework for part 3, which reads turn-of-the-century verse through its "particular forms" as they voice and challenge the period’s troublesome evaluative dynamics.

**AMERICAN POETRY ELSEWHERE**

The time frame of this study goes against the grain of traditional "modernist" scholarship, which often assumes that on or about October 1, 1912, American poetry changed with Ezra Pound’s first appearance in Poetry: A Magazine of Verse, and that little of interest, other than Whitman and Dickinson, had happened before that. No matter that the decisive dynamics of cultural modernity in America had all emerged by 1900, nor that recent historicist scholarship has shown turn-of-the-century American prose writers vividly registering the experiential and ideological shifts that define urban-industrial modernity. Cary Nelson’s seminal assertion that "We no longer know the history of the poetry of the first half of this century" (Repression 4) applies, if anything, even more comprehensively to the verse produced between 1890 and 1910, which generations of American literature scholars have been told possesses neither historical nor aesthetic significance. Our "impoverished memory" (Nelson, Revolutionary 68) of this era is a dubious legacy of the New Critical paradigm of value under which modern poetry was
institutionalized in the mid-century academy, reduced to the narrow formation of "high modernism." New Criticism's will to ahistoricity rendered unpalatable, or even unreadable, whatever relationships turn-of-the-century texts posited between the genre of poetry and the condition of modernity. Its fetish for stylistic originality meant that the traditional forms and meters used in most turn-of-the-century poems rendered them insufficiently "modernist."

This criterion of stylistic originality has often enforced powerfully antimodern accounts of the history of American poetry, in which a few writers gain access to the valorizing term "modernism" by rejecting modernity for some "world elsewhere," in Richard Poirier's well-known phrase. The theory of literary value advanced in Poirier's influential 1966 book of that name frames its subject in uncompromising fashion: "American literature is a struggle with already existing literary, social, and historical organizations for power over environment and over language itself" (ix). Poirier's argument identifies the best American literature by its radical disconnection from the "prison" of historical "reality" (29). This paradigm of value confines the canonical American text within an idealized self-created realm based on stylistic uniqueness. This equation is made explicit by the full title of Poirier's book—A World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature—and by this passage from the preface: "The great works of American literature are alive with the effort to stabilize certain feelings and attitudes that have, as it were, no place in the world, no place at all except a writer's style can give them one" (ix). Thus modernism becomes a narrative of embattlement in which titanic individuals seek a breakthrough in style and voice dramatic enough to propel their work beyond the reach of a materialist modernity that reduces everything else to commodity status.

Similar assumptions still undergird the chronological and aesthetic boundaries of much American poetry scholarship. I make this claim well aware that high modernism and New Criticism have been critiqued philosophically and politically (not least by Poirier himself), and that in recent years exciting historicist work has demonstrated how American literary forms can be situated in a range of complex relation to modernity, from abject accommodation to corrosive critique to utopian idealism. Still, a remarkably small proportion of New Americanist scholarship deals with poetry. Though by now few would openly argue that the most valuable verse must escape the dispiriting realm of modernity for a realm of aestheticist detachment, this premise nonetheless lingers in choices made and not made, particularly in the tendency of many scholarly projects to define a historicized American literature as
fiction, or at least prose, making poetry into something less than an afterthought.4

This severance of poetry from the main contemporary currents of American literature studies has been noted by several scholars, but remains mostly unredressed. Joseph Harrington reminds us that much verse of the early twentieth century was "popular, narrative, and conventional in its representational strategies" ("Why American Poetry" 508). Why is such verse not as valuable to New Americanist practice as previously devalued prose texts and genres? Harrington argues that verse "remains barely visible to critics of American literature because they read poems (if they read them) through the social form of 'poetry' institutionalized 50 years ago" in the disciplinary norms of New Criticism (508). It appears that New Americanism's own "disciplinary unconscious" (Pease 3) sustains a powerful complex of formalist assumptions about poetry that implicitly privilege stylistic density over transparency, emotional opacity over directness, and disillusioned cynicism over idealism.

This subterranean formalism creates a generic double standard in which prose works of vastly varying linguistic sophistication and stylistic distinctiveness are admired—as they should be—while verse texts that come across as sentimental in tone, transparent in theme, or conventional in form, are ignored or scorned. Where poetry is concerned, we are still influenced by an "ethic of difficulty-based machismo" that Leonard Diepeveen sees as foundational to the construction of high-modernist literary value ("Difficult Pleasures"). Harrington proposes that at its most extreme, this self-contradictory practice threatens to eradicate poetry from "American literature" as the field is now being reinscribed under historicist paradigms. Ultimately this absence may be as damaging to New Americanism as to poetry, since it confutes the movement's disciplinary mission to imbricate literature into a historical field defined by political struggle and ideological contestation. Poetry is nearly always the genre claimed to exemplify "the literary" in exactly the sense that New Americanism contests this concept: as a privileged realm separate from history and politics. If a disciplinary movement holding these premises does not demonstrate that this most "literary" of genres is as susceptible to historical imbrication as any other sort of text, then its claim to have situated literature into history will never be realized.

Though this critique still needs to be made, I'm happy to acknowledge fine recent scholarship reasserting American poetry's productive relations to history and politics. Work by Cheryl Walker, Nina Baym, Joanne Dobson, Paula Bennett, and Suzanne Clark, among others, has
rethought the boundaries, scope, and uses of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American women’s poetry, loosing the sentimental from long-standing pejorative baggage and proposing it instead as a productive category of writing we can study and evaluate differentially, as we do romantic or realist texts (Dobson, "Reclaiming Sentimental Literature" 283). Recent investigations of American left culture, extending the project initiated by Nelson’s Repression and Recovery, augur radical (and overdue) changes in the canonical shape of American poetry after 1910. The following chapters will demonstrate that these emerging critical movements have shaped my account of turn-of-the-century poetry at many points.

So far, however, the years between 1890 and 1910 have fallen between these two revisionist paths, which have remained largely within the traditional periodizing strategies of American poetic history, in focusing either on the middle third of the nineteenth century or the interwar years of the twentieth. The canons have changed (from Longfellow/Whittier to Whitman/Poe to Dickinson/Sigourney; from Eliot/Pound to Stevens/Williams to whom—Loy/Hughes?), but the periods have remained the same. These surprisingly tenacious chronological divisions make a productive reading of turn-of-the-century verse difficult, but not impossible. My analysis refreshes this verse by placing it in the evaluative contexts of its production and initial reception, and by measuring not its unfitness for conventionally conceived “modernism,” but its engagement with modernity. At various points my argument interrogates the lingering tendency of much Americanist scholarship to treat sentimental and hortatory verses as meretricious subliterary performances rather than as complex and productive deployments of discursive conventions “emerging from a shared cultural/aesthetic impetus at a particular historical moment” (Dobson, "Reclaiming" 265). I seek finally to show that turn-of-the-century verse tropes its times with such variety and intensity that it must be seen as a key moment in the nation’s poetry, dramatizing the epochal transition between genteel and modern paradigms of cultural value, and rearticulating the genre’s possible uses in a world of million-selling novels, daily newspapers, and hit songs. In its broadest implications, my work joins many of the studies cited above in reconfiguring what is meant by the phrase “modern American poetry.” Instead of the great stylistic divide before and after 1912 that has long framed, and perhaps limited, our scholarly work, “modern poetry” might mean, first and foremost, poetry addressing the conditions of modernity.

Many qualities I associate with this modern poetry will no doubt sound familiar: an impulse to resist or challenge traditions; a tendency to
measure literary value through the creation of distinctive forms and unique authorial voices; an affinity for irony, historical awareness, and self-reflexivity; an ambivalent attraction to other cultural genres and disciplines; an interest in articulating oppositional political positions; and above all, deep engagement, however anxious or oppositional, with the conditions of modern life. I certainly don't mean these attributes as prescriptive litmus tests a text must pass to be considered "modern," but as a flexible cluster of characteristics traceable across a vast body of verse (in innumerably varied styles) written after 1890. As I conceive the term, such early-twentieth-century poets as Carl Sandburg, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Claude McKay, Amy Lowell, and Langston Hughes (and for that matter, Harriet Monroe, Stephen Vincent Benét, and even Joyce Kilmer) are fully as modern as Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, Hart Crane, and Marianne Moore. To claim all these poets are equally modern does not imply that their "modern-ities" are all necessarily of the same type, or their poetry of the same quality or value. These are questions that must be pursued case by case. But the only poems I would exclude from considering as "modern" altogether are those seeking to pretend that urban-industrial modernity never existed at all. There were a vast number of such poems produced up through the first half of the twentieth century (and later?) by writers both well-known and unknown. But even here, I've sometimes found that verses attempting such pretense can still illuminate conditions of modern culture in their very strategies of evasion and repression. Nor would I rule out a priori any poem from being modern because of its author, genre, or site of publication. At various points in this book, I look at verses from popular magazines, advertisements, pop songs, and political protest movements, as well as more "literary" venues. All of these warrant further intensive study as productive genres of modern verse.

In this study, when I describe texts or attitudes of the 1890s and 1900s as "modern," I see them departing from prevailing genteel conventions, and deploying some attitude, image, or representational strategy more typical of the "New Poetry" after 1912. Paula Bennett has used the term "protomodernism" in this way, to describe late-nineteenth-century women poets who "moved toward a poetry of obliqueness and doubt" that challenged prevailing genteel idealism ("Not Just Filler" 207). I'll use "modern" instead, because I want to avoid privileging "modernism" as any sort of a teleological destination, and also because the key poets of this study, born between 1860 and 1880, were barely older than most of those who were central in the New Poetry. If this seems ambiguous, it's an ambiguity calculated to keep in mind the peculiar generational
dynamics of the 1910s, in which long-excluded middle-aged writers assumed crucial positions in an emerging avant-garde. Edgar Lee Masters, Amy Lowell, Robert Frost, Vachel Lindsay, Carl Sandburg, Wallace Stevens, born between 1868 and 1879, were chronological contemporaries of Stephen Crane, William Vaughn Moody, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Trumbull Stickney, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, and Francis Brooks, born between 1867 and 1875. My argument makes this latter group the first moderns of American poetry. Most of them did not even live to see 1912, and thus have seldom been seriously considered in relation to conventional "modernism." But without them, their contemporaries could not have made the New Poetry as vigorous as it became.

WHAT'S SO GREAT ABOUT THE GREAT DIVIDE?

In this book "modernity" describes the epochal material, social, and cultural forces that during the nineteenth century transformed the United States from a relatively homogeneous Christian agricultural society into a multicultural industrial powerhouse dominated by secular values. T. J. Clark and others have proposed reading major artistic movements since Romanticism as often contradictory responses to these processes of secularization and capitalist modernization (7-8). I concur with this, but I see more productive ambiguity in modernization's effects than does Clark's bleak (though magnificent) account of the intertwined decline of modernism and utopian socialism in *Farewell to an Idea*. With Marshall Berman I treat modernity as a paradoxical and conflicted condition in which we "find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world—and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are" (15).

In my account of American poetry the central event of cultural modernity was the emergence of the mechanized metropolis, which catalyzed a paradoxical and productive set of social dynamics in the later nineteenth century. Urbanizing and technologizing conditions of experience made possible unprecedented geographical, emotional, economic, and social mobility; yet these new freedoms were achieved by displacing traditional anchoring communities of work, home, family, and religion with networks of more impersonal economic interaction. For Berman, the increasing physical mobility of modern metropolitan life in Western Europe through the nineteenth century shattered long-standing class
stratifications and dramatically increased class consciousness, with a rich variety of consequences (150-55). In the United States, with its weaker traditions of social stratification, the growth of the industrialized metropolis, massive immigration, and the postwar emergence of big capitalism initially increased suspicion and disdain across classes. This climate of polarization was a significant factor in American poetry's turn-of-the-century crisis of modernity, as an embattled elite tried to use the genre to enforce rigid categories of cultural legitimation and distinction, in Pierre Bourdieu's sense. However, the continued impact of these forces of modern heterogeneity prevented this climate of distinction from becoming fully naturalized, and generated a contested and multivalent discourse on social marginality that inflected American poetry beginning in the 1890s.

As Clark suggests, one of modernity's defining paradigm shifts pertains to cultural value. Societies can be designated modern by their turn away from measuring value through reverence of past precedent or tradition and by their "pursuit" instead "of a projected future—of goods, pleasures, freedoms, forms of control over nature, or infinities of information" (7). The entanglement of these emergent conceptions of value with ideologies of market capitalism produces another decisive contradiction of cultural modernity. As more people can afford an enlarging array of goods, activities, and pleasures, they are induced to construct their identities around personal economies based on accumulation of material objects, which support capitalist systems of manufacture, distribution, and advertising. Analogously, the individual's relationship to knowledge becomes a paradoxical bargain in which an incredible wealth of knowledge is made available but largely through mass-marketed systems of information, authority, and entertainment whose reliability and beneficence are (or should be) in constant question. These shifts in the relations between macroeconomic forces and cultural value augured radical changes for a genre as tradition-bound and financially tenuous as poetry. Chapter 1 shows that for a time after 1840, the growth of capitalist cultural institutions aided American poetry, as modernized systems of publishing, marketing, and distribution enlarged the audience for an emerging national canon of poets. But by 1890 this delicate balance had spun out of control as voracious market imperatives demanded more immediate and spectacular returns than poetry could usually generate, and as dramatically increasing demand for leisure activities gave rise to new cultural forms competing for the public's coin and allegiance. It is no coincidence that poetry's crisis of value erupted in this gap between its desertion by mainstream cultural economies and the invention of
alternative modern forms of publication—above all, the little magazine—that better addressed the genre's distinctive requirements and attractions.

Although modernity's liberating and restricting dynamics are always shifting in proportional importance depending on specific circumstances, both are defining aspects of modern experience, and both are crucial to my analysis of American poetry. In insisting upon this, I am contesting the polarization that Berman describes as typifying twentieth-century writing about modernity:

Our nineteenth-century thinkers were simultaneously enthusiasts and enemies of modern life, wrestling inexhaustibly with its ambiguities and contradictions; their self-ironies and inner tensions were a primary source of their creative power. Their twentieth-century successors have lurched far more toward rigid polarities and flat totalizations. Modernity is either embraced with a blind and uncritical enthusiasm, or else condemned with a neo-Olympian remoteness and contempt; in either case, it is conceived as a closed monolith, incapable of being shaped or changed by modern men. Open visions of modern life have been supplanted by closed ones, Both/And by Either/Or. (24)

At the turn of the century, the most compelling accounts of poetry's value, and the strongest American verses, sought to engage modernity's defining contradictions as sources of creative power. To reexamine the enabling aspects of these contradictory engagements, long obscured by high modernism's Olympian disdain for modernization, will help us construct accounts of American poetry more responsive to the heterogeneous textures of modern life.

Though as Berman notes, the crippling polarity of "cultural despair" and "modernolatry" often bisects conventional left-right political divisions (169-70), the former is usually associated with elite or "literary" culture, the latter with mass culture. Like Richard Ohmann, I take the emergence of the genres we term "mass culture" as "a development of world-historical importance" (31)—indeed, as one of the decisive consequences of the modern condition. And I view American poetry beginning in the 1890s as being consistently inflected by this development. Andreas Huyssen's revision of the relationship between modernism and mass culture pertains to my position: "Contrary to the claims of champions of the autonomy of art, contrary also to the ideologists of textuality, the realities of modern life and the ominous expansion of mass culture throughout the social realm are always already inscribed into the articulation of
aesthetic modernism. Mass culture has always been the subtext of the modernist project” (47). But Huyssen’s use of the singular "modernist project" risks equating a particular formation (typically, high modernism) with the entire culture of the modern period.

I also question Huyssen’s claim that "What has to be put in question is the presumably adversary relationship of the modernist aesthetic to the myth and ideology of modernization and progress, which it ostensibly rejects in its fixation upon the eternal and timeless power of the poetic word" (56). Here Huyssen usefully reframes this relationship away from simplistic opposition but interprets this as exposing a dirty secret, one so unmentionable that all of modernism becomes a "reaction formation" (54) defined by its need to repress involvement in "the processes and pressures of the same mundane modernization it so ostensibly repudiates" (56). When Huyssen refers to "the subterranean collusion of modernism with the myth of modernization" (56), he circumscribes his position within an evaluative paradigm of elitist high culture, able to see mass culture's emergence only as "ominous," the promises of modernization only as delusive and debilitating. Such a conclusion veers toward the "flat totalizations" Berman objects to.

This book uses a less global and more contingent approach to exploring the relative value of elite and mass culture as "twin and inseparable forms of the fission of aesthetic production under late capitalism," as Fredric Jameson puts it (14). As we investigate multiple "modernist projects" that use mass culture quite differently from high modernism's uses of it, we'll find this means not just considering how individual writers of the high canon echoed, borrowed from, or parodied mass culture, illuminating as such studies can be. It also means investigating how forms of mass culture inflected traditionally elite genres such as poetry, even if such inquiry means taking seriously the sort of verse we were taught to regard as worthless doggerel—an assertion put to the test in chapter 2 when I discuss a poem advertising canned baked beans.

I propose that American poetry’s engagement with mass culture has been not deviously collusive, but often exuberant and powerfully energizing. The mass-culture verse genres that challenged poetry's elite status in the 1890s generated energy by appropriating conventions of genteel verse for use in forms more relevant to the actual textures of modern life. During those same years, Americans who were still committed to literary poetry were forced to acknowledge the obsolescence of its existing cultural functions and worked to reimagine its possible uses, often by adapting or parodying conventions of mass culture. It was no accident that American poetry was rejuvenated in the 1910s when a vast range of
poets immersed themselves in the defining textures, settings, and discourses of modern urban experience. But as the final chapter of this book details, even in the 1890s and 1900s some American verse writers—Stephen Crane above all—began to draw upon forms of mass culture for conceptual, structural, and even ethical models. These attempts to reformulate poetry’s value exhibit plenty of anxiety and antagonism toward mass culture, but in their strongest and most self-aware works, anxiety and antagonism generate valuable resistance to modernity’s dispiriting aspects. This resistance is the opposite of the genteel desire to escape modernity altogether. Of course not all such forms of engaged resistance are equally valuable, but engagement in some form is surely prerequisite to any meaningful contribution that literature might make to modern social life.

THEMATICS OF VALUE

In the book’s interpretive sections, I foreground the tendency in turn-of-the-century American poems—from the perfumed effusions of rarefied aestheticist circles to the hastily composed light verses of mass-circulation magazines—to ruminate upon their own status, function, or value. This quality contrasts strikingly to American verses written after 1910, which exhibit far less need to investigate or justify the conditions of their own existence. To chart these articulations, I have drawn upon the “thematics of writing” underlying Michael Fried’s brilliant deconstructive reading of Stephen Crane’s prose, which argues that “Crane’s relentlessly metaphorical style” continually explores “the multifarious aspects of . . . the scene of writing” (98, 120). This choice is not arbitrary, since Crane is the central poet of my analysis, the one most intensely engaged with turn-of-the-century American modernity. Fried sees such recurrent Crane images as “disfigured upturned faces with open unseeing eyes” troping “the blank page on which the action of inscription takes place,” and providing an intricate self-reflexive level of signification even in his most historically embedded and occasional writings (99-100). My interpretive approach could be called a “thematics of value,” charting the ways that turn-of-the-century verses trope the conditions of their own production and reception. Sometimes these self-reflexive moments thematize the physical act of inscription, but they may also evoke the activity of reading, either individual or communal; explore the psychosocial economies of creating poetic writing; portray books or poems as material commodities or cultural icons; articulate their own conflicted relation-
ship to past canons; measure poetry against such popular genres as newspapers, fiction, and song; or ponder poetry’s capacity to intervene in the realms of politics and history.

In tracing the ways that American poems offer reflexive commentary on their own value, the last thing I want is to imply a closed circle of self-reference—that poetry always talks about itself and not much else. My goal is the opposite: to show that when such texts problematize the premises of their own value or valuelessness, they are grappling with far-reaching issues, particularly the changing relationship between traditionally elite genres and the forms of modern mass culture. When poems voice anxieties about their own ephemerality, for example, they don’t merely bemoan their misfortune but also struggle to comprehend unstable modern dynamics of cultural permanence and change. When they portray the poet as an outcast wandering the margins of society, as a vast number of turn-of-the-century verses do, they may (or may fail to) appropriate key conceptual polarities such as center and margin in order to challenge existing aesthetic and social hierarchies. Poems such as Robinson’s that exploit disparities between traditional styles and modern subjects offer new ways for artistic “form” to embody social “content.” Poems parodying or critiquing forms of mass culture may advance perspectives of intelligent resistance to repressively polarized responses to modernity (elitist dismissal or blind acceptance). These are the sorts of interpretive premises historicism uses productively with American prose texts but has seldom tried with the nation’s rich reservoir of poetry.

It’s not enough simply to say that we ought to read a different kind of modern poetry because it was politically or morally well-intentioned. Our understanding of poetry’s value has been profoundly shaped by the formalist lineage of New Criticism and American deconstruction that showed how to read such poets as Stevens, Eliot, Moore, and Hart Crane with the subtlety their work deserves. But at the same time, imperatives of aesthetic craft and conceptual depth need not mean that we can appreciate only those same poets and their work. It is premature—drastically so—to assume that the interpretive skills we use to read modernist titans must fail when applied to poets writing with different premises and priorities. Yet this is not only assumed all the time, but also taken for granted that such “failure” clinches the inferiority of those latter poets. In my view, all that such disclaimers demonstrate is that the strategies critics honed to read Eliot in 1940 with such revelatory force that they transformed the canonical outlines of American literature—the somewhat different ones used to read Pound in 1950, Stevens in 1960, and Williams in 1970—are overdue for further retooling. Richly contextual approaches
can, and must, be adapted to the concerns of modern American poets—and not just the few greats vetted by high modernism, but also those who used "popular, narrative, and conventional" forms to garner sizable audiences and exert powerful influence on the nation’s culture. The work of Cary Nelson, Alan Wald, Walter Kalaidjian, Mark Van Wienen, Michael Thurston, Nancy Berke, Joseph Harrington, Robert Shulman, Rita Barnard, and others has reasserted American verse after 1910 as a discourse that engages modernity rather than trying to repudiate it. My analysis extends the reach of their work by showing how a range of turn-of-the-century poets fit into this developing narrative of modern American poetry.

Some readers may perceive a few—or most—of the verses I discuss as lacking sufficient aesthetic value. I would gently urge them not to turn away too quickly, but to examine their own interpretive and evaluative premises, as historicists have done while working with once denigrated prose works. The rigorously relativistic model of literary evaluation advanced by Smith in *Contingencies of Value* and Jane Tompkins in *Sensational Designs*, among others, treats the value and meaning of texts not as intrinsic to them, but as dependent on complex contextual variables. This relativist position has become widely professed, if not predominant, in current Americanist practice. Those who claim to hold it must accept the corollary that verse dismissed as lacking aesthetic value by New Critical high modernism might become significant or even crucial within historicist paradigms. Yet this process will not happen instantaneously or easily: these poems need a chance to breathe, to show us what they can do, before we close the book on them for another hundred years.

I have opened many musty volumes since I began this study and am happy I did so. After completing a dissertation and book on Wallace Stevens, I knew I was no longer interested in projects on single authors. My quarrel was not with Stevens (far from it), but with modernist criticism’s "incredibly narrow focus on a select group of seminal careers," as Kalaidjian puts it (2). I therefore resolved to explore a wide range of American verses that grapple with questions of cultural value, regardless of whatever canonical or non-canonical baggage they currently carry. Originally my discussion of turn-of-the-century work was conceived as a prefatory chapter in a study of early-twentieth-century American poets’ engagement with urban-industrial modernity (my next major project). But I found so much of interest before 1910 that I wound up with an entire book. My enthusiasm was piqued by the almost complete lack of recent critical material on turn-of-the-century verse. As I
read these poets whose names I had usually heard spoken in tones of condescension or even ridicule, I had the liberating sense that some of my high-modernist preconceptions were falling away. I also developed deep respect for their often brave and ingenious responses to the excruciating conditions in which they found themselves. Reading them, I felt the surprised pleasure one feels upon discovering old but fresh currency in a discarded coat. If this metaphor seems crassly materialistic, it is intentionally so, since the turn-of-the-century poems that speak to me most are those willing to acknowledge their own ambiguous embeddedness in a stubbornly material and irreversibly modern world. I hope that upon encountering this body of verse in a sympathetic yet open-eyed analysis, others will find more to say about these poets, and will carry on excavating the still undervalued riches of modern American poetry.