Would Poetry Disappear?

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American poetry’s crisis of modernity was experienced most acutely by the young writers born after 1860. Given the profusion of truncated careers and premature deaths among poets of this generation, it is not surprising that the turn of the century has been seen as “the big blank of American poetic history,” in Frank Lentricchia’s words (2). In alarming contrast to the six Fireside poets, whose ages averaged nearly eighty at their deaths, a remarkable number of the promising writers who began publishing verse in the 1890s, including Richard Hovey (1864–1900), Francis Brooks (1867–1898), Stephen Crane (1871–1900), Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906), Guy Wetmore Carryl (1873–1904), George Cabot Lodge (1873–1909), Joseph Trumbull Stickney (1874–1904), and Arthur Upson (1877–1908), died well before their fortieth birthdays, while William Vaughn Moody (1869–1910) barely reached his. Out of financial necessity or general discouragement, numerous other aspiring and talented poets, including George Santayana, Ellen Glasgow, Carolyn Wells, Edgar Lee Masters, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Alice Dunbar-Nelson, gravitated to other pursuits, some never to return to verse. Those inclined to employ the Chatterton scenario to account for the decline in American poetry had models aplenty during these years. Indeed, as the best known and most ungoverned young literary celebrity of the 1890s, Stephen Crane was described in Munsey’s as
“the Chatterton of today” as early as 1895, as if his tragically premature death were merely a matter of time (Review of The Black Riders, in Weatherford 66). Even if we resist the notion that all these early deaths were not coincidental but somehow linked to the untenable position of the poet in turn-of-the-century America, the work of these young writers demonstrates that skepticism toward the value of poetry in America, latent but manageable in the Fireside writers, had become a serious, even fatal, stumbling block. For them, Josephine Preston Peabody’s sardonic question—“But tell us of the wage, man / You had for this hard day; / . . . / And tell us why you play!” (Fortune 98)—was no joke. Finding reasons to continue playing, surrounded by little but indifference and contempt, became an urgent and defining concern of their work.

The critical commonplace about the generation of 1890s poets is that they possessed a melancholy temperament, a tragic sense of life, an inheritance of philosophical pessimism, or some similarly nebulous notion. Their angst-ridden pessimism becomes more meaningful when read through American poetry’s crisis. Like the commentators discussed in part 2, these young writers faced a paralyzing impasse between the conviction that the traditions of American poetry were exhausted and a caustic skepticism toward actual avenues of innovation. To most, a reactionary embrace of the genre as a bastion of elite culture no longer seemed an adequate response, yet avenues of engagement with alternative or mass cultural formations were not easily accessible either. They saw few productive links left with past traditions and no particular reason to believe that the future would improve the situation.

Not surprisingly, given these Sisyphean circumstances, their work is preoccupied with images of paralysis and futility. But we have been mistaken in dismissing the period as a desolate interval in the history of American poetry between the long-settled canons of the mid-nineteenth century and the cosmopolitan formation of “high modernism.” Indeed, I’ve found extraordinary interest in the struggles of these young writers to endure and comprehend the worst of the crisis, and for those who survived, to establish rejuvenated institutions and paradigms of cultural value after 1910. Detailed discussion of the 1910s awaits my next book, but here I want to note, as too few histories have done, that most of those crucial to the New Poetry of that decade—Edwin Arlington Robinson, Edgar Lee Masters, Harriet Monroe, Amy Lowell, Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, Vachel Lindsay, Wallace Stevens—did not spring into middle-aged existence in 1912, but were members of this same “lost” generation born before 1880. Until 1910 its members’ only recourse, and their major achievement, was to generate verse from their vexed relations to past
canons, and from their anxiety over poetry’s meager future prospects. Their strongest poems articulate an engagement with adversity that proved such qualities as anxiety, pessimism, and irony enabling rather than impious and morally corrosive, as genteel culture had believed. As these poets thematized the oblivion apparently awaiting them, they converted their feelings of marginalization and even despair into productive critique of obsolescent but still dominant genteel conceptions of cultural value. Their marginal position enabled them to say things about modernity that genteel verse had never uttered, and to imagine new cultural uses for American poetry. The beginning of viable “modernist” institutions in American poetry dates from 1911 or 1912. But these young poets of the 1890s and 1900s were the first to advance a modern poetics.

Part 3 describes the varied responses of these young writers to the excruciating evaluative conditions they encountered and urges reconsideration of their achievement. In this chapter I begin by sketching their increasing dissatisfaction with genteel canonical elders and their adoption of personae of youthful dissent and rebellion. I then examine the emergence, struggles, and dissolution of a group of talented poets associated with Harvard in the early 1890s who seemed the obvious heirs to the Fireside canon. The work of Santayana, Lodge, and Stickney poignantly dramatizes the breakdown of three previously crucial functions for poetry: to posit cosmic ideality, to provide emotional consolation, and to comment on sociopolitical issues. Ultimately the failures of these Harvard poets came not from their inability to create a “world elsewhere” transcending the despoliations of modernity, but from their too-eager embrace of this chimerical realm, which left them little but misanthropic revulsion toward modern American life. Their successes, particularly in the work of Moody and Robinson, came when they transmuted their alienation into clear-eyed awareness of poetry’s cultural marginality and explored its possible uses.

My primary goal is to show that despite many false starts, abrupt cessations, and muted voices, a significant body of American verse between 1890 and 1910 registered the shifts in cultural value that defined the era’s emergent modernity and began to rethink poetry’s role in it. Foregrounding their own putative valuelessness or ephemerality, the strongest poems of this era grapple productively with the unstable evaluative dynamics of cultural modernity. This struggle was manifested through two pervasive topoi: canonical traditions portrayed as ghostly echoes of a past dead yet still oppressively present; and modern poets characterized as outcasts wandering through symbolic landscapes devoid of intelligible markers of value. These agonistic tropes both
dramatize the poet’s problematic cultural position and provide avenues of paradoxical enablement. The canonical ghost topos addressed the fraught relations between these poets and their literary predecessors, sometimes bogging down in despair and futility, but also (especially in the work of Robinson) generating a complex response to the threat of oppressive canonical plenitude. Through the ubiquitous figure of the wanderer, young writers evoked an urgent, sometimes aimless need to stake out territory outside the existing conventions of American poetry. The wanderer persona tempted some into escapist disengagement, but in other cases it offered liberating avenues to explore modern poetry’s possibilities.

Both tropes are most productive in poems that give up the futile effort to buttress a nostalgic moral coherence, and that accept poetry’s marginal position as a starting point. Such works rethink poetry’s capacity to explore the phenomenology of modern perception, comment on sociopolitical conditions, and address the complex material and emotional meanings of modernization. The final chapter elaborates this thesis and challenges long-held assumptions about the escapist irrelevance of turn-of-the-century verse, by tracing a group of neglected but striking poems that directly engage the defining elements of modern mass society: the Statue of Liberty, the crowded urban thoroughfare, the World’s Columbian Exposition, modern warfare and its propaganda, the daily newspaper. The young poets of these years took the first steps in American poetry’s long march toward engagement with a condition of modernity driven by incorporative capitalism and articulated to most people through genres of mass culture. Their work responds to these challenges neither by rejecting modern mass culture in favor of obsolete genteel purity, nor by capitulating to its tendency to reductive utilitarianism. Their struggles were crucial in making twentieth-century poetry into a subtle and forceful vehicle for articulating the distinctive textures of modern life.

REBELLIOUS YOUTH

Even more severely than the commentators surveyed in the previous chapter, the young writers of the 1890s experienced genteel culture, and the Fireside canon that most fully embodied it, as an oppressive progenitor that excluded or inhibited them, yet allowed for no other creative realm. Though her fame would come as a novelist, Ellen Glasgow (1873–1945) harbored poetic aspirations as a young woman, and in 1902
she published her only volume of verse, *The Freeman*. In her autobiography, written decades later, Glasgow’s antagonism against the turn-of-the-century genteel establishment was still palpable. She viewed “the Forty Immortals of the American Academy [of Arts and Letters]” as repressive ancestors who “had created both the literature of America and the literary renown that embalmed it” (*Woman Within* 139). In reference to these generally very old men, the metaphor of embalming was a pointed one, and Glasgow pressed the attack by describing theirs as a culture of “immature age” that “was old and tired and prudent, . . . loved ritual and rubric, and was utterly wanting in curiosity about the new and the strange” (140). Age had made these elders timid rather than wise, and they clung to premodern categories and practices, attempting to shut out a new and strange world they feared and failed to understand. Glasgow’s conclusion—“at the turn of the century I owed less than nothing to these creators” (142)—would be echoed or simply taken for granted by her generation and its successors.

Expressions of youthful rebellion against tradition have long been recognized as defining elements of twentieth-century American culture. But it’s less understood that such intergenerational antagonism was well established before the 1910s. A emergent demographic of rebellious young artists and writers was an ironic effect of cultural developments of the later nineteenth century that entrenched age, wisdom, and experience as preconditions for meaningful participation in most arenas of American society. Glenn Wallach argues that after the Civil War there was a basic shift in the relation between younger and older generations, manifested by the precipitous decline of “age-defined organizations” such as the Young Americans, so that “By century’s end, young people had few chances to participate in public” (152–53). These organizations were replaced by age-specific institutions and practices premised upon the new concept of adolescence, which “downgraded maturity and intellectuality in youth” while emphasizing instead a state of “perpetual becoming” (Kett 173). After 1890 adolescence was theorized exhaustively in psychological, educational, and familial discourses as a period of natural “storm and stress” (Wallach 153) requiring tolerance but also close adult supervision. In this model, the young were expected to “practice their adult roles without direct engagement in public affairs” (Kett 211). As Kett suggests, the legitimation and indulgence of adolescent behavior may well have encouraged a youth culture of “passivity” and “insularity” (211), exemplified by the “school spirit” trend of 1890s colleges. But among some young Americans, they also made available the new subject position of rebellious bohemian youth. The more this
rebellious attitude was adopted by young people alienated from adult life, the more it demonstrated to their elders youth’s unreadiness to shoulder the responsibilities of adulthood—hence, more exclusion, and further rebellion.

Emerging from this youthful desire to repudiate the American literary tradition that made no place for her, the poems in Glasgow’s The Freeman cast off restrictive social conventions by revising the domestic imagery so crucial in nineteenth-century canonical poetry. For example, in “Death-in-Life,” featuring an eerie visitation by a dead lover, she recasts the fireside not as spiritually nourishing, but as insatiably consuming the speaker’s attention and energies. In contrast to Snow-Bound, inside/outside is no longer the governing opposition, shelter no longer the ideal. The worst threat now comes from doing nothing but “Feeding the fangs of the hungry fire” (47). In the end, the speaker accepts his demonic lover (“What matter the honours that I shall miss / When I find her lying against my side?”), preferring an ecstatic death rather than unending thralldom to the hearth fire; this choice is fully justified by his dead lover’s paradoxical response, “Nay, nay—ah, love, I am Life” (49). Glasgow’s analysis of the cultural traditions inhibiting her youth invites us to read this poem as a rejection of genteel domesticity in favor of an avant-garde agonism she perceived as liberating in its scandalous extremity.

Like Glasgow’s, many turn-of-the-century poems anticipate the familiar rebelliousness of so many twentieth-century youth, for whom a desire to shock their elders was perhaps the most precious goal, extremity of rhetoric and form the most central strategies. Lodge’s “Les Bourgeois” (1902), for example, prefigures the fierce antibourgeois lampoons produced by Pound and other avant-gardists a dozen years later. The lives of Lodge’s bourgeoisie, ruled by fear, weakness, and hypocritical desire, are no more significant than those of “gaudy flies that play and perish” in a single day and are “Once vanished, like a stupid dream / That never was.” Lodge ends by abjuring them to “Be something, good or bad! Be real!” (1:134), embracing modern ideals of authenticity even at the cost of virtue and respectability. Moments of violent rebellion such as these simmer right underneath the conventional formal surfaces of much turn-of-the-century poetry; beguiled by high modernism’s insistence on stylistic uniqueness and disjunction, we have usually failed to see them.

Perhaps no young poet analyzed the inhibiting shadow of the genteel canon more incisively than Amy Lowell (1874–1925), for whom it was not just an imposing cultural heritage but a familial one. In middle
age, released from her ambiguous birthright after long struggle, Lowell
paid mischievous homage to her illustrious elder cousin and his fellows
in the 1922 satire *A Critical Fable* (first published anonymously). Enumer-
ating the leading poets of that year, the poem’s narrator describes “Amy
Lowell’s” touchiness about her ancestry in witty terms that nonetheless
make a deadly serious point: “No one likes to be bound / In a sort of
perpetual family pound / Tied by *esprit de corps* to the wheels of the
dead” (46). Linking these feelings of familial repression to broader pat-
terns of generational and cultural repression, Lowell’s narrator explains
the Fireside poets’ fall by 1922:

> “At least,” I said hotly, “we are not a mere sprig
> From an overseas’ bush, and we don’t care a fig
> For a dozen dead worthies of classic humdrum,
> And each one no bigger than Hop-o’-my-thumb
> To our eyes. Why, the curse of their damned rhetoric
> Hangs over our writers like a school-master’s stick.” (5)

Lowell’s comic rhymes theorize the modern repudiation of the Fire-
side-Schoolroom poets: their (“damned”!) moralizing rhetoric is like a
schoolmaster’s stick repressing the American poetic imagination. Where
previous generations of poets and readers had felt edified and uplifted
by that rhetoric—or at least unable to rebel—Lowell’s, openly resentful,
felt rapped on the knuckles by it.

As the conversation continues, the narrator’s companion, an old gentle-
man gradually revealed as the shade of James Russell Lowell, asks
indignantly, “Where are Longfellow, Lowell, / With Whittier, Bryant,
and Holmes? . . . / . . . are they not deserving / A tithe of your upstart,
unfledged admiration?” (7). Reflecting the irritation of Amy Lowell and
her contemporaries with the pious obligation (“tithe”) claimed for these
canonical elders, the narrator responds, “For the matter of liking, / The
men he had mentioned might be each a Viking” (8)—the couplet’s awk-
ward diction and outlandish rhyme offering more sly comment on the
faults of their poetry. When asked the cause of these drastic changes in
American poetry over barely thirty years, her narrator wonders:

> Poor old gentleman, should I be tempted
> To tell him the fault was that he had pre-empted,
> He and the others, the country’s small stock
> Of imagination? The real stumbling-block
> Was the way they stood up like Blake’s angels, a chorus
Of geniuses over our heads, no more porous
Than so much stretched silk; rain, sun, and the stellar
Effulgences balked by our national umbrella
Of perished celebrities. To mention a trifling
Fact, underneath them the air’s somewhat stifling.
Youthful lungs need ozone and, considering the tent,
No man can be blamed if he punches a rent
With his fist in the stiff, silken web if he can. (14–15)

If Glasgow had seen the renowned Americans of nineteenth-century literature as the denizens of an embalming parlor, Lowell portrays their canonical function as an equally repressive and moribund one, in which their precious images of enclosure were no longer signs of beneficent nature, but had become umbrellas and tents, artificial and “stifling.”

Lowell’s old gentleman, discomfited by the unstable nature of fame, next demands to be shown “your people of parts” (12). The narrator directs him to a door marked “Skeletons Only,” headed by “A notice designed to make any one lonely. / It stares over the gate in huge letters of red: / ‘No person admitted until he is dead,’” a stricture conspicuously parodying the eligibility requirements for the Hall of Fame for Great Americans. Before this unprepossessing sign, a belated “shrivelled remainder” waits, eyes glued. When the door opens to admit one, “Gone over to dust and to fame,” the remaining “requiem fraternal” comically emits “a chorus of ‘Damns!’” (13). As she reduces the American “chorus of geniuses” to wheezing, querulous old men concerned only with their canonical reputations, Lowell plays the subversive avant-gardist to the hilt, equating fame with dust, portraying canonicity in metaphors that render ridiculous the whole notion of a sanctified national culture.

A distinction must be maintained, however, between the uninhibited hindsight of Glasgow’s and Lowell’s later comments and the more restricted range of rebellion against the genteel actually available to young Americans during the 1890s and 1900s. In their young adulthood, Glasgow and Lowell too struggled against the inhibiting sexist stereotype of the “girls with three names” (Burgess 11). Before 1910 even less restricted male writers found no secure cultural position from which to articulate such bracing antitraditionalism. The travails of the privileged and talented “Harvard” poets of the 1890s exemplified the urgent need of developing—and the daunting difficulty of maintaining—a sensibility of revolt against genteel canons.
PALLID CRIMSON

By the early 1840s, five of the six writers who became “Our Poets” of the American fireside had congregated in greater Boston, formed close and productive associations with each other, and begun their ascent to the canonical firmament. Apparently re-creating this pattern, between 1889 and 1895 Joseph Trumbull Stickney, George Cabot Lodge, William Vaughn Moody, Francis Brooks, and Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869–1935) all matriculated at Harvard, where George Santayana (1863–1952, class of 1886), just a few years older, was a young instructor. They had before them the social and cultural benefits of the country’s most prestigious university and the intellectual enrichment of its most eminent group of thinkers—William James, C. S. Peirce, Josiah Royce. Longstanding friendships developed among these student-poets, with Moody serving as the pivotal figure equally at home with the Brahmins Lodge and Stickney, and with Robinson, much humbler in origin.4 In an earlier time the literary world would simply have awaited the pleasure of young poets with such a pedigree. Blessed with abundant ambition, talent, and cultural capital, they seemed to have everything needed to become as dominant a canonical configuration as their Cambridge predecessors. Their inability to do so was overdetermined by the early deaths of all but Robinson. But as Cary Nelson points out, such “artistic failure” needs to be understood not as primarily about “the weaknesses and limitations of individual character,” but as “culturally driven,” a “complex reflection of social and historical contradictions” (Repression 69)—in this case, as a structural failure revealing the untenable position of even the most advantageously situated young poets during these years.5

To a significant extent, the failures of these poets were those of Harvard itself, whose intellectual atmosphere in the 1890s hampered their efforts to develop a poetics adequate to turn-of-the-century American modernity. In a 1936 letter quoted often by historians (most influentially by Van Wyck Brooks in New England: Indian Summer [447]), Santayana expressed this failure rather melodramatically by remarking: “all those friends of mine, Stickney especially, . . . were visibly killed by the lack of air to breathe. People individually were kind and appreciative to them, . . . but the system was deadly” (Letters 306).6 Santayana’s metaphors imply cultural suffocation; at the other extreme, Larzer Ziff portrays Harvard in the 1890s as a desert of too much freedom, arguing that the revolutionary elective curriculum of President Charles William Eliot
constituted an admission that the university “could no longer define education, and threw the burden on the individual,” resulting in the displacement of true intellectual community by exaggerated emphasis on social distinctions and the “artificial community” of school spirit (308). While this may ascribe too much importance to the elective system, it is clear that the insular atmosphere of 1890s college life, which to most young Americans meant fraternal organizations, athletics, and extracurricular activities, generated among these seriously literary Harvard undergraduates a quasi-monastic, agoraphobic idealism that strongly inflected American poetry by the turn of the century.

Despite the dynamic engagement with modernity in the work of James and Peirce, the dominant intellectual force at Harvard during these years, as Bernard Duffey has shown, was the recently rediscovered Arthur Schopenhauer, as interpreted by Royce and Santayana, the young poet-philosopher who straddled the faculty-student divide (143–47). The embrace of Schopenhauer, dead since 1860, indicated literary Harvard’s fascination with a spiritual idealism defined by its contrast to the despoiling materialism of modernity. This idealism derived its identity—and some of its debilitating insularity—from Royce’s emphasis on “the spiritual body” of a community, which, as Lentricchia points out, tends to mean that genuine community “can have nothing but spiritual body, that the values he associates with community can keep their integrity only in the inner life’s realms of nostalgia and hope, memory and imagination” (37). This vision of the elite college as quasi-monastic ideal, disdainfully repudiating modern materialism, was captured in an untitled verse fragment by Philip Henry Savage. Describing a “sunset in the college close,” falling “like a benediction softly down,” Savage then evokes the forces of urban modernity that the closeness of the college (in all its senses) must keep at bay:

... but on the sky
The city in the distance casts a light
Brilliant and false, electric, publishing
Confusion and false day, nature betrayed,
And all the dark disguises of the town.
("Fragment IV" 84–85)

The city is doubly damned here: associated with an electrified modernity that blazons a false and disorienting brilliance, it is also condemned for its dark patches and tendency to self-concealment. Savage’s use of “publishing” is particularly intriguing, implicating the act of writing for
an audience into the false and despoiling realm of commercialized modernity.

We can be forgiven for doubting that Harvard in the 1890s was still relying on sunlight and candles, as Savage seems to imply. His anachronistic imagery suggests that despite its devotion to spiritual idealism in the abstract, literary Harvard during these years was motivated even more strongly by disdain for materialist modernity. Its dominant pose was a cynical indifference to just about everything, even the idealism of its own organizations. This whimsical but ultimately self-defeating pose was taken to its extreme in 1892 by the “Laodicean Club,” named in tribute to the church cursed by God thus: “So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth” (Revelation 3:16; qtd. Whittle 45–46). Electing Santayana as “Pope,” this organization faithfully embodied the paradoxes of its intellectual environment: having adopted the rule that “if at any meeting a quorum should be present the club should ipso facto cease to exist,” the very interest of its members doomed it after two meetings (Lovett 46). Savage’s sonnet “To G. S.” presents to Santayana an apologia for the same fastidious passivity that the Laodicean Club embodied; it begins “PRAY God to give me power to keep / Life’s cureless evils out of sight; / Nor wander o’er the world and weep / The things I cannot do aright,” and ends “I scorn / To add one weight to weakness more” (159). “To G. S.” functions as an antimanifesto, a rationale for not writing—no surprise given Savage’s treatment of the act of publishing in “Fragment IV.” It bespeaks a sensibility so radically alienated that it cannot even freely proclaim its alienation and must instead remain cloistered within a small circle of like-minded peers and mentors, never acting at all except to reiterate its disdain for despoiling publicity.

Santayana’s aesthetic influence on a brace of Harvard-educated poets, not just those of the early 1890s but also Stevens, Eliot, and Conrad Aiken between 1897 and 1911, has been well documented, but seldom has the role of his own verse been thoroughly considered. His 1894 volume of “Schopenhauerian sonnets,” as Duffey calls them (145), offers perhaps the purest articulation of literary Harvard’s tendency to binaire experience as either worldly or spiritual and to embrace a radically subjective “spiritual” consciousness. This inclination is enacted in the first two lines of the sonnet that begins: “There may be chaos still around the world, / This little world that in my thinking lies” (Sonnets 16). Initially the reference to the “chaos” of “the world” seems to suggest that even if the poem does nothing but decry a state of chaos, it will at least acknowledge some awareness of a contemporary social realm. But the
second line reduces the poem’s scope to the “little world” of the speaker’s own thought, the only world that turns out to matter, as “Within my nature’s shell I slumber curled, / Unmindful of the changing outer skies” (16). These lines evoke the sheltering natural images through which the Fireside poets dramatized the workings of a benevolent deity. Here, however, “nature,” like “the world,” analogizes no category of larger spiritual understanding, but remains the solipsistic subjectivity of “my nature.” The next sonnet in the volume uses another image of enclosure to describe the spiritual self-isolation the poet hankers for: “A wall, a wall around my garden rear, / And hedge me in from the disconsolate hills” (17). Here the distance from Fireside analogical communitarianism is even greater; this enclosure is purely a signifier of economic elitism, erected to keep out both the natural world and the human one (“Come no profane insatiate mortal near / With the contagion of his passionate ills”). The hills are disconsolate for the same reason the profane mortal is insatiate: because poetry’s powers of consolation and satisfaction, which once offered access to spiritual experience, no longer function. All that remains of value is silent, pure consciousness, an “ancient quiet” that “broods from pole to pole” in this walled shrine (17).

Such self-quarantine against the contagious strife of modern materialism became all but obligatory in the verse of the Harvard poets, as in Santayana’s lines “My heart rebels against my generation, / That talks of freedom and is slave to riches” (Sonnets 69), and in Francis Brooks’s condemnation of a “Cursed inebriate nation” wallowing in gold, “Drunk with the dollar’s damnation” (Margins 78). This antipathy to modernity was often dramatized by fetishizing cultures and literatures of the distant past, as in Hugh McCulloch’s celebration of “The golden age of medieval France” as a time “when powers of Light were fain / Against the powers of Darkness to advance” (“Praeteria,” Quest 74). Robinson remained in the grip of neomedievalism throughout his life, as his voluminous Arthurian narratives attest; his satiric self-portrait “Miniver Cheevy” shows he also maintained a healthy skepticism toward these potentially disabling obsessions. Most of his Harvard contemporaries, not as sensitive to self-irony, were less fortunate. Whether the past they aspired to inhabit was Biblical, classical, or medieval, it was invariably distant. Moody, Stickney, and Lodge followed a remarkably similar pattern in the latter years of their brief careers, gravitating toward long blank verse dramas that mined ancient myths for symbols of disaffection and rebellion. Both Stickney in “Prometheus Pyrphoros” and Moody in The Fire Bringer essayed the personage of Prometheus, magnetically attractive to the ambitious and frustrated young poet, while Lodge’s
Herakles and Cain are “built around the struggle of the central characters to attain Promethean stature” (Riggs 417). Thomas Riggs Jr. argues plausibly that Henry Adams, a friend of Lodge and Stickney, was the main philosophical influence on their Promethean works (though not on Moody’s), encouraging them to transform a narrative of human illumination into an Adamsian recognition of the futility of progress, in which “the emotional weight” is entirely “on the side of the laws of dissipation and decay” (409). The autobiographical resonance of this agonistic nostalgia was comprehensively evoked by Stickney’s fragmentary drama on the Roman emperor Julian the Apostate, a belated classical idealist who struggled against the tides of irrationality and chaos that overwhelmed his time, before dying tragically young, his work unfinished and virtually forgotten.

This common turn toward archaic forms of poetic drama that self-consciously intervened into the high literary tradition, but had little or no chance of being performed in a contemporary theater, again suggests the escapist tendency of Harvard’s idealism. They dreamed of creating work in the great tradition that would free them from the despoliations of modernity. McCulloch’s sonnet “Refuge” constructs the high canon in exactly this escapist role. The octave establishes the need for escape from “these barren lands / Where I was born,” then embarks on a fantasy journey to “the magic isles / Of tropic seas” where the speaker might “wander on the golden sands.” The sestet analogizes that notion of escapist “refuge” to another type of magic isle, the great works of distant times and cultures: “Then Homer to the Old World carries me / In hollow ships across the crested main,” while Spenser “gives enchanted sea, / His summer woods and purple pageantry” (Quest 57). In a sonnet beginning “I HATE the vast array of ‘modern’ things,” Savage took this agoraphobic trope a step further to suggest that in philistine modernity, even the escapist function of the high canon might be losing its potency. The speaker notes with distaste that “Every season brings” a new set of “Dull imitations and a thousand light / And weightless books of verse and copyings,” and further, that “fashion” “Proclaims them beautiful,” besieging him “till I take flight / And turn me to the masters and the kings.” But the degrading force of commodity fetishism has infected even the elite realm of the masters, and he gains no satisfaction there either:

I find my Walton in a showy dress;
Find all the bright, old-age simplicity
Bedecked and botched; the years of good Queen Bess
Are made the dull philistine’s property;
And Burns is ‘popularly’ sent to press. (73)

As Savage’s bitter elitism suggests, the Harvard poets’ agoraphobic pronouncements, and their ransacking of the past for inklings of an idealism Santayana called “Some greater waking” (7), did not often afford them access to enriching spiritual experience. On the contrary, their rejection of modernity was usually accompanied by disabling skepticism toward the attainability of any spiritual value. For example, in “L’Enfant du Siècle,” Lodge incarnated twentieth-century modernity as a “dim dying child” in whom “Faith has died” and to whom “no new God appears” (1:94). They favored metaphoric constructions that linked an absent, ineffectual, or capricious deity to the futility of poetic utterance itself. In another of his many sonnets, Santayana connected such skepticism to the acutely despiritualized character of modernity and to poetry’s enfeebled position within it:

I would I had been born in nature’s day,
When man was in the world a wide-eyed boy,
And clouds of sorrow crossed his sky of joy
To scatter dewdrops on the buds of May.
Then could he work and love and fight and pray,
Nor heartsick grow in fortune’s long employ.
Mighty to build and ruthless to destroy
He lived, while maskèd death unquestioned lay. (Sonnets 6)

The desires expressed here would have been easily recognized by the Fireside writers. Santayana’s representative human is “a wide-eyed boy,” where Whittier’s had been barefoot, but his nostalgic wish is for the same unreflective analogical coherence that the Fireside poets had sought. The difference in the two formulations is one of attainability. In “The Barefoot Boy,” Snow-Bound, and other works, Whittier had used idealized memories of his childhood to buttress the emotional and spiritual coherence his age urgently desired. For Santayana, in a belated age of debilitating uncertainty, where poets “Now ponder . . . the ruins of the years, / And groan beneath the weight of boasted gain,” any transparency poetry had once enabled between worldly and spiritual realms is long gone:

No unsung bacchanal can charm our ears
And lead our dances to the woodland fane,
No hope of heaven sweeten our few tears
And hush the importunity of pain. (Sonnets 6)

Santayana’s syntactic parallelism (“No unsung bacchanal,” “No hope of heaven”) evokes poetry’s contemporary inability to image spiritual experience and suggests that this loss has resulted from its very profusion in a bloated world of “boasted gain,” in which the phrase “no unsung bacchanal” also implies that all bacchanals have been sung, all poems already written.

The “hope of heaven” that might “hush the importunity of pain” evokes another once viable way of understanding the value of poetry: as a source of emotional consolation. More or less an afterthought in Santayana’s sonnet, the rejection of the consolatory genteel poetics that had drawn reassuring analogical relationships between human, natural, and cosmic realms was made devastatingly explicit in other turn-of-the-century works. In Lodge’s “L’Enfant du Siècle,” “The soul’s sweet choristers that once did toll / Thro’ God’s immensity are fallen dumb,” and the new century’s child is doomed to “come / Thro’ life a mourner” (1:94). But the quality of this mourning is so debased that the child of modernity has utterly “lost the power of natural tears” and will thus remain “mute and pitiful.” Less ponderously, Brooks’s “For Such” employs a rhetoric of analogical consolation for the apparent purpose of comforting one who “sits with breaking heart and filling eyes alone,” hearing “fond laughter on the passing breeze” and “slow footsteps . . . pacing twain” (Margins 12). Such a grief-stricken figure was a familiar one from innumerable genteel elegies, but Brooks uses it instead to lampoon poetry’s consolatory tradition as little more than specious sentimentalism. The poem ends by reiterating, “For such the consolation will remain,” but it will come only in the unhappy one’s knowledge that despite the “fond laughter” of those who are now happy, eventually “Death will strangle each alone” (13; italics in original). Brooks thus cuts the rug out from under the consolatory tradition, endorsing instead an appallingly bitter view of life defined by the ultimate desolation of every human soul instead of just some of them. Replacing the empathetic Fireside deity cognizant of human suffering with an indifferent, equal-opportunity annihilator, this poem exemplifies the corrosive agnosticism of fin de siècle Harvard.

In “The Dead Village” (1897) Robinson extended this critique of consolatory verse, imagining a world utterly devoid of poetry. The genre’s spiritual function had once enabled humans to discern a precious connection between material and ideal realms (“small soft hands . . . once
did keep in tune / The strings that stretch from heaven”). But “too soon / The change came, and the music passed away” (Children of the Night 50); poetry had now lost the ability to ascribe spiritual significance to the material realm, and thus (in one of the many turn-of-the-century echoes of the last lines of “Dover Beach”), “Now there is nothing but the ghosts of things,—/ No life, no love, no children, and no men.” The implacable sequence of clauses that ends the poem—“The music failed, and then / God frowned, and shut the village from His sight” (50)—reinforces Robinson’s fear that the end of poetry’s efficacy means the loss of the entire spiritual dimension of existence.

The skepticism these writers felt about modern poetry’s ability to evoke spiritual experience led them to frequent expressions of cosmic emptiness, memorably captured by Stickney’s phrase “the big night of time,” which Duffey used to entitle his fine chapter on this period in American poetry. Stickney’s spiritual anguish deepens when we understand it as a response to poetry’s crisis of modernity:

Who is this God our prayer pursues?  
Down the big night of time,  
On wings of ancient wind  
The gray smoke from a thousand altars rolls,  
And anthems cried by choired souls  
Immeasurably combined  
Crowd in the sky sublime.—  
Who is he? where? and may he be divined?  
(“Fragment of an Ode for Greek Liberty” 292)

Without doubt, the devoted classicist Stickney conceived this work in response to the oppression of contemporary Greece, but its more potent function is to evoke the futility of poetic expression in the modern world. The imagery of the passage emphasizes failing methods of poetic divination: “prayer” hopelessly pursuing the notion of God, and choirs of “anthems” attempting to celebrate it. Despite his restiveness with old prayers and anthems, Stickney is diverted from a position of revolt or iconoclasm by an alienating human clutter that evokes turn-of-the-century anxieties of cultural overproduction and fragmentation. These anthems “crowd in the sky,” and the crowds of souls who choir them, so “combined” as to be immeasurable, signal the erosion of the individually conceived canon of value, and by extension, the surrender of elite culture to the commodified anonymity of mass culture. For Stickney, the question posed by God’s absence is now answerable in only one way:
through a cry of sheer misery signifying the replacement of human speech with frenzied animalistic utterance:

. . . must their piteous wrong
Of slaughtered men, women befouled
And nurslings trampled in the mire,
Hurl its terrific song,
The crying measure of a last desire? (292–93)

The poetry still to come will be only a “crying measure” (in two senses) of the “last desire” of human aspiration. The final fragment begins, “He shall not rise. Let hope in veils of pall / This widely crimson morning close” (293), acknowledging the anguished sense of pointlessness that pervades the whole work. Given this recognition of its own futility, we can hardly be surprised that the poem remained incomplete. Like the drama on Julian, its fragmentary state was not due to Stickney’s untimely death. The editors who posthumously collected his work dated it 1897, the year of the Greco-Turkish War in Crete. We can only surmise that in working on this topic, Stickney found poetry unviable as a vehicle for social commentary and simply stopped.

GHOSTLY CANONS

The many false starts, blind alleys, and abrupt endings in the work of the Harvard poets vividly demonstrate that Romantic-genteel accounts of poetry’s value had broken down. Poetry was still just potent enough to motivate a young writer to begin, say, an ode commemorating a war or a friend’s death, but often not potent enough to allow its satisfactory completion or reception. Like the commentators I examined in the previous chapter, younger poets of the 1890s were grappling with two contradictory convictions: (1) that American poetic traditions were exhausted and useless, and (2) that no viable avenues of innovation and renewal existed. Not surprisingly, their verse frequently depicts both empty desolate space and exasperating clutter, exuding enormous tension between oppressive stasis and restless movement. These clashing impulses manifested themselves in two interdependent tropes pervading verse of these decades: (1) the portrayal of canons as ghostly echoes of now inert and useless traditions that refuse to recede into the past, and (2) the figuring of the modern poet as a vagabond wanderer in landscapes that lack comprehensible markers of value or ethics.
The topos of the “ghostly canon” articulated young poets’ vexed relations of present and past poetry. Its most important practitioner was a lonely man haunted his whole life by family tragedies and alcohol-driven demons, who lacked the personal brilliance of his glossier Harvard contemporaries. Yet Edwin Arlington Robinson was the only Harvard poet who evaded creative impasse and early death to become an important force in American verse after 1910. The canonical ghost motif allowed him (and sometimes others) to articulate their troubled relationships with canonical predecessors and to question, if not reject outright, the subject position of pitiable aspirant that poetry’s crisis threatened to mire them in. Robinson’s approach to tradition certainly generated more productive resistance than the abject antiquarianism of Santayana, Savage, McCulloch, and Stickney, who diffused their rebellious energies by immersing themselves in the distant past, never learning how to use these enthusiasms to challenge the modern world’s spiritual vacuity. In contrast, most poems that trope canonical ghosts, particularly Robinson’s, clung stubbornly to that modern world even as they agonized over it. As efforts to comprehend the oppressive reverberation of the past upon the present, they were less glamorous than plunges into lost golden antiquity, but much healthier to the spirits of their creators and more conducive to American poetry’s rejuvenation.

We can measure the anxious, ingenious, and paradoxically energizing responses to the ghostly canon by first understanding how being haunted could inhibit and disable. In “Visitation” (1891) Richard Hovey’s attitude toward his canonical fathers is one of abjection that tries but fails to mask feelings of oppression and hostility. The speaker’s annoyingly obsequious phrasings (“I would that I could deem / That I were worthy”; “I would that I could think that my poor song / Had reached thee”) culminate in a wish that his verse, paltry as it is, “pleased thee but so much as thou shouldst turn / And yield one sigh for those who still must mourn / On this harsh earth” (Along the Trail 100–01). In describing the dead poet’s presence as “like a flower / That sends a heavy odor through the air” (101), Hovey comes close to conceding the unnatural and unwelcome power of the canonical ghost over the living aspirant. Yet he seems not to realize that his verse, itself wallowing in the conventional diction and imagery of genteel homily, evokes the “hot-house” gentility of contemporary poetry that he reviled in other contexts. Hovey never gains control of this contradiction, and the poem comes across as passive-aggressive groveling.

This experience of canonical haunting was the same one articulated by Howells in his survey of contemporary poetry in 1899: what can
poets of the present do that will measure up to those “tremendous Absences” left by departed greats? (“New Poetry” 591). But if this was a challenge young poets had to confront, it was also an opportunity to rethink the possible functions of poetry in a time that exhibited little reverence for canons. In “Visitation” Hovey was not up to the task, but in another poem, “The Shadows” (1898), he gained some purchase on his angst-ridden relationship with his predecessors. “The Shadows” reads like a fragment from a Gothic horror story, in which the speaker apprehends a nightmareish procession of shadows he describes as “dull red, like embers in a grate” (Along the Trail 98), marking them as the denizens of the Fireside canon, gone yet still unnaturally present. Ironically, “the grisliest horror” of the experience is that the speaker cannot make the shadows acknowledge his presence, as they stride on “with a stony stare, / Nor heed me where I lie.” Conversely, no matter how much he attempts to “strain my eyes as I freeze and cringe / Till the sockets sizzle dry,” he cannot actually see them clearly (“they will never impinge mine eye”). The touch of canonical inspiration that the poet dreads but desperately wants will never be forthcoming. The poem ends with the shadows playing “about the feet of Fate / Their awful game of tag,” a strained but intriguing metaphor portraying the canon as a closed circle whose members interact only with another. In this work Hovey has at least shed the paralyzing pretense that this relation was based on benevolent mentoring rather than deadly intergenerational competition.

In “Prometheus” (1899) Dunbar gets further than Hovey in confronting this tension between present-day poets and canonical ancestors, represented here by Shelley and Prometheus himself. Here the Promethean myth of poetry’s origins, created “To lift men’s souls above their low estate,” becomes a sardonic commentary on the genre’s modern obsolescence:

But judge you now, when poets wield the pen,  
Think you not well the wrong has been repaired?  
’T was all in vain that ill Prometheus fared:  
The fire has been returned to Heaven again!  
(Complete Poems 117)

Though Dunbar’s response to this perception of canonical plenitude is clearly pessimistic (“We have no singers like the ones whose note / Gave challenge to the noblest warbler’s song”), it is an honest, self-respecting pessimism, unlike the obsequious flattery of “Visitation.” And it catalyzes a bracing transformation in the poem’s diction, from the more
indirect and highfalutin language of the first stanzas, to the crisp, minimal affect of the final lines:

The measure of our songs is our desires;
We tinkle where old poets used to storm.
We lack their substance tho’ we keep their form:
We strum our banjo-strings and call them lyres. (117)

Even if Dunbar intended the spareness of these lines to concede his lack of an adequate language to stand up to the canon, it represents an impressive cleansing of genteel poeticisms, a significant step toward the minimal styles that flourished after 1910, and a sign of Dunbar’s importance not just as a pioneer of African American writing but as a stylist of modern verse.

The sense of being haunted by lingering canonical presences was an obsessive subject in Robinson’s early work. Never inclined to launch onto an open road as Crane was, Robinson’s restlessness manifested itself instead as complex dissatisfaction with his predecessors. In his 1897 volume *The Children of the Night*, this impulse catalyzed an impressive series of poems that thematize common notions of canonicity, including “The Wilderness,” “Ballade by the Fire,” “The Clerks,” “The House on the Hill,” “The Pity of the Leaves,” “Sonnet,” “The Dead Village,” and “Ballade of Broken Flutes.” While Robinson’s pessimistic survey of poetry’s status may be a litany of futility, it is far from an exercise in futility. By problematizing the oppressive reverberation of past canons in conceptually ingenious and linguistically rich forms, these poems wind up reasserting (even while they doubt) the genre’s continued imaginative value.

Robinson articulates his stalemate with the domestic conventions of the American poetic tradition in his volume’s title, which evokes Longfellow’s breakthrough book of 1839, *Voices of the Night*. Robinson clearly identifies himself with the progeny of the Fireside, but this is hardly an unambiguous homage, since to be “children of the night” implies deprivation as much as enrichment and evokes a group forced forever to “wait for the light,” as he put it in “Richard Cory” (*Children of the Night* 35). This ambivalence toward his Fireside predecessors is theorized in “The Wilderness,” whose wandering speaker hears a nebulous voice offering solace in the Fireside style, “an old song calling us to come” home and “roam no more” (88). The speaker urges his listener to “Come away” out of the wilderness since “a window gleams to greet us, / And a warm hearth waits for us within” (89). But Robinson can neither
repudiate nor embrace this fear-gripped traditionalism. All he can do is forcefully register his ambivalent awareness of it and its diametric opposite: “dead men all around us— / Frozen men, that mock us with a wild, hard laugh” (90). If these rebels who rejected the canonical hearth for the wilderness ultimately failed, the ghostly echoes of their struggle toward liberation still fill the speaker with shame and envy. Robinson thus implies that adherence to tradition reveals only fear and weakness; yet still he cannot see its rejection as anything more than a quick way to a cold grave.

But a superficially similar poem, “Ballade by the Fire,” demonstrates that this impasse could be converted into self-affirmation almost in spite of the poet’s apparent intentions. The speaker here begins in the familiar fireside setting but immediately announces his distance from genteel domestic conventions by his isolation and bachelor habits: “Slowly I smoke and hug my knee” (Children of the Night 20). This speaker’s only communion is with the dim visions in “The falling embers,” which he terms “a witless masquerade” that “Floats in a mist of light and shade.” The spiritual ameliorations of remembering one’s childhood by the fireside, so dear to his canonical predecessors, are reduced to the “weak, remindful glow” of a nicotine haze (20). In the next stanza, these rather complacent musings on past canons and his own poetic aspirations suddenly coalesce into a visionary moment:

Then, with a melancholy glee
To think where once my fancy strayed,
I muse on what the years may be
Whose coming tales are all unsaid,
Till tongs and shovel, snugly laid
Within their shadowed niches, grow
By grim degrees to pick and spade
As one by one the phantoms go. (20)

The speaker is startled to find that his fireside (Fireside) tools, which had seemed “snugly” ensconced “within their shadowed niches,” have metamorphosed into reminders of inevitable and all-encroaching oblivion, preempting the “unsaid” tales he had aspired to tell.

Vincent Bertolini has shown that the antebellum scene of “the solitary lounging bachelor dreaming before the glowing embers” was “a widely diffused cultural topos” (707) of peculiar liminal significance, hosting “the active and passive, the transgressive and normalizing, sides of bachelor identity contending against one another” (716), and often
including a strongly sexual component: “the bachelor has left properly constituted boyhood, in which the young man’s sexuality is monitored, chastened, and directed towards proper objects by the mother, but not yet entered properly constituted manhood, in which the wife extends the maternal regime within the bounds of a limited, procreative conjugal sexuality” (710). The posture of Robinson’s speaker—hugging his knee, enjoying his cigar, mesmerized by the “visions” he imagines in the fire—strongly resembles this ambiguously sexualized bachelor scene. In this context, the fireplace tools evoke repressive parental-canonical figures who throw ashes over the speaker’s powers of transgressive fantasy. Bertolini suggests that by the turn of the century, a more modern contented bachelor, “unbound by either the constraints on excessive sexual subjectivity or the injunction to procreative norms,” had emerged (730).\(^\text{15}\) Robinson’s speaker strives to become that more modern bachelor, jauntily resolving to resume his bachelor existence, to “live and laugh, nor be dismayed / As one by one the phantoms go” (Children of the Night 21).

But the old inhibitions, sexual and canonical alike, are not so easily discarded, and his affirmation of bachelor pleasures pales compared to the hallucinatory shape-shifting of those Fireside tools. This poem is typical of the 1890s verse at its most paradoxically interesting: at a literal level it despairs of poetry’s continued value, but in the very framework of its failure it creates a rich, edgy demonstration of what poetry can do.

At the turn of the century, the supposedly overwhelming profusion of new poetic work was often portrayed as an avalanche of waste paper—an enormously discouraging image to the aspiring poet. In “The Pity of the Leaves,” Robinson uses canonical-ghost imagery to challenge this waste-paper trope, revivifying the well-worn pun on “leaves” as from both trees and books. Here an old man hears a “bleak, sad wind that shrieked” “Loud with ancestral shame” (Children of the Night 45). Surely one possible source of this “ancestral shame” is the oppressive reverberation of a tradition upon its contemporary aspirants. Robinson likens “words of the past” from “lips that were no more to speak” to “brown, thin leaves that on the stones outside / Skipped with a freezing whisper.” These leaves are not just frozen but “freezing,” chilling the speaker’s own aspirations. The final lines powerfully evoke an impasse, neither fully past nor present:

\[\ldots\] Now and then
They stopped, and stayed there—just to let him know
How dead they were; but if the old man cried,
They fluttered off like withered souls of men. (45)
In decisive contrast to the “withered words” of Lowell’s “A Winter-Evening Hymn to My Fire,” which were given incandescent life by the domestic inspiration of the fireside, the only function of these withered canonical writings is to remind the speaker of their complete lack of vitality to him. They disintegrate the moment he tries to use them for expressive purposes. In the face of this bleakness, a faint but important affirmative resonance emerges through the poem’s double-edged title. Usually the image of waste paper was applied to new, unwanted verse; by using it to portray canonical poetry, by pitying the tradition rather than simply allowing it to pity him, Robinson deflects some of the image’s disabling force away from the aspirant.

One of Robinson’s key strategies for challenging the canon’s oppressive force was to lampoon its conventional portrayal as a sacred space—academy, pantheon, museum, mausoleum—by instead linking it to the rundown and obsolete physical structures of deteriorating New England market towns. In “The House on the Hill,” an abandoned dwelling houses an ingenious ghost story on the impotence of the canonical edifice the poet has inherited. Here is the poem in full:

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They are all gone away,
The House is shut and still,
There is nothing more to say.

Through broken walls and gray
The winds blow bleak and shrill:
They are all gone away.

Nor is there one to-day
To speak them good or ill:
There is nothing more to say.

Why is it then we stray
Around that sunken sill?
They are all gone away,

And our poor fancy-play
For them is wasted skill:
There is nothing more to say.

There is ruin and decay
In the House on the Hill:
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They are all gone away,
There is nothing more to say. (Children of the Night 34)

Despite acknowledging three times that the inhabitants “are all gone away,” this speaker and his peers “still stray / Around that sunken sill,” unable to give up the notion of a canonical house on the hill. Since the tradition is in “ruin and decay,” their efforts to communicate with the dead are met with utter indifference (“our poor fancy-play / For them is wasted skill”), but the aspirants continue to try, their aimless obsessiveness echoed by the stubborn a-b-a rhymes of the villanelle form. They have prematurely adopted the role of ghosts, attempting to inhabit a scene of past vitality, unable to understand their status in limbo. Robinson puts the other distinctive formal feature of the villanelle, the two-line refrain, to good use as well, the repeated phrases embodying the two sides of contemporary poetry’s dilemma: the decrepitude of its canonical inheritance is clear to see (“They are all gone away”), but this clarity makes no new directions possible (“There is nothing more to say”). It is hard to imagine a starker or more precise articulation of the impasse that Robinson and his contemporaries were faced with.

In “The Clerks” Robinson ingeniously uses the theme of the reverberant canon to ponder poetry’s role in commodified turn-of-the-century culture. Here past poets are figured as “a shop-worn brotherhood” hanging on “with an ancient air” (“I did not think I should find them there / When I came back again; but there they stood”), who offer the speaker and his fellow aspirants a painful lesson in the futility of their own canonical hopes:

And you that ache so much to be sublime,
And you that feed yourselves with your descent,
What comes of all your visions and your fears?
Poets and kings are but the clerks of Time. (Children of the Night 54)

The shabby figures still “standing” in the same spot evoke not just the clerks in a dusty small-town shop, but their shopworn wares as well, books or other goods on neglected shelves, a display of cultural decay waiting helplessly for a customer-reader who may never come. This metaphoric equation of creator with both seller and object for sale tropes the period’s anxiety that the individual creative spirit was being submerged in a headlong rush toward commodity culture. What these clerk-poets unsuccessfully peddle is not just the material forms of poetry, but also an obsolete account of its value, whose emphasis on sublimity and
transcendence is thoroughly unsuited for the markets of modern culture. Having little hope of “selling,” they persist in weaving intricate, ephemeral arabesques signifying only their own redundancy (“Tiering the same dull webs of discontent,” “Clipping the same sad alnage of the years” [54]).

With “alnage,” an old word designating a quantity of material measured by the ell, Robinson again considers the threat of commodification, but also implies poetry’s need to develop a productive relationship with commodified modernity. The terms alnage and ell (etymologically related to ulna and elbow) derive from the length of the forearm, ingenuously troping both the act of writing and the skeletal character of the decrepit clerk-poets. The finicking precision of these figures pokes fun at poetic traditionalists obsessed with precisely measuring out their lines, whom Robinson satirized more directly in another poem as “little sonnet-men” “Who fashion, in a shrewd mechanic way, / Songs without souls, that flicker for a day, / To vanish in irrevocable night” (Children of the Night 63). But since the clerks’ irrelevance comes from their reliance upon obsolete units of measure, as the flagrant archaism of “alnage” suggests, it follows that the mechanical use of traditional poetic forms, no matter how shrewdly executed, is equally suspect. Thus Robinson questions whether commodified modernity per se has rendered poetry irrelevant, and proposes instead that poetry, having stood still as the world has changed, must now generate new “measures.”

Robinson’s little sonnet-clerks ingeniously embody the period’s central anxieties about poetry: overproduction, ephemerality, the empty (“mechanic”) repetition of conventional forms and images, the cliquish careerism implied by their shrewdness. The poem in which he most directly lampoons them, also contained in The Children of the Night, ends by affirming both the continued need for poetry and the undiminished existence of materia poetica:

What does it mean, this barren age of ours?
Here are the men, the women, and the flowers,
The seasons, and the sunset, as before.
What does it mean? (Children of the Night 63)

In this poem Robinson proposes that poetry might still be valuable in two crucial ways: to articulate the meaning of the age, even of its barrenness, and to maintain a place for the individual consciousness in a world defined by ephemerality and anonymity: “Shall there not one arise / To wrench one banner from the western skies, / And mark it with his name
forevermore?” (63). It is impossible not to notice, however, that here as in “The Clerks,” Robinson embeds his critique of mechanical formalism in flawlessly traditional sonnet form; that the line uttering his fondest desire—"To put these little sonnet-men to flight"—is in note-perfect iambic pentameter; and above all, that this poem castigating the little sonnet-men is itself entitled “Sonnet”! This paradox is reminiscent of the self-contradictory calls of the 1890s for American poets to achieve individual expression by burying themselves in the *Golden Treasury.* But Robinson has full control of the contradiction: we know, and we know he knows we know, that he didn’t set out to make a poem lampooning sonneteers, write it in sonnet form, and name it “Sonnet” by accident. The clash he creates between acquiescent construction and iconoclastic declaration is so knowing and witty that it becomes not a sign of creative disarray, but a sardonic metacommentary on the difficulties of poetry writing in a belated period, in its very negation of originality affirming the value of traditional poetic forms to nurture a quirky and ironic sensibility that might challenge the era’s paralyzing evaluative binaries.

**FALLEN BY THE WAYSIDE**

The turn-of-the-century verses best demonstrating poetry’s continued value are those that give up a nostalgia for moral coherence and explore the unstable evaluative dynamics of modernity through isolated figures wandering through desert, wilderness, or other symbolic spaces emptied of ethical or cultural value. The strongest of these works reimagine the key conceptual relationship of center and margin in American poetry, exploring the phenomenology of perception, commenting upon sociopolitical conditions, and giving voice to a modern consciousness that, finding itself dispossessed of traditional verities, seeks to live self-possessed in the contemporary world.

A paradigmatic expression of the wanderer topos can be found in the opening and title poem of Ellen Glasgow’s collection *The Freeman* (1902), which scripts the poet as an avant-garde “vagabond between the East and West” who has rent the “clankless chains that bound” and now flings “defiance” to the elements and obstacles that would block his wandering way (13). Similarly, the vagabond speaker of Glasgow’s “The Traveller” careens through a wintry nocturnal landscape (past “hamlets draped in frozen white”) evoking the pastoral premodern America of *Snow-Bound* and innumerable Fireside poems. But this speaker can experience that world only from the outside, glimpsing the fires through “the
frames of ruddy windows,” since “The homely hearths are lit in vain / For one who rides across the plain” (Freeman 16). In situation and imagery the poem closely parallels Longfellow’s well-known “Excelsior” (1841), whose young traveler excludes himself on an icy night from “happy homes,” in which “he saw the light / Of household fires . . . warm and bright” (Complete Poetical Works 19). But the divergences are ultimately more telling: Longfellow’s figure of aspiration, striveing “toward the heights” (the meaning of his title), and perishing in the attempt, is effortlessly apotheosized into a mythic immortal “Lifeless, but beautiful,” whose “voice fell, like a falling star” “from the sky, serene and far” (19). In contrast to the Olympian third-person narrator of “Excelsior,” Glasgow’s aspirant speaks in urgent first person, inviting the reader to perceive these feelings of disconnection from the domestic realm as the poet’s own. There is little closure, and certainly no apotheosis, to her poem. It simply stops with an expression of ongoing wanderlust and alienation that looks not backward so much as sideways, to an emerging genre of popular modern narrative, the Western: “Death waits to woo me to her will. / I press my spurs, I ride alone, / I laugh and journey to my own” (17). That we now hear these final images as cowboy clichés is a measure of how widely early-twentieth-century Americans embraced this vocabulary of agonistic rebellion to articulate their cultural situation. Indeed, during these decades the figure of wayfarer, wanderer, or vagabond became a virtual synonym for “young person with creative aspirations,” as in Herbert S. Stone’s invitation to Harriet Monroe to join “a Bohemian sort of club” in Chicago, which became the famous Little Room group: “It is altogether informal but we are filled with great ideas about making the life of Chicago tolerable and furnishing inspiration for artistic vagabonds” (Letter of January 2, 1895).

Glasgow’s self-conscious rewriting of genteel convention suggests that the turn-of-the-century poetic vagabond was above all a figure uprooted from the poet’s own cultural past. In his study of fin de siècle France, Matt K. Matsuda establishes an important link between the vagabond topos and the dislocating effects of modernization. The disruption of long-stable social and economic patterns by the emerging industrial, bureaucratic, and military institutions of modern France had drawn vast numbers of people away from their rural and village origins, while improved roads and transportation technologies had made the traversal of large distances more possible. These converging forces produced a large rootless population whose nomadic presence was interpreted by poets and criminologists alike as “the sign of an unsettled modernity” (126–27). In American verses seeking to articulate the sensibility of the fin
de siècle, the alienated wanderer is a nearly ubiquitous convention. George Cabot Lodge’s “The Poet” offers just such a figure, defined by his resistance to comfort and convention, motivated by an overriding compulsion to noble vagabondage: although “Bright lips beseech him,—yet he cannot stay” but must venture alone “in the large night his outward way” (1:159). Lizette Woodworth Reese characterizes her speaker-poet as “A wayfarer blown to and fro” (“The Wayfarer” 44; italics in original), while the speaker of Hugh McCulloch’s “Search” “has the untiring passion of the sea” and urges his listener “Let us go seek the sun” somewhere far away from “this quickly-aging North” (Written in Florence 13). Guy Wetmore Carryl’s “Whom the World Calls Idle” describes the poet as one “brother-born to the wind of morn,” who “must share its endless quest” in search of “The stretch of the open road, the challenge of heights unmounted” (Garden of Years 76). In “Pioneers” Charlotte Perkins Stetson (Gilman) gives the metaphor a more social dimension by celebrating the “thought-seekers of the printed page” who must “lead the world down its untrodden way,” braving “drear wastes” and “lonely deaths” to do so (74).

Matsuda argues that the vagabond’s deterritorialization implies estrangement from a moral conscience that had typically been maintained through memory, and notes that some fin de siècle psychologists accounted for vagabondage as a form of quasi-clinical amnesia (126, 129). In the case of American poets, the “amnesia” of vagabondage was self-induced and strategic, warranting their antinostalgic repudiation of the oppressive conscience of genteel moralism. The vocabulary of vagabondage enabled them to convert disaffection toward settled social structures into forms of resistance and offered enticing prospects of self-liberation and renewal, as in Dunbar’s “Morning”: “With staff in hand and careless-free, / The wanderer fares right jauntily, / For towns and houses are, thinks he, / For scorning, for scorning” (Lyrics of Sunshine 51). From its title through its final poem, Josephine Preston Peabody’s 1898 volume The Wayfarers plays one variation after another upon the wanderer-poet. “A Road Tune” announces, “And I must up and wander / Away against the rain” (72). “The Piper” is proffered “hearth and home, / And neighbors at thy side,” even audiences (“flocks”), but refuses them all for the comforts of the open road: a single companionate bird, a “friendly star at night, / And a brook to follow” (72). The long title poem of Peabody’s volume depicts a group of intrepid figures on a quest for a female cosmic principle variously identified as Life, Song, Death, Love, and so on; these identifications are so vague and all-encompassing that the wayfaring quest, rather than any specific result, becomes its own end. Like the endings of Glasgow’s vagabond poems,
the final stanza of “The Wayfarers” is sheerly gestural, but the point of the gesture is clear enough. The world of genteel culture holds nothing more for the poet and her peers.

The exhilaration of lighting out for the territories is generally sustainable only if one does not have to portray one’s arrival there. When the young poets of the era attempted to deal with that next step—if we leave here for somewhere else, what will that somewhere be like?—they all struggled, though some were more able than others to acknowledge it. The thoughtful “Envoy” that concludes Peabody’s The Wayfarers presents a speaker, seemingly identical to the poet, who prays she can overcome the need to “eat my bread with furtive tears / Of home-longing,” and can learn instead to “go where lights and highways call, / To hear the soothsay of them all, / And rest by any door” (83). Though Peabody claims to believe that the highways and lights of modernity have prophetic powers, her soothsaying aspiration remains only a hope that she “some day with better grace / May take the bounty of the place” that she cannot presently perceive or accept (83). As her ambivalence suggests, the poet-as-wanderer’s skepticism toward communitarian tradition did not always open viable avenues of experimentation. Moody’s “Road-Hymn for the Start” confronts this dilemma, beginning with a seemingly unequivocal repudiation of American genteel poetry’s domestic traditions: “Leave the early bells at chime, / Leave the kindled hearth to blaze” (Poems 9). This vagabond speaker sees the domestic aspects of poetry as just “a part” of existence and resolves to “strive to see the whole” (9). But in a characteristically skeptical turn, the poet then cuts his wandering pilgrims adrift with no clear object for their peregrinations: “We have heard a voice cry ‘Wander!’ That was all we heard it say” (10). Moody puts a good face on this aimless wanderlust, referring to “the boon of endless quest,” but he remains acutely conscious of inhabiting a world whose deity “maketh nothing manifest” (11).

Another couplet from Moody’s “Road-Hymn,” “Careless where our face is set, / Let us take the open way” (10), articulates the frequent objectlessness of these young poets’ desire to take to an open road. Such moments remind us that the wanderer is an ambiguous persona, offering not just liberating rebellion from convention, but also the possibility of spiraling disengagement from all social structures. In writers less self-aware than Moody, the urgent impulse to wander led to some notably misguided uses of the wayfarer-poet that produced only solipsistic antmodernity no more constructive than the genteel quietism they sought to reject. In particular, George Cabot Lodge’s use of Whitman’s vision of the wanderer on the open road ended in misanthropic disarray.
In “To W. W.,” which opened his second volume, Poems 1899–1902, Lodge announced this allegiance by weaving Whitmanesque phrasings (“backward glance,” “vistas,” “leaves of love”) into his portrayal of the earlier poet as a Christlike progenitor: “I toss this sheaf of song, these scattered leaves of love! / For thee, Thy Soul and Body spent for me, /— And now still living, now in love, transmitting still Thy Soul, Thy Flesh to me, to all!” (1:117). But from his early writings, Lodge had also been drawn to poems recoiling from the social realm, in the manner of another W. W., and following hard upon the tribute to Whitman was “The World’s Too Long about Us,” which melded Wordsworthian antiurbanism with the “Outward” mode to repudiate materialist modernity: “Let us go / Far from . . . / The trivial loveless women and the low / Abortive men, the fashions stale and slow, / The greed of riches and the crime of want!” (1:131).

By the time of his ambitious late work “The City,” Lodge’s devotion to Whitman had collided disastrously with his revulsion toward “the world” and his compelling need to imagine a better one elsewhere. “The City” still contains vestiges of allegiance to Whitman, such as the opening sentence, which offers fifty-five lines of elaborate grammatical parallelisms in the manner of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.” But the verse now has rhyme and, worse, a monotonous iambic meter. The poem’s schizophrenic ambivalence combines Whitmanesque rhapsodism with a nightmarish interpretation of the modern city. The payoff that ends the fifty-five-line sentence is this resoundingly vacuous (not to mention rhyme-led) assertion: “There, interlocked inseparably, / Diverse yet single near and far, / There is the City!—where the ways / And byways of the City are” (11. 52–55). The next section bogs down right away in equally empty phrases: “There is the City!” (1. 56); “The self-same City, all in all, / Is here and there, first and last!” (11. 59–60); “There is the City—there and then! / And there and thence the City is” (11. 70–71). It is as if Lodge wants to explore and even celebrate the city as Whitman had done, but having mustered the necessary rhapsodic rhetoric, he cannot think of a single meaningful thing to say about it. This rhetorical bluster eventually gives way to a fixation on an ideal realm defined by its distance from the “mean, familiar street” (1. 99). The ellipses are the original poem’s:

Here is the City!—here are we! . . .
Here is the City—Here! . . . But there,
There where the brave are gone before,
There where the lamps of Truth and Love
Shine steadfast at the Secret Door,
Is not the City! (11. 103–08)

The remainder of the work celebrates the celestiality of this ideal noncity in terms uncomfortably prescient of the contrast between the cities of the workers and managers in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*: “Not in these purlieus of the City where / The sunless hovels of man’s indigence / Crowd meanly on the sordid thoroughfare, / But there where thought’s immeasurable dome / Kindles and clears and is fulfilled with light!” (11. 160–64). At this point Lodge’s idealizing impulse has turned entirely inward, and he damns the actual cities of modernity, equated to “hovels of man’s indigence,” as roundly as in any Fireside poem. Evoking all the elitist revulsion toward the urban social Other that T. S. Eliot would, with little of Eliot’s exhilarating formal brilliance or conceptual sophistication, Lodge’s wandering poet ends up the very embodiment of misanthropic disengagement.

Given the weight of Lodge’s elite pedigree, the antimodern destination of his verse is perhaps less surprising than his lingering fascination with Whitman. Poets less heavily invested in and by the Eastern social elite, such as the Illinois native and self-proclaimed socialist Richard Hovey, had perhaps a better chance to use the wanderer persona to rethink the modern value of poetry. Hovey’s poems of “Vagabondia,” coauthored with the Canadian native Bliss Carman (1861–1929), were the most successful American verse of the 1890s in attaining a readership and some critical following. The popularity of the Vagabondians testified to readers’ incipient yearning for a poetry embracing a life of vigor rather than shrinking from the world. The untitled envoi printed on the front and back endpapers to Carman and Hovey’s *More Songs from Vagabondia* (1896), illustrated by Tom B. Meteyard, begins by evoking the domestic ideology of Fireside poetry in order to reject it. Here even the most single-minded seeker of domesticity (“Whose furthest footstep never strayed / Beyond the village of his birth”) can be “but a lodger for the night / In this old wayside inn of earth.” Longfellow had used his wayside inn to dramatize the formation of an impromptu community, in the manner of the Canterbury pilgrims and the storytellers of the Decameron. As in those works, the setting of *Tales of a Wayside Inn* determines its structure as a series of communitarian narratives, exemplified by the most famous section, “Paul Revere’s Ride.” But for Hovey and Carman, the American poet is now “an alien and a vagabond” (“Envoy”), and the rejection of the village for the transience and impersonality of the wayside inn is not a choice but a condition of existence.
Hovey and Carman’s modernized wayside inn, more like an anonymous motor court, provides no access to a community revealing the benevolent workings of God, as Longfellow's homier hostelry does. The only path in this world of isolation was to embrace one’s companionate vagabondage, as they did with a vengeance. But to what purpose? The canonicity that might result from such an embrace (“If any record of our names / Be blown about the hills of time”) was uncertain and likely ephemeral. Its sole value (“Of all our good, of all our bad, / This one thing only is of worth”) was their understanding that true comradeship, “the league of heart to heart,” was “The only purpose of earth.” Like Arnold’s alienated speaker in “Dover Beach,” wistfully proposing to his lover that their fidelity to one another might compensate for the lack of any larger social commitment, the Vagabondians insisted that they had redefined spiritual value into a tiny coterie of three (“the man of paint, the men of rhyme”). But Arnold knew that this effort was doomed to fail, and out of that knowledge created a defining (though not complete) articulation of modern sensibility. The Vagabondians admitted no such illuminating disenchantment, opting for the less psychologically burdensome mask of blithe immaturity (one recent critic calls it “sophomore exuberance” [Meyer 219]), which would date so severely that to many avant-garde poets of the 1910s Hovey and Carman became objects of ridicule, despite being in some ways their most immediate predecessors.

As the American 1890s ended in a spasm of imperialist expansionism, Hovey’s ideological position degenerated into a peculiar but not implausible amalgamation of two iconoclastic rebels, Whitman and Henry George, with Theodore Roosevelt, whose version of wandering the open road involved iconoclasm of a more literal and violent nature. Hovey’s socialism slid into unguarded antimaterialism, contemptuous of the American populace as dupes of capital. Although he died suddenly in 1900 while the occupation of the Philippines was still a subject of fierce debate, his notoriously jingoistic poems about the war left little doubt of his enthusiasm for an American imperial destiny. “Unmanifest Destiny,” inscribed “July 1898,” acknowledges that the destiny of American culture is not clear (“I do not know beneath what sky / Nor on what seas shall be thy fate; / I only know that it shall be high, / I only know it shall be great” [Along the Trail 17]). But its unironic use of the central catchphrase of American expansionism, coupled with its characterization of God as “The Admiral of Nations” who “guides / Thy blind obedient keels to reach / The harbor” (16) where America’s future resides, made clear that this destiny properly involved expansion into other nations, absorption of other peoples. Hovey’s fetishization of the
vagabond thus curdled into imperialist apologetics that demonstrated his own ample capacity to play the dupe of capital.18

WANDERING THE MARGINS OF MODERNITY

The fatal flaw in Hovey’s exploration of the wanderer persona was his stubborn unwillingness to accept the ramifications of marginality. In fact, the antitraditional posturing of the Vagabondians masked a deep nostalgia for a time when poetry housed the yearnings and energies of privileged Romantic youth. Hovey’s embrace of the Rooseveltian man of action—whose “wandering” takes place at the head of an imperial expeditionary force—betrayed the need to cling to some model of cultural centrality in his poetry, at whatever intellectual or ethical cost. I trust that the previous pages have traced the pitfalls that some of these young wanderer-poets encountered. But others, accepting poetry’s cultural marginality as a starting point, used the trope productively to reimagine the genre’s uses for urban-industrial modernity. Both Stephen Crane and Edwin Arlington Robinson continually generated images of wanderers who make their way through a world of nothing but margin, stripped bare of familiar spiritual landmarks. The ambivalence habitually evoked in their wanderer-poems represents a significant departure from the insistent verities of genteel verse and marks the beginnings of American poetry’s deep oppositional engagement with modern experience. Robinson’s sonnet “The Altar” (1897) offers a speaker wandering “Alone, remote, nor witting where I went,” who encounters in a dream “A fiery place,” clearly having to do with poetry, that offers “a gleam / So swift, so searching, and so eloquent / Of upward promise” that the speaker is struck by a bracing flash of oppositional understanding: “Alas! I said,—the world is in the wrong” (Children of the Night 61). This visionary moment crystallizes his wanderlust into a “quenchless fever of unrest,” and he feels the thrill “of that martyred throng” who rebelled against convention. But it still does not show him a clear purpose in the waking world, and he awakens to realize that he is “the same / Bewildered insect plunging for the flame / That burns, and must burn somehow for the best” (61). This turn does not negate his impulse to rebellion, but the shift from eloquent “upward promise” to “bewildered insect” radically problematizes its efficacy and the fate of those who try to live by it. Despite—or more precisely, because of—this uncertainty, Robinson is able to imagine a constructive role for poetry in an unstable modern condition in which ambivalence, not surety, is the only appropriate
response: plunging into heterogeneity and uncertainty, he hopes for the best.

Robinson’s “Ballade of Broken Flutes” (1897) uses the wanderer topos to imagine a desolate world devoid of poetry, beginning. “In dreams I crossed a barren land, / A land of ruin, far away” (Children of the Night 22). Unlike most of Crane’s wanderers, Robinson’s encounters no cosmic being, not even an indifferent or contemptuous one, just a decayed, silent space of trees, where once “pipes and tabors had their sway,” now become leafless “skeletons in cold array” (22). Despite the desolation, the speaker still harbors vestigial dreams “to command / New life into the shrunken clay.” But these aspirations merely foreground the futility of continued poetic endeavor, which emerges in a startling passage of self-reflection near the end:

I tried it. Yes, you scan to-day,
With uncommiserating glee,
The songs of one who strove to play
The broken flutes of Arcady. (23)

The ironic “Envoy” to the poem then announces miserably that the speaker plans to “join the common fray, / To fight where Mammon may decree; / And leave, to crumble as they may, / The broken flutes of Arcady” (23). This ending indict the contemporary reader as Mammon’s coconspirator, taking unempathetic pleasure from the poet’s discomfiture. “Ballade of Broken Flutes” links the wanderer topos with the ghostly canon, as the wandering speaker in effect proclaims himself the end of the ghostly line. Unable to breathe new life into the canon’s shrunken clay, he becomes ironically canonical in his very futility (if the canon itself is a failure, one’s own failure is prerequisite for canonization). His departure for another kind of wandering, the “common fray” of alienated capitalist modernity, signifies the final giving up of the canonical ghost.

If Robinson’s is the voice that most vividly captured the ambivalence of young turn-of-the-century writers toward poetry’s changing cultural status, Crane’s is the richest and most heartbreaking expression of its persistent impulse to rebellion and innovation. The wanderer is certainly Crane’s central poetic persona, occurring again and again across his oeuvre. Pursuing its implications, Crane develops a position of radical skepticism toward all cultural orthodoxies. The six-line poem beginning “If I should cast off this tattered coat” (1894) moves toward an oppositional position equally skeptical of timid convention and its facile alternatives.
The poem’s speaker yearns to be free from the burdens of tradition, but is utterly unable to imagine what that freedom would be like:

If I should cast off this tattered coat,
And go free into the mighty sky;
If I should find nothing there
But a vast blue,
Echoless, ignorant—
What then? (Black Riders 73)

End of poem. Here Crane evokes the double anxiety that comes from chafing against oppressive tradition and from discovering that its disappearance offers only vertiginous disorientation. The articulation of “what then?” is one of poetry’s most urgent functions, and Crane is rigorously honest in acknowledging that he has no answer to it. Yet this very admission is a crucial departure from the too easily generated, no longer adequate answers offered by genteel poetry. The answer that comes only in giving up on answers: this paradox thematizes the value of poetry in the modern condition as a discourse that, by embracing its very marginality, might take on unsuspected power.

Crane often considers poetry’s crisis and its changing potentials by synthesizing the canonical-ghost and poet-wanderer topoi. The many wanderers in his poems are not just symbols of spiritual aimlessness and cosmic isolation, as they’ve often been taken. His articulation of the crisis of poetry would have been less fraught with anxiety, and less rich, if such wanderers were truly alone. Many of his wanderer poems, perhaps most, depend upon encounters with ghosts: indifferent, arbitrary, or malevolent figures of evaluative authority. Some of these represent debilitated but still oppressive past traditions, while others signify an alienated and commodified present, but all lack the necessary judgment or ethical force to legitimate their authority in the poet’s eyes. The paradigm for this sort of encounter takes place in the poem beginning “A youth in apparel that glittered” (1894), which Crane might have been aiming at the Harvard poets and their medieval obsessions. A youth wandering in “a grim wood” encounters a figure of repressive and unreasoning past canonicity, “an assassin / Attired all in garb of old days” who inexplicably accosts and stabs the youth (Black Riders 28). David Halliburton aptly describes this youth’s “apparel” as “radiant in a shallow way” (290), as if its glitter were his specious attempt to recapture some radiance he imagines to be characteristic of the distant past. But the past he actually encounters is represented by the much less
glamorous “garb” of the assassin. Crane notes bitterly that what is assassinated, youth’s proper role as defier of stale convention, is unwanted anyway, as this one is “‘enchanted, believe me, / To die thus, / In this medieval fashion, / According to the best legends; / Ah, what joy!’” (28). Self-deluded to the end, the youth dies “smiling” and “content,” though Crane’s satiric intelligence is clearly discontent that American youth should feel so.

In contrast to this acquiescent youth, Crane liked to portray himself as a defiant blasphemer wandering the cultural margins, alienated from all authority. Even when his poems do not announce any literal wandering, they often employ an avant-garde conceptual structure, thematizing the poet as a figure of marginal opposition who confronts a body of received opinion unchallenged by anyone else. Here is a highly schematized version of this structure:

There were many who went in huddled procession:
They knew not whither;
But, at any rate, success or calamity
Would attend all in equality.
There was one who sought a new road.
He went into direful thickets,
And ultimately he died thus, alone;
But they said he had courage. (Black Riders 18)

This single-minded little poem announces the rebellious sensibility that would explode upon American poetry soon after 1910. In an 1896 note to an admirer of his work, Crane revealed how fully he had internalized this persona of alienated opposition: “You delight me with your appreciation and yet too it makes me afraid. I did not bend under the three hills of ridicule which were once upon my shoulders but I don’t know that I am strong enough to withstand the kind things that are now sometimes said about me” (Correspondence 195). In using this alienated persona to thematize the value of his poetry, and to live out his own vagabond existence, Crane modeled the oppositional profile that would define the modern American avant-garde.

Virtually the only epigraph to any of Crane’s poems places this rebellious persona against an oppressive canonical legacy: “And the sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the heads of the children, even unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me” (Exodus 20:5) (Black Riders 13). Crane was temperamentally unable to imagine himself in the role of the father; throughout his poetry he is the son who discovers he
will be oppressed by his ancestors’ actions regardless of his own and therefore decides he may as well explore the exhilarations of scandal and blasphemy. He replies to the epigraph:

Well, then, I hate Thee, unrighteous picture;  
Wicked image, I hate Thee;  
So, strike with Thy vengeance  
The heads of those little men  
Who come blindly.  
It will be a brave thing. (13)

The imagery here suggests that Crane’s rejection of Christianity was closely linked to his resistance to the oppressive iconography of genteel culture. Versions of these “unrighteous pictures” and “wicked images” recur with notable frequency in his work, as in “There was a great cathedral,” where a solemn “white procession” appears at first to be the target of Crane’s satiric energy. But the poem develops unexpected empathy for the Stedman-like “chief man there” who leads the procession: “some could see him cringe, / As in a place of danger, / Throwing frightened glances into the air, / A-start at threatening faces of the past” (Black Riders 70). These “threatening faces of the past” can no doubt be linked to Crane’s evangelical Methodist upbringing, as in Daniel Hoffman’s fine reading of the religious writings of his father and uncles as influences on his poetry (48–62). A reading of the poem’s thematics of value, on the other hand, might fancifully recall the most righteous pictures of American culture, the Fireside portraits on hundreds of thousands of middle-class parlor walls, perhaps now with something less than benevolent detectable around their eyes. The fact that only “some could see” the chief man cringe supports this reading, implying that to most, he seems the most loyal and estimable keeper of tradition; but to the perceptive, skeptical reader he is haunted, like Stedman and Howells, by these icons of oppressive canonicity.

To Crane’s rebellious temperament, religious orthodoxies and cultural canons are often barely distinguishable, both signifying equally the oppressiveness of obsolete, arbitrary, or cynical authority. The weight of such authoritative writing inspires him to one of his most gnomic and sardonic condemnations of canonicity:

You tell me this is God?  
I tell you this is a printed list,  
A burning candle, and an ass. (1897; War Is Kind 35)
This time Crane achieves the desired effect of blasphemy by tossing off a definition of God in a three-line poem. Refusing to allow anyone else to tell him what God is, he shoots back his own tripartite definition that reduces the conventional symbolic pomp surrounding God to a single “burning candle.” The “printed list,” the first of the three parts, is yet another image of religious and cultural authority imposed with no genuine ethical warrant. That the list is printed adds a further intriguing irony, evoking a “God” who is propped up by techniques of modern mass production. God’s third element, the “ass,” is both more and less cryptic, presumably having reference to some Biblical beast, but also serving, especially in close conjunction with the candle, a scatological function. Responding to oppressive orthodoxy with rude physical gestures of defiance, Crane advances a subversive sensibility that prefigures such 1910s texts as Pound’s “The Temperaments” and Millay’s “First Fig,” which use similarly scatological implications to flout conventional gentility and assert their avant-garde allegiances.

But Crane is well aware that such guerrilla assaults on oppressive canonicity, no matter how ferocious, don’t in themselves establish a viable account of modern poetic value. As he tries to articulate what he would put in place of traditional notions of value, we find his iconoclasm inflected by ambivalence and anxiety. In “Once I saw mountains angry” (1894), for example, Crane offers a picture of canonical ancestry reminiscent of Robinson’s congenital ambivalence. A wandering “little man” “no bigger than my finger” is pitted against “mountains angry, / And ranged in battle-front” (Black Riders 23). The little man’s size tropes the writer’s creative capacity (and phallically expressed anxieties about it). His ability to “prevail” against an angry cosmos derives from “His grandfathers,” who “beat them many times,” suggesting the continued potency of canonical ancestry. But the speaker’s final remark on the issue is, if I may, clearly ambiguous: “Then did I see much virtue in grandfathers,—/ At least, for the little man / Who stood against the mountains” (23). “At least” seems to qualify this virtue, yet the “little man” and his dependence on his grandfathers are not ironized and ridiculed as such figures often are in Crane’s work. A similarly bracing ambivalence tinges “Tradition, thou art for suckling children” (1894), whose first line efficiently rejects canon and tradition, going on to allow that they might offer “enlivening milk for babes,” “but no meat for men” (Black Riders 48). But the end of the poem calls that rejection into radical doubt: “Then—/ But alas, we are all babes.” The pause functions as an ingenious graphic signifier of the paralytic ambivalence toward past canons felt by the young poets of the 1890s. Having confidently asserted his
repudiation of them, the speaker looks forward to a new direction ("Then") but quickly perceives the lack of viable alternative avenues ("—"), a realization that ignominiously reinfantilizes him.

The opacity and ambivalence that sometimes seem to dilute Crane’s rebellious positions should be read not as signs of his incomplete liberation from convention, but of his unwillingness to sacrifice the complexity of these issues for more direct but reductive statement. Indeed, Crane’s awareness of the abyssal character of meaning—the meaning of experience, the meaning of writing—is one of the centrally modern qualities of his writing. Michael Fried’s brilliant book makes clear that this unfathomability characterizes much of Crane’s prose. But there it emerges within socially embedded narratives that can be refamiliarized into the critical traditions of realist fiction. In his verse, on the other hand, Crane is free to use this metalinguistic level of signification to valorize a modern poetics of complexity and irreducibility. A number of his poems explore the infinite regress of meaning through a distinctive trope of uncontrolled dissemination, in which something representing poetic material suddenly bursts its containing bounds and is diffused throughout an environment. Akin to the impulse to wander, this dispersive gesture constitutes a forceful repudiation of the virtues of enclosure, coherence, and security so dear to American genteel verse. Perhaps his fullest use of this trope to theorize modern poetic value comes in this poem:

Once, I knew a fine song
—It is true, believe me—
It was all of birds,
And I held them in a basket;
When I opened the wicket,
Heavens! They all flew away.
I cried, “Come back, little thoughts!”
But they only laughed.
They flew on
Until they were as sand
Thrown between me and the sky. (Black Riders 72)20

As he often does, Crane here uses a twisted version of Fireside analogical method. We can measure his distance from that earlier poetics by contrasting this text to a Fireside classic using a similar trope, Longfellow’s “The Arrow and the Song” (1845), whose poet-speaker sends an arrow into the air, then a song, to ostensibly unknown results (both “fell to earth / I knew not where”). Ultimately, of course, Longfellow’s
method of analogical homily requires tidy denouement, and in the final stanza the arrow is found “unbroke,” embedded in an oak, while the song, “from beginning to end,” resides “in the heart of a friend” (Complete Poetical Works 68). Fireside poetics presumes that arrow and song, no matter how far or indirectly they might have traveled, will always remain whole, their essence unchanged from the moment of their creation and launching, and that they can be found in some coherent place (oak tree, friend’s heart) that reaffirms a coherent world. In Crane’s diffusive trope, on the other hand, the little birds, identified as both songs and thoughts, burst forth from their container, and despite the creator’s wistful desire to retain them for himself (or at least to know whither they fly), they endlessly recede from view. Far from offering reassurance of the integral character of meaning, the little bird-poems become hindrances to vision, microscopic grains of “sand” that obscure his view of the sky, images of the infinite regress of meaning. Using the analogical method to exorcise the shades of the genteel canon, Crane advances a modern account of poetry that revels in multiplying the loose ends of imagination and meaning that genteel poetics could no longer keep tied up.

AT HOME ON THE ROAD

Crane’s subversive play with images of infinite regress was matched, perhaps even outdone, by one of his forgotten contemporaries. Francis Brooks, dead by 1898 after publishing just one book, was the era’s closest forerunner of the phenomenological strain of modern American verse epitomized by Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams.21 I have made glancing reference to Brooks as a participant in the agoraphobic idealist ethos of 1890s Harvard. But unlike Lodge and Stickney, who were inhibited and ultimately stifled by their idealism, Brooks used his to explore how poetry’s meanings might elude the reductive stenographic models of modern language authorized by capitalist enforcers like Edward Bok and H. E. Warner. Brooks’s finest work, “Titular,” appears early in his 1896 volume Margins. His cross-referencing play of titles suggests that the poem is premised on its own marginality, which eventually becomes explicit in these self-evaluating lines: “So, mayhap, just on the marge / Of superior and truer, / Lovelier things, these verses cling” (6). Since the poem is titular as well as marginal, that makes the entire project of the book marginal, and the whole genre of poetry as well. This frank acknowledgment frees Brooks to explore marginality as a condition of possibility rather than defeat. The first half of “Titular”
weaves an imagistic mosaic of visual pictures, spatial relationships, and emotional impressions that construct marginality as a threshold to "dream what lies beyond":

Margins of the mere and moor,
Margins of the sea by shell
Convoluted, many-hued,
Mosses manifold, defined;
Margins of the furrowed fields,
Daisy-decked, and aster-starred;
Margins of the woods when Spring,
Joyous from the shadowed depths,
Smiles in every violet;
Margins of the day and night,
Dimness of the dusk and dawn;
Margins of the sky and earth,
Faint horizons, mystic, far;
Margins of the city streets,
Endless, tense humanity;
Margins of life, pure infancy
And serene old age—to know
These and dream what lies beyond,
Children of men! untraveled worlds. (Margins 5–6)

The poem’s extraordinary first line offers two words, “mere” and “moor,” that capture the multiple virtues of marginality both for apprehending the phenomenal world and for the act of poetic inscription. Literally, the “margins of the mere” refer to the edges of a lake, pond, or sea, but this also means they refer to a state of unrestricted otherness (whatever borders water but is not itself water, since if it were water it would be the mere and not its margin). This state is “mere” in being only marginal; but the rich etymology of mere also offers “pure,” “unmixed” (Latin, merus). Thus the marginal’s mere-ness is countered and compensated by the purity of its otherness, in which its identity comes from its very unidentifiability. Yet another signification of mere expresses not merely a thing or its other, but the liminal pivot between the two, a boundary or boundary marker (from Latin murus, wall). Not only do we have a margin that is (a) mere, but a mere that is a margin. Thus the “mere” is simultaneously the object itself (the body of water), the absence of that same object (merely its margin), and the liminal boundary between the two. These Möbius-like convolutions recur in the image
of margins of a “moor.” They are the edges of a heath or bog, but the moor is itself a liminal space between (solid) ground and (liquid) bog, between one terrain and its other. And while the signifier “moor” might imply the action of securing (mooring) such an image to a single determinate meaning, as with “mere” that supplementary signified is itself evidence of the multiple potentialities scintillating in the linguistic sign, belying the possibility of any easy reduction.

To generate such abyssal significations from this poem should not be seen as an arbitrary activity, since “Titular” contains two symbols of itself offering patterns of infinite regress, the “shell / Convoluted, many-hued,” and the “mosses manifold, defined.” The shell is unlimited both in the intricate coils that constitute its form and in the imperceptible merging of its unquantifiable colors. Similarly, like the ambiguity of the signifier “grass” that Whitman exploited so ingeniously, “moss” refers both to the patch of moss as a whole and to each tiny individual leaf. In a further convolution, this symbol of infinitude is “defined” by its manifold multiplicity of forms. To be defined by marginality and indistinctness is thus transmuted by etymological play into a richer and more varied identity than to be one definite thing or another. In the many forms the poem articulates them—convolutions, horizons, hems, borders, tangents, “shadowed depths,” and “dimness of the dusk and dawn”—margins function not as delimiting boundaries but as thresholds offering liberating access to more multiple and profound meanings (“untraveled worlds”) than do centers. This self-reflexive play is developed further in the poem’s second half, where “these verses,” marginal as they are, “cling—/ Like the curling tender vine, / Creeping long the vast cliff’s brow, / Void below, a world above” (Margins 6). This poetic vine signifies the margin of all margins, that between earth and sky, material and ideal. But in an intriguing reversal utterly in character with the poem, the clinging vine’s cliffside setting, and its ability to defy gravity, invert conventional relations of earth and space: the world is “above,” the “void below”—another instance of Brooks’s fascination with abyssal images. Thus by accepting and exploring poetry’s marginality, Brooks posits its value as a liminal form of expression, a window to new dimensions of perception, and in doing so, initiates modern American poetry’s powerful engagement with the phenomenology of imagination.

In his study of turn-of-the-century neurasthenia, American Nervousness, 1903, Tom Lutz demonstrates how an ostensibly marginalizing condition actually enabled many sufferers to explore alternative subjectivities that inhibiting social conventions had rendered otherwise
unavailable. Lutz draws upon Arnold Van Gennep’s formulation of “liminal rites” that “suspend normal social expectations and create an unstructured space in which individuals slough off old social positions in preparation for new ones awarded in postliminal rites,” though he suggests that such spaces are not so much unstructured as mirror structures (21). If neurasthenia could function as such a mirror structure that enabled psychosocial transformation, Brooks’s contemporaneous poem proposes, in its linguistic and phenomenological play of mirroring opposites, that a poetry of marginality might offer a similar liminal and transformative function. Lutz concludes that his neurasthenic subjects (including Theodore Roosevelt, Theodore Dreiser, Edgar Saltus, and William James) “each refashioned, however unconsciously or unintentionally, their own life styles and subjectivities” through their self-marginalization as neurasthenics (22). Similarly, verse of the 1890s such as “Titular,” even as it appears to languish under the weight of self-doubt and dispossession, begins to refashion the value and meanings of poetry for twentieth-century modernity.

“Titular” is the key poem of Margins not just in its wit and intricacy but in its assertion of the margin as a dominant conceptual element. The material form of Brooks’s book, which was published in 1896 by the obscure Chicago firm Searle & Gorton, contributes to this reimagining of the value of poetry as well. In its thick paper, elegant typeface, clean cover design, and overall level of visual refinement, Margins participates in the decade’s aestheticist impulse, seen also in The Chap-Book, in the work of Stone & Kimball and other small publishing houses, and abroad in The Yellow Book and the spectacular later productions of William Morris’s Kelmscott Press. In The Black Riders, Jerome McGann argues that the stupefying elaborate designs of Morris’s last books initiate a modern understanding of the poem as object, both material and aesthetic, whose “subject is poetry itself—or more particularly, poetry as it may be carried out in an age of capitalist mechanical reproduction” (46). Such texts as the 1896–1897 Kelmscott edition of The Earthly Paradise, which McGann calls “the culminating work of Morris’ life” (71), “foreground textuality as such, turning words from means to ends-in-themselves” in opposition to a dominant culture that uses print merely as “a vehicle for linguistic meaning” (74). McGann thus adapts to his materialist analysis the classic formulation of modernist style as an act of resistance to modern forces of commodification and mass consumption: “The text here is hard to read, is too thick with its own materialities. It resists any processing that would simply treat it as a set of referential signs pointing beyond themselves to a semantic content” (74).
The slim and minimal elegance of *Margins*, which is certainly not difficult to read, could scarcely contrast more strongly to the intentionally cluttered and murky affect of *The Chap-Book* and Kelmscott books. But in the very modesty of its minimalist aesthetic, *Margins* offers an alternative to the familiar resistance-of-consumption model of modernism, challenging the commodification of poetic value in arguably more affirmative fashion than does Morris. Unlike the aggressive escapism of *The Earthly Paradise* (whose first lines urge us in screaming capitals to “FORGET SIX COUNTIES OVERHUNG WITH SMOKE, / FORGET THE SNORTING...
STEAM & PISTON STROKE, / FORGET THE SPREADING OF THE HIDEOUS TOWN”), Margins strips down to a bare minimum every aspect of book production that might lend it a commodified aspect. The book has no table of contents; the title page gives no date of publication, while the copyright page contains just five words—“Copyright, 1896, by the author”—that reassert the individual creator against impersonal economic forces. All pages on which a poem begins are left unnumbered, so only about half of the book’s pages have numbers. Rather than fill the margins with intricate patterns as Morris does, Brooks’s book leaves them empty; on most pages they are much wider than the text. Given the centrality of margins in Brooks’s poetics, the empty space in these pages functions as a tangible reminder of poetry’s liminal power to convey us into “what lies beyond.” In Van Gennep’s model of “liminal social rites,” the stage described as liminal (the transition proper) will be followed by “postliminal rites” that consolidate and situate the new subjectivity produced by the transition (Lutz 21). If in “Titular” the conceptual force of margins makes such liminality imaginable, the physical margins of the book provide a space for this postliminal reconstitution of the individual reader’s consciousness. The margins of Margins remain empty but prominent, as if to signify that the re-creative process is still in a nascent—but now imagined—state.

In her study of the early modern book as a material object, Evelyn Tribble establishes a vital connection between the margins of the printed book, often filled with glosses both printed and handwritten, and the period’s contested and fluid conceptions of authorship and authority (6). Tribble’s analysis ends with Ben Jonson’s consolidation of his collected works into a “corpus” imposing a “uniform typographical order upon a diverse career” (9), an event signaling the emergence of modern-individualist literary authority. This individualist model of the author was brought under attack by the advent of mass commodity culture in the late nineteenth century. Both Morris and Brooks can be seen as responding to this threat of commodification, in effect acknowledging the cultural marginality of their projects. Morris’s strategy for recuperating the author as individual is to construct the materiality of the book in the most idiosyncratic style possible, defensively cramming every inch of the page with signifiers of his distinctive vision, assuming a restive reader who must be subdued through sheer perceptual overload. In its minimal but still indisputable aestheticism, Brooks’s book offers a more hopeful anticipation of the postliminal space in which an individual consciousness adequate to modernity may be constituted in and through poetry’s cultural marginality. Ultimately it is the understated elegance of Margins, not the
flamboyance of The Earthly Paradise, that best anticipates the modern understanding of fine printing as “invisible typography,” theorized by Beatrice Warde in 1932 as the effort “to reveal rather than to hide the beautiful thing which it was meant to contain” (11; italics in original).

The last two poems in Margins, “Still” and “Thus,” adopt a tone of quiet expectancy, as if awaiting that postliminal re-creation of consciousness. The former, beginning “Still midst the prose a poem we weave, / Pallid with doubt yet dare to believe,” confronts the period’s conventional anxieties about the value of poetic activity and insists that poetry still “Touches the dross and turns it to gold” (Margins 79–80). The poem’s title is its most efficient conveyer of its theme: though the era’s poets may appear to be stilled, they are in fact still capable of evoking the benefits of imaginative liminality, here portrayed as alchemy. The title of the final poem, “Thus,” implies an action or process that follows from what has gone before and will continue past the end of the book. “Thus” imagines in its minimal eight lines a modern conception of poetic value based on an individual authorial consciousness striving to discover new forms and subjects:

Some unworn thought,
    Some unused word,
Some tone untaught,
    Some rhyme unheard;
Some nobler aim,
    Some further lore,
Shall add a name,
    A poet, more. (80)

This coalescence would bring to life the individual vision of “a poet,” but also “more”: the distinctive subjectivity of a modern reader, who, the book’s design implies, can be relied upon not to consume poetry heedlessly as just another commodity, but to use it wisely. The book’s abundant marginal space invites all manner of material glosses through which such readers might articulate their own emerging subjectivities. Thus without sacrificing conceptual complexity, Brooks’s modern poetics of value rewarrents the authority of the individual creator not by alienating but by involving the Other-reader.

Margins was the only volume Brooks published before his health was seriously undermined, and he drowned in Lake Geneva in 1898, an apparent suicide, at the age of 31. Yet another truncated and unrealized turn-of-the-century life, it seems, but this one contains some striking ele-
ments that foreshadowed the vigorous cultural roles available to American poets after 1910. Like Robinson and Moody, Brooks was sufficiently detached from the ethos of Harvard to escape its most inhibiting aspects. In the fall of 1890 Brooks matriculated (not graduated as Carlin T. Kindilien states), but he stayed just two years before departing for successful legal training in Chicago, followed by a brief interval of practice, then by medical studies and a degree, and finally by an extended period of strenuous wandering across North America and Europe, where he died. Kindilien calls his peripatetic existence “a quest for a purpose in life that he failed to find” (131), but its more precise significance derives from the conscious self-marginalization Brooks undertook. Despite a sympathetic family, Brooks found himself unable to commit to their milieu of upper-middle-class professional comfort, and like Crane, he eventually embarked upon an intellectual and financial vagabondage that his friend Rice attributes to empathy with “the great majority of his fellow men and women who grasped the thorns of the rose that he might enjoy its fragrance” (“Francis Brooks” xiv). Brooks had always felt “sympathy for their struggles,” but after his experience of wandering, “he was now to incarnate this sympathy in his own person” (xiv).

Thus the exploration of marginality seen in “Titular,” which predated most of Brooks’s wanderings, was no passing whim in his poetics but was central to his vision of the modern poet as one empathetic toward the socially marginalized. In the late work “Night: A Fragment,” Brooks describes this commitment in terms that would be echoed a half century later by Allen Ginsberg in “A Supermarket in California”: on a summer evening the wandering speaker sees the lights of homes and hears voices

\[
\ldots \text{borne to me, a stranger, full of care} \\
\text{And lonely, shuffling down the darkened street} \\
\text{My life the focus where all shadows meet. (Poems 72)}
\]

If the poet of modernity is “driven still to wander and to yearn” (72) through the night, Brooks’s use of the role was more thoughtful of its social implications than the self-dramatizing of Glasgow, Peabody, Lodge, and the Vagabondians. Sadly, Brooks’s personal awakening coincided with declining health. But several of his late works, such as “Cities’ Streets” and “The Age of Steel,” muse upon the contradictions of modernity with greater ethical complexity than most poems of the era were able to summon. Like Crane’s more famous vagabond existence, Brooks’s life reveals the personal hazards—and some of the benefits—of becoming a poet-wanderer on the margins of modern culture.