Investigating the resistant force of the wanderer persona in its many guises, we discover an array of American verses written between 1890 and 1910, most now virtually unknown, that respond productively to poetry’s marginality. Like Brooks’s “Titular,” such poems comprehend the margin not just as static spatial metaphor but as a source of temporal energy. They seek to convert marginality into horizontality, in a strong sense: not just something low and wide, but something on the horizon, an incipient element capable of growing in significance. Younger poets of these years made the first productive attempts since Whitman to imagine American poetry’s horizons in a modern condition driven by incorporative capitalism and articulated to most people through commercialized forms of mass culture. Given that they struggled toward this renewed relevance during the worst years of poetry’s institutional crisis, it’s not surprising that their work is sometimes unsure of its footing, self-contradictory, even despairing of its objectives—above all it is, to borrow Paula Bennett’s term, “heavily negotiated” (“Not Just Filler” 204). But exactly in being so, in leaving behind the closed-minded verities of genteel verse to negotiate the drastically uncertain terrain of the twentieth century, these works took crucial steps toward a modern American poetics.

My final chapter focuses on a significant subset of this turn-of-the-century modern verse that directly addresses defining phenomena of
urban-industrial modernity. In these decades, to choose modern subject matter, when the entire ideological force of late genteel culture asserted that poetry was poetry only when it stayed out of the modern world, became an important statement of discontent with existing traditions and a willingness to explore new possibilities. I group these modern subjects into three related categories—material, political, and discursive—that collectively highlight the breadth of turn-of-the-century poetry’s address to modernity. The first of these deals with poems addressing iconic urban objects and places in which physical space intersects with social landscape. The second examines poets’ evolving responses to media-manipulated military action in the Caribbean and the Philippines between 1898 and 1902, which challenged them to reconsider national identity in the face of an emerging imperialist modernity. In the strongest of these modern war poems, the marginal character of poetry becomes a politically aware counterdiscourse based not on certitude and conviction but on skeptical detachment toward official stories. The book’s final section elaborates what I call the “poetry-writes-the-newspaper” topos: a small but impressive group of poems that use the newspaper to explore the impact of mass culture on changing models of social and cultural value in America. Two major poems in this category, Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s “Legend of the Newspaper” and Crane’s “A newspaper is a collection of half-injustices,” ingeniously explore poetry’s capacity to resist more thoroughly hegemonized discourses of capitalist media. The writers examined here span an ideological spectrum from nostalgic conservative to anarchist radical; their work spans a stylistic range from traditional metrical form to experimental free verse. This variety is important because it shows that the desire to make poetry relevant to modern experience did not emerge from within any single style or politics, but across the entire range of American verse writing.


The appearance in the 1890s of poems thoughtfully, even critically, exploring the meanings of modernized public space (rather than simply commemorative celebrations of their openings, of which there were many) indicated that American verse was moving fitfully toward engagement with modernity.1 Perhaps the best-known poem in this category was “The New Colossus” (1883), written by Emma Lazarus (1849–1887) at a moment when the Statue of Liberty’s supporters were
struggling without much success to raise the funds necessary for its pedestal. No one doubted that Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi’s statue, if built, would be an American icon, but there was much question what it might signify. Officially, as stated in an 1884 article by William Howe Downes, it was meant to symbolize “the historic friendship of the two great republics” and “the idea of freedom and fraternity which underlies the republican form of government” (153). Downes referred to “The New Colossus” and to the question of “American hospitality to the European emigrant” (153) as a secondary meaning, suggesting that the poem had already begun to influence, but not to dominate, interpretations of the statue even before construction was complete. Lazarus’s poem was recited at the unveiling ceremony in 1886, indicating its growing importance, but it would be another seventeen years before this interpretation was officially authorized by being inscribed on a plaque inside the pedestal.

The poem’s highly rhetorical final section, which features the statue’s self-defining statement (“Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses”) is better known, but the lines that precede it are more impressive poetically and politically:

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. (1:202–03)

Lazarus defines the statue first and foremost as a symbol of modernity: it will be a new colossus, repudiating the old world’s history of expansionist conquest, its monumental iconic gestures signifying “world-wide welcome” to other peoples, its electrified torch lighting the way to a world of peaceful, permeable borders among nations. The poem has never been understood as a stylistic harbinger of modernism, and yet its syntax and diction—particularly the declarative constructions “here . . . shall stand / A mighty woman with a torch,” and “her mild eyes command / The . . . harbor”—are notably plainspoken for the year, especially in such a self-consciously public poem. If the poet slightly
overindulges her liking for compound adjectives, each of these is fresh and effective in its own terms; with “beacon-hand” and “air-bridged,” she generates compact metaphors that anticipate twentieth-century preferences for efficiency and clarity over euphuistic indirection. The statue’s rejection of the “storied pomp” of older cultures both celebrates a national skepticism toward outworn social hierarchies and predicts the emergence of more direct modes of expression in the stories told by modern Americans and their icons.

After 1890 the big-city thoroughfare, the quintessentially modernized space that Bryant had thoroughly repudiated for Fireside poetry in “The Crowded Street,” gradually reappeared as a site of poetic engagement. Lazarus’s “City Visions” (1880s) proposes that the city-dwelling poet is not bereft of “Fancy” but can “soar cloud-high,” no less than the consciousness taking imaginative sustenance from the natural world (1:219). Yet in this poem Lazarus avoids actually looking at the street, still inhibited by the binary model employed by antiurban poetic traditions, which scripts the city as a “restricted sphere” of the “dismal now and here” in contrast to another realm, “free as the winds are free,” defined by its separation from the actual textures of modern life (1:219). But other poets during these years reentered the urban street and looked around more openly. The sonnet “Broadway at Midnight” (before 1910), by Frank Dempster Sherman (1860–1916), contrasts the artificially lit “motley show” of the theater district’s streets at night to “serene” stars that look down “From their blue balconies forevermore” (274). But the knee-jerk repudiation of the urban that conventionally followed from such binary oppositions never comes. Instead the speaker destabilizes the old binaries by emphasizing the modern city street as a place where opposites freely mingle (“Here Wealth and Poverty together stray; / Here Virtue walks with Vice, and does not know”). This post-theater crush of Broadway, a “motley show” whose participants are “The tireless actors of an endless play,” contains the “busy whirl of life,” and Sherman ultimately prefers it to the cool silence of the stars, “mute spectators of our mortal strife.” As they “look down” from their balconies like passive spectators of a play, Sherman reminds us that despite their resonance as symbols of immutable beauty, they can only hover above, indifferent and remote, while “the human comedy” takes place on the street, not above it.

Like Bryant’s “The Crowded Street,” Francis Brooks’s “Cities’ Streets,” written in the later 1890s, portrays the street as an ambiguous site where all aspects of human activity are concentrated. But Brooks declines to seek refuge in pastoral nostalgia or consolatory Christianity,
instead remaining in the city even as he notes its chaotic impersonality. Here is the poem in full:

Upon the pave, the ceaseless lave
Of life and trade; the cities rave
And jostle—egotism’s own grave
Upon the pave.

And here compassion’s well is digged
Or charity’s felucca rigged;
And eyes made wise observe how chance
Doth mix with varied circumstance.

Even the will is shaped to fill
The needs that time and place distil—
The fateful flow of weal and ill
Upon the pave. (Poems 221)

In this realist rewriting of Bryant, markers of individual consciousness central to the Enlightenment worldview—ego, wisdom, will—are subordinated to such motive forces of modernity as blind chance and environmental circumstance. Yet these forces are not dismally deterministic but generate a complex mixture of “weal and ill” found on the urban street. While acknowledging the jarring textures of metropolitan life that Georg Simmel was theorizing during this same decade, Brooks doesn’t, as some naturalists might, dismiss the weal produced by the modern city as illusory, but acknowledges that this challenging urban environment can generate compassion as well as rapacity. Perhaps most importantly, Brooks asserts his modernity of outlook by admitting no world elsewhere into this urban milieu: he makes “life and trade” apposite rather than opposite terms and conceives the city’s continual destruction and reconstruction as a renewal of experience, laving rather than sullying.

The underrated Edith M. Thomas (1854–1925) carried American verse closer yet to finding itself in and through the modern urban street. Like much of her work, “Broadway,” published in Scribner’s in 1889 and then in the 1893 volume Fair Shadow Land, mounts a bracing synthesis of sentimental, transcendentalist, and modern sensibilities. “Broadway” draws upon the same metaphor of city as river that Bryant had used, but rather than fleeing the urban for pastoral refuge, Thomas uses it to consider the new spatial perspectives and patterns of movement created by the skyscraper city:
Between these frowning granite steeps
The human river onward sweeps;
And here it moves with torrent force,
And there it slacks its heady course.

(Fair Shadow Land 44)

Bryant’s flight from the urban led him eventually to call upon the deity “who heeds, who holds them all, / In His large love and boundless thought” (Poetical Works 320), proposing that only God can make sense of the incoherence of the modern city. Thomas rewrites this portentous evocation of divinity as a good-natured agnostic admission of the city’s incoherence (“what controls its variant flow / A keener wit than mine must show” [Fair Shadow Land 44]). But this incoherence is paradoxically enriching, allowing her to “cast myself upon the tide, / And merging with its current glide,” become a Whitmanesque “drop, an atom, of the whole / Of its great bulk and wandering soul” (44). Thomas’s wholehearted willingness to mingle in the experiential textures of urban modernity is a crucial step toward the New Poetry of the 1910s, in which dozens of American poets as different as Carl Sandburg, T. S. Eliot, and Edna St. Vincent Millay took the city as the venue and inspiration for their modern poetics.

The playful second section of “Broadway” further pursues the street-as-river image to destabilize the conventional genteel opposition of rural and urban:

O curbless river, savage stream,
Thou art my wilderness extreme,
Where I may move as free, as lone
As in the waste with wood o’ergrown,
And broodings of as brave a strain
May here unchallenged entertain,
Whether meridian light display
The swift routine of current day,
Or jet electric, diamond-clear,
Convoke a world of glamour here. (Fair Shadow Land 44–45)

Bryant’s image had exploited a convenient metaphoric relation (masses of people streaming through streets, water flowing through riverbed), but had never faced up to the subversive implications of confusing natural and artificial. Once you make the city into a river or other natural object, even to demonize it, you allow someone else to assert the city as
natural, or as an affirmative synthesis of natural and constructed. Thomas takes this step here, playing the modern urbanite so accustomed to constant noise that she now needs it to sleep. For her, electric light evokes not garish falsity but the exhilaration of the twenty-four-hour city, and the rural world seems “a waste” of meaningless, random overgrowth.

Thomas was perhaps the first American poet (at least since Whitman) to mount a comprehensive challenge to the genteel convention in which urban space was necessarily defined as dirty, noisy, dangerous, immoral, emotionally jarring, and spiritually alienating. For her, indeed, the city is not the disease of modernity but the cure, offering safety, comfort, companionship, and spiritual balm. To rural vacancy and loneliness she prefers the city’s perceptual kaleidoscope, not always beautiful but continually surprising and various. She experiences urban space not as confinement but as liberation, where she “may move as free, as lone” (44) as she likes, brooding about anything she wants to, unhindered by the intrusive arbiters of taste or morality that a middle-class woman of her generation would have encountered in small-town America. Put another way, the modern city allows an Edith Thomas, born on a farm in Ohio before the Civil War, to reinvent herself in her thirty-third year and to live thereafter in New York as an independent woman in charge of her own life (Gray 235). The city’s very impersonality makes this freedom possible, affording “solitude” when she desires it, but unlike the desperation that attends remote rural solitude, also offering instant “comradeship” through renewing encounters with others, “Where all to all are firm allied, / And each hath countenance from the rest” (Fair Shadow Land 45). The noun “countenance” carries both neutral connotations (the appearance of a human face) and positive ones (an expression of approval or support). Thomas draws upon both senses here, asserting that the modern city’s continual procession of human countenances, no matter how “unconfessed” the bond may be, still implies and enables recognition, alliance, mutual support.

Having established this theme of a transcendent bond among city dwellers, Thomas reimagines the city of modernity not as the random collisions of fragmented monads, but as a cohesive collective entity:

I muse upon this river’s brink;
I listen long; I strive to think
What cry goes forth, of many blent,
And by that cry what thing is meant. (Fair Shadow Land 45)
In musing upon the city, making it her muse, the poet seeks a visionary liminal realm (“Sometimes I move as in a dream” into a space of “wondrous quiet”) where she may experience frenetic city life no longer as random and entropic, but as a collective journey that “seems in summoned haste to urge, / Half prescient, towards a destined verge!” (45). This section emphasizes images of marginality—the river’s brink, the barely heard human voice, and particularly the “destined verge.” They all imply that the city’s “swift, phantasmal stream,” the inexorability and haste of its movements, the impossibility of comprehending it in the puny terms of individual ego—the very same qualities that caused the genteel poet to repudiate it—might carry a powerful liminal prescience, as yet “inarticulate,” but heralding humanity’s eventual destiny.

Despite her tendency to “poetic” diction, at a conceptual level Thomas fully inhabits the machine-age paradigm of cultural value celebrating efficiency and decrying waste (superbly described by Cecilia Tichi, 63–75). “Waste” is a key word in the poem, and Thomas returns to it in the poem’s final lines.

The river flows,—unwasting flows;  
Nor less nor more its volume grows,  
From source to sea still onward rolled,  
As days are shed and years are told;  
And yet, so mutable its wave,  
That no man twice therein may lave,  
But, ere he can return again,  
Himself shall subtle change sustain;  
Since more and more each life must be  
Tide-troubled by the drawing sea. (Fair Shadow Land 45–46)

In contrast to the overgrown “waste” of rural wood, the “unwasting” city achieves material efficiency and stability even while taking its identity from constant change—much as a river maintains its course and form despite its individual molecules of water being in constant flux. Thomas thus rounds out her central metaphor with a ringing affirmation of the city’s organic identity. In critiquing the genteel-Romantic poetics that insisted on opposing city to river, modernity to nature, “Broadway” establishes several premises that would underwrite the urban American verse of the 1910s: that the city minimizes waste and maximizes resources; that its electrification puts an end to the squandering of time by making the night available for human uses; that its
profusion of people allows both comfortable anonymity and convenient companionship as one prefers; that its density of materials intensifies energies and compounds material wealth; that its innumerable voices might articulate a collective consciousness.3

I’ve ordered these poems to indicate that by the 1890s American poets were starting to treat the urban street not as an abstraction or convention whose meanings were fixed and prior to any particular experience of it, but as a concrete material reality, whose character varied from one circumstance to another. Lazarus, still largely within the binary paradigm of Romantic antiurbanism in “City Visions,” can barely look out her city window unless she looks up at clouds and sky; Sherman still treats the street as metaphor rather than as material site, but affirms the city’s motley mixture as the genuine emblem of modern experience. Brooks rejects the binary opposition of two worlds in favor of a wholly urban milieu, and Thomas adds an ardent emotional investment in the life of the city, as well as the conviction that its physical textures carry emotional and even spiritual meaning. This process of concretization culminates in “The Road Builders,” by the radical anarchist writer Voltairine de Cleyre (1866–1912). Here, perhaps for the first time since Whitman, an American poet describes a specific event that happens on an American city street. The poet earns the right to abstract a broader social meaning from this event by focusing intently on the physical materials that comprise the modern street—earth, macadam, sweat, blood. Here is the poem in full:

The Road Builders

(“Who built the beautiful roads?” queried a friend of the present order, as we walked one day along the macadamized driveway of Fairmount Park.)

I saw them toiling in the blistering sun,
Their dull, dark faces leaning toward the stone,
Their knotted fingers grasping the rude tools.
Their rounded shoulders narrowing in their chest,
The sweat drops dripping in great painful beads.
I saw one fall, his forehead on the rock,
The helpless hand still clutching at the spade,
The slack mouth full of earth.

And he was dead.
His comrades gently turned his face, until
The fierce sun glittered hard upon his eyes,
Wide open, staring at the cruel sky.
The blood yet ran upon the jagged stone;
But it was ended. He was quite, quite dead:
Driven to death beneath the burning sun,
Driven to death upon the road he built.

He was no “hero,” he; a poor, black man,
Taking “the will of God” and asking naught;
Think of him thus, when next your horse’s feet
Strike out the flint spark from the gleaming road;
Think that for this, this common thing, The Road,
A human creature died; ’tis a blood gift,
To an o’erreaching world that does not thank.
Ignorant, mean, and soulless was he? Well,—
Still human; and you drive upon his corpse. (68)

Philadelphia, July 24, 1900.

The epigraph identifies the poem as a response to a real question asked by a particular person, strengthening its immediacy as an intervention into a specific set of social circumstances. So too does the attachment of an exact date and place to the text; even if July 24 marks the poem’s completion rather than the events narrated, both the man’s death and the act of composition are situated firmly in 1900 Philadelphia. The poem’s structural apparatus thus contributes to its political force in somewhat the same way that Jacob Riis’s and Lewis Hine’s contemporaneous photographs of slum life documented the actuality of the conditions decried by urban reformers and denied by some supporters of the existing order. The poem’s authenticity is further asserted by the opening phrase “I saw,” in which de Cleyre takes on the responsibility of witness. Judiciously she repeats this phrase just once, but at a crucial moment, when the man collapses (1. 6). Rhythmically, the phrase “I saw one fall” requires us to accent each of its four syllables, slowing down the iambic pentameter into an emphatic, ominous trudge (an effect re-created two lines later in the phrase “The slack mouth full of earth,” which offers four heavy stresses in six long syllables). These strategies allow de Cleyre to avoid any evocation of the inevitable cosmic suffering of the generic poor and help her describe an actuality that can be comprehensively located in geographic, temporal, and political dimensions.
Like its rhythmic effects, the poem’s imagery and diction are more complex than they might first appear. De Cleyre’s contrast between light and darkness challenges the notion of a natural social hierarchy. In the workmen’s “dull, dark faces”; in the association of the dying man with the dark soil that he consumes as he falls, and will then consume him; and finally in the eventual revelation of his actual racial difference, darkness appears to carry conventional Euro-American connotations of deprivation, ignorance, and exclusion. But ironically, the imagery that opposes darkness does not signify enlightenment, refinement, innocence, or any other conventional meaning. Instead light signifies onerous pressure: the “blistering,” “fierce,” and “burning” sunlight, the “cruel sky,” and the spark thrown by the horse hooves on the “gleaming road.” All trope the forces that confine the dead man and his “comrades” in darkness (as the sun glitters “hard upon his eyes”). This imagery supports de Cleyre’s primary political goal in the poem: to implicate people who enjoy the luxury of thinking theirs is an enlightened, beautiful society, into the structural inequities that darken the lives of so many of its inhabitants. For the poet, as for the dying workman, the capitalist world’s light is inextricably part of its darkness.

De Cleyre effectively uses the poem’s particularized setting—a modernized road in one of the nation’s greatest public parks—to intensify her commentary on the structural injustices of turn-of-the-century America. Unlike New York’s Central Park, Fairmount had been developed in stages, and its elongated dimensions—more than thirteen miles from one edge to the other—required the maintenance of elaborate, lengthy roads (Weigley 427, 517). Despite the difficulty of getting there from Center City, and the vast distances between some of its highlights, the park was Philadelphia’s major leisure attraction, an urban pleasure ground unique for its size, variety of terrain, and removal from noise and smoke, described by Lafcadio Hearn in 1889 as “the most beautiful place of the whole civilized world on any sunny, tepid summer day,” in which “100,000 people make scarcely any more sound than a swarm of bees” (Bisland 470). De Cleyre uses “beautiful” as well, to describe the conventional view of the park’s new roads, a usage that becomes bitterly ironic as the poem continues. The word here may remind us of the ideological functions of the “City Beautiful” movement, which by the turn of the century had begun to shape the development of public spaces across the nation. Between 1895 and 1925, City Beautiful rhetoric drove one of the nation’s most grandiose (and protracted) civic works projects, which sited the new Philadelphia Museum of Art on high ground at the edge of Fairmount Park and built a grand parkway (later named the Benjamin
Franklin) to link the park and museum to city hall and the business district (D. Brownlee 15). During these same years, in sprawling areas to the northeast and southwest of the park, tracts of cheap row housing and often substandard infrastructure were developed to house the city’s laboring class, much of it immigrant or African American. As she identifies the worker’s body with the road itself, de Cleyre reminds her readers of the connection between these two types of urban space and proposes that human labor is the truest resource of a society. This workman, one among many, is “driven to death” upon “this common thing, The Road,” so that others may “drive upon his corpse.” The road is “common” in being both something an ordinary laborer (“ignorant, mean, and soulless” to his ungrateful social betters) would live and die upon, but also something public, owned in common and freely traversed by all members of the metropolis, at least in theory. But for those not fully enfranchised, denied opportunity and freedom of movement, the road’s commonality as an ideological construct becomes a bitter joke. De Cleyre conveys this irony through the shift of the verb “drive” from its primary older meaning, of pushing something forcibly forward, to its more typical twentieth-century usage, of moving in a vehicle under one’s own control. Those who promenade themselves comfortably through this beautiful civic space are heedlessly driving upon one whom an unjust society has driven to death, in the grim older sense. Through these multiply signifying common words, de Cleyre links the nation’s slave-driving heritage, obviously still not eradicated, to its modern leisure-seeking character. In doing so, she puts an implacable political critique into effective rhetorical and aesthetic form that anticipates the radical modern verse of the 1910s sponsored in The Masses, The Liberator, and elsewhere.

In the United States between 1890 and 1910, the material and ideological significations of modern public space were instantiated most comprehensively by the World’s Columbian Exposition, held in Chicago in the summer of 1893. The Exposition’s class-stratified design, frankly segregating the spheres of White City and Midway, elite and mass culture (as seen in Figure 3, chapter 2), embodied a dominant but increasingly embattled binary paradigm in American architecture and city planning that corresponded to the polarized evaluative model of late genteel poetry. The greatest congruence between these two disciplinary formations was precisely their resistance to the chaotic heterogeneity of the immigrant metropolis, of which Chicago was exemplary. The custodians of genteel verse, like the architects of the White City, knew that a literary Midway Plaisance existed and perhaps even needed to exist. But
that didn’t mean they had to admit it into the Arcadian realms of poetry: let it remain across the cultural tracks, in the doggerel of popular song lyrics and the prose of “city fiction.” Poetry should remain enclosed within its own sanitized white city of the soul, strictly regulating its visitors’ perceptions, ennobling them whether they liked it or not. But in the 1893 Exposition, this segregated model of cultural value threatened to come apart at the seams; despite the elegant proportions and gleaming surfaces of the White City, the magnetic midway stole the fair from its organizers. As this book has suggested, something similar would need to happen before the status of poetry in America would be rejuvenated.

For several American poets, the Columbian Exposition provided an occasion to explore the meanings of the modernized nation and verse within it.⁵ Their works offer us most when they remain rooted in the Exposition space itself—its layout, its attractions, its social dynamics—rather than departing on windy generic journeys through American history. The “Chicago Exposition Ode” (1897) of Mary Weston Fordham (1862–19—?) begins promisingly by merging Exposition imagery with the immigrant iconography of the Statue of Liberty: “Columbia, to thee / From every clime we come, / To lay our trophies at thy feet—/ Our sunbright, glorious home” (30).⁶ But the poem soon metamorphoses into a severely sentimentalized account of the arrival of European Christians in the western hemisphere, as “‘Pale Faces’ on their knees!” bringing “the Holy Cross” to the natives of the place thereby named “San Salvador, the blest!” For Fordham, receiving “God’s benison” is alone sufficient to make the New World “Home of the free, the brave!” to whom “Nations beyond the seas / Shall worship at thy shrine” (31–32).⁷

The “Columbian Ode” of Harriet Monroe was first read (and partially performed in choral settings composed by George W. Chadwick) on October 21, 1892, at a grand ceremony dedicating the Exposition and also commemorating the ostensible four-hundredth anniversary of Columbus’s “discovery.” The poem does not much engage the Exposition as a material reality either, since it was composed months before opening day. Suffering from the typical faults of nineteenth-century romantic-epic verse—ornate imagery, strained allegory, lumbering gait, overemphatic tone—the work is a far cry from Monroe’s mature verse written after 1905, which is vividly engaged with the defining technological, material, and emotional textures of modernity.⁸ Still, the “Columbian Ode” was a crucial American poem, a formative experience for the person most instrumental to the institutional emergence of modern poetry in the United States. Monroe knew many of the fair’s organizers well. In fact, her sister was married to John Wellborn Root, the
first supervising architect of the Exposition, whose sudden death in January 1891 deprived it of an architectural vision more attuned to American vernacular styles. Even before 1890 Monroe was working to integrate poetry with the cultural life of Chicago: her “Cantata” rhapsodizing the city had been delivered at the dedication of an early landmark of American civic modernism, Louis Sullivan’s Auditorium Building, on December 9, 1889. A few months later she began pursuing a role for poetry in the Exposition planned for 1893. Though her main success was being invited to write the ode rather than achieving a more integral place for verse throughout the fair, her efforts did establish the notion of civic support for poetry among Chicago’s business and cultural leadership, which would bear fruit two decades later. She achieved this precedent in part by having the astonishing nerve to spring a bill for one thousand dollars on the Committee on Ceremonies late in the planning, even though everyone knew that she had suggested the ode to the committee rather than the other way around (Poet’s Life 124). These monetary demands engendered initial opposition, but when they were finally accepted, Monroe had achieved an “entrepreneurial triumph”: the “resilient, inventive promotion of the poet and her poem” (Massa 58), which in the audacious context of Chicago capitalism must have impressed the businessmen in spite of the extra minus sign on the Exposition’s ledger. In 1911 she would again use that audacity to find guarantors for Poetry: A Magazine of Verse among the same group who had supported and subsidized the Exposition and other institutions of civic culture: the Art Institute, the Symphony, and the Chicago Opera.

Though the ode had only a brief public vogue, Monroe’s participation in the Exposition reverberated long afterward. She sued Pulitzer’s New York World for its unauthorized publication of excerpts from her poem and in 1895 was awarded the impressive sum of five thousand dollars. As an early test case of the copyright laws passed in the 1880s, this suit was appealed unsuccessfully by the newspaper all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. The experience fired Monroe’s zeal for defending the rights of individual cultural entrepreneurs—poets and editors—against an impersonal and careless publishing establishment. As she later put it proudly, “my little lawsuit, being without precedent, established its own precedence and became a textbook case, defining the rights of authors to control their unpublished works” (Poet’s Life 139). Her commitment to authorial rights would echo forcefully through the editorial rhetoric and policies of Poetry from 1912 into the 1930s and had a shaping impact on the economics of modern poetry. When Monroe brought her suit, such mass-media ideologists as Pulitzer and Edward
Bok were proceeding as if the individual author—and especially the poet—had passed into obsolescence. The World’s brazen and sloppy publication of the ode, as an anonymous bit of news rather than as someone’s intellectual property, was vivid evidence of this disregard. In contrast, Monroe’s tenacious conviction that authors of verse should retain economic control of their work asserted poetry as a full-fledged participant, not a charity case, within modern culture. This would be the sort of forceful advocacy American poetry needed, and fortunately would receive, in its stunning shift from crisis into renaissance in the 1910s.

Two other substantial poems used the specific design and arrangement of the Columbian Exposition to examine the models of cultural value available in 1890s America. Edgar Lee Masters’s “The White City” (published 1898) begins by situating itself into the material textures of the fair:

The autumnal sky is blue like June’s,
The wooded isle is sere below
Reflected in the still lagoons
Beneath the full noon’s brilliant glow.
Around the wondrous buildings show
Their sculptured roofs and domes and towers.

(A Book of Verses 120)

The early autumn setting imparts a belatedness that tempers the awestruck speaker’s enthusiasm with a wistful sense that the fair’s splendor is ephemeral. The “wooded isle” was a parklike preserve in the middle of the White City, designed to allow people to depart the bustling avenues for a more meditative, bucolic experience. It affords the poet a metaphor of preindustrial America from which he can begin to describe the emergence of modernity. The island’s reflection in the surrounding lagoons also establishes the presence of visual echoing, confusion, and perhaps illusion, in the apparently shadowless scene of sunlit noon.

From this point Masters turns toward the allegorical entities still obligatory in poems about great public events, but he maintains an engagement with the Exposition’s material textures by describing them as they appear on actual buildings and statuary: “triumphal columns crowned / By Neptunes”; Augustus Saint-Gaudens’s Diana on the roof of the Agriculture Building, her “tense bow ready to rebound”; the figures of winged Victory and “Liberty within her chair,” both seen on F. W. MacMonnies’s Columbian Fountain; and of course, the eye-catching
Statue of the Republic by Daniel Chester French, a structure made of gold leaf over plaster, which rose 105 feet from the lagoon of the Court of Honor:

And over all the Republic stands,
    With countenance serene and fair,
The staff and eagle in her hands,
    Whom we adore, because she loosed our bands. (121)

Just behind the Republic is the dramatically sited columnar structure called the Peristyle, which “Protects the land against the sea” (121) (by forming a barrier between the Court of Honor and the open water of Lake Michigan) and contains various iconic statuary, including an orator, a young fisherman, a Native American, and Columbus (de Wit 87). These allegorical presences inspire renewed idealism and even “reverence” in the poet, who concludes that an appropriate response would be “the head / . . . bowed for truths we have inherited” (122).
Yet despite Masters’s sincerely felt idealism toward America as purveyor of Liberty to the world, hints of unease creep in, first through the sudden proliferation of conditional verb forms (“A solemn splendor which may be / The presence of the majestic dead, / Reigns in the air until the knee / Would bend in reverence”). The next section begins with renewed idealistic energy, but this is almost immediately deflected by another realization of the fair’s impermanence:

Aye, truths and beauty and the power  
Which makes this vision all our own,  
Though for a brief and passing hour. . . . (122)

“This vision” is both the faith that a better world is possible, which created and maintains American democratic ideals, and also the splendid visual illusion of the fair itself. For the poet, the ephemerality of the latter troubles the power, beauty, even perhaps the truth of the former. These two notes—celebration of the republic’s best social ideals, and anxiety that America’s exemplary status might be no more permanent than the plaster structures of the fair—challenge each other throughout
the poem and create its distinctive tone, wistful yet cynical, already nost-
talgic for a resonating, magical moment that is not yet past but may not
be fully present at all.

Masters next turns to a conventional but concise and rhetorically
effective narrative of the coming of modernity, beginning with Bacon’s
turn away from superstition toward empiricism, leading eventually to
industrial technologies—steam engine, railroad, telegraph. The unvei-
ling of the earth’s mysteries, the creation of a world dominated not by
miracle but by “enterprise,” brings a desire for political enlightenment
and the emergence of “Justice” and “Liberty” as motive forces in the
world. Yet despite all these causes for celebration, surrounded by
emblems of eternal truth, Masters still cannot shake an obscure sense of
mutability and deprivation:

And thus where art and science hoard
The trophies of the fruitful years,
The mighty spirits which out-soared
The shadows of their trials and tears,
Dante’s and Homer’s and Shakespeare’s
Seem hovering in the sun-lit air,
Now when the attentive spirit hears
The first sighs of the year’s despair,
While sorrow dyes the earth in hues most fair. (124–25)

The trophies of modernity’s art and science, accumulated in the great
buildings of the Exposition, evoke those great poetic spirits who sus-
tained humane ideals through darker times. Yet hints of autumn mute
this evocation as well. If the earth is at its “most fair” exactly because of
the year’s coming “despair,” what does that imply about the Exposition?
Is its hoarding of beauty, its presentation of human accomplishments in
all their fairest forms, somehow a harbinger of coming loss or decline?

There seems no obvious or necessary reason why this should be so,
yet as Masters ends the poem with a description of the Exposition’s spec-
tacular display of nighttime fountains (“Ten thousand lamps blaze in the
jet / Of water, shadowed nook, and tree”), he is continually conscious of
the experience as a “heavenly fantasy—/ Ah, that this dream should
ever cease to be.” The final lines maintain this paradoxical blend of plen-
titude and loss:

And lo! How white, how glorious
These fanes and temples now appear;
How pure a mood is now o’er us,
    The evening bell is sweet and clear.
And there by Dian’s brow, how near
    A star shines singly and alone;
Right o’er the dome’s symmetric sphere!
    The flags against the sky are blown—
And all we cherished once is quickly gone. (125–26)

This time the consciousness of loss is not countered by any further affirmation: we are left wondering if what’s ending is not simply a happy day at the fair, but somehow the ideals that the fair has so strikingly evoked. Again, such melancholy and loss seem unmotivated in a poem of evidently celebratory intent. Perhaps their persistence only makes sense as the poet’s obscure intuition that the experience of modernity exists in the gap between our yearnings and even the most beguiling material objects we surround ourselves with. By maintaining a focus on the physical textures of the fair, Masters has approached an unsought and perturbing understanding of the insufficiency of commodity fetishism to satisfy our spirits. The Columbian Exposition has proven American expertise in material realms, but has not finally reached the modern spirit.

Perhaps the most politically acute American poem about the Exposition is “The Captive of the White City” by Ina Coolbrith (1841–1928), which challenges supremacist racial ideologies by pondering the presence on the Chicago Midway of the Sioux chieftain called Rain-in-the-Face, the reputed killer of General George Armstrong Custer in 1876. The Columbian Exposition has been critiqued by Robert Rydell, Curtis Hinsley, and others for both its racial exclusions and inclusions: for the exclusion of Native Americans, African Americans, and women from equal participation in the official spaces of the White City; and for the Midway’s “ethnological” attractions—people of foreign extraction, the more exotic the better, who were brought to Chicago and exhibited as emblems of “primitive” cultures, in contexts that inevitably claimed this nation’s material, moral, and genetic superiority (Rydell 143–70). Here, constructing a distinctive version of chauvinistic cultural value, Midway and White City worked not in opposition but in concert. Visitors drawn to the heterogeneity and vitality of the former could gawk at the dark skin, strange dress, lamentable living conditions, and absurd rituals of the outlanders. Meanwhile, the mere presence of the White City shimmering in the background offered comforting reassurance that they lived in a civilized place of rationality, beauty, and homogeneous whiteness.
(even if, like the persona of the song “On Midway Plaisance,” they might be bored silly by the White City’s attempts to edify them).

Clearly the midway’s ethnology reflected the era’s predominant racist and imperialist sensibilities. As Rydell notes, however, “the motives and reactions of the people put on display are less clear”; not just “passive victims” of commercial exploitation, some may have been complicit, others resistant, toward representations of their ethnicity (158). The exhibition of the notorious Rain-in-the-Face, killer of Custer, is an especially problematic case. Described in an 1876 biography of Custer as a “great warrior,” “considered brave beyond precedent” by his nation, Rain-in-the-Face had been imprisoned for several months under Custer’s command in 1875 before escaping to rejoin Sitting Bull and the Sioux some months before the Little Big Horn, where he took his revenge (Whittaker 518–19). On the midway, the warrior was perceivable simultaneously as exotic and native, distant yet powerfully present, silent and assertive, beyond history and torn from the headlines. Was he, as Rydell surmises, among those Native Americans who petitioned the government for control over their own representations at the fair, urging the organizers to “Give us . . . some reason to be glad with you that [America] was so discovered” (qtd. Rydell 160)? Or was he there, as Coolbrith claims in a footnote, “by permission of the United States Government (so read the record), under guard in the log cabin” in which his associate Sitting Bull died (57)? Or could he somehow have been both petitioner and prisoner at once?

Despite the seventeen years since the Little Big Horn, the destruction of Custer’s company was still fresh in American minds, the most resounding defeats of the nation’s military by an enemy force. In the decade before the Exposition, Custer’s widow, Elizabeth, had built a public career as a writer and speaker from her husband’s famous demise. In 1886 Libbie Custer had been “a familiar figure backstage” when Buffalo Bill Cody had first taken his Wild West Show (of which the climax was a depiction of the Little Big Horn) to Madison Square Garden (Frost 261). In January 1892 the Century published a major article by Captain Edward S. Godfrey, who had been at the battle under another commanding general. Godfrey’s article and its reception reopened the controversial possibility that Custer precipitated the disaster by disobeying orders or exceeding his authority (Frost 268). In Chicago in May 1892, a year before the Exposition began, Libbie Custer initiated a nationwide tour of public appearances, giving addresses on such topics as “Garrison Life” and “Buffalo Hunting” (Frost 275). Meanwhile, upon being refused permission to locate his enterprise within the midway, Cody planned to
set up just outside its borders during the summer of 1893, threatening formidable competition to the officially sanctioned attractions (Rydell 160) and intensifying their need to offer an authentic element of this momentous event. What could be more authentic than the living presence of Rain-in-the-Face?11

The persistent publicity hovering around “Custer’s Last Stand,” which mingled the most serious aspects of the “Indian question” with Wild-West commodification, is the context into which Coolbrith’s poem intervenes. She begins with a lyrical evocation of the White City as the “Flower of the foam of the waves / Of the beautiful inland sea,” the exemplary modern metropolis that houses “Children of every zone / The light of the sun has known” (57). In this “Marvel of human hands,” “the banners of all the lands / Are free on the western breeze, / Free as the West is free.” The double-edged impact of this last phrase is the first indication of Coolbrith’s thoughtful critique of the ideologies of officialdom, since the American West is clearly not free of strife; nor, as we soon discover, are its native peoples free. In the midst of the midway’s “surging crowd,” Rain-in-the-Face sits “silent, and stern, and proud.” Coolbrith asks, as we might upon first learning of this unnerving juxtaposition, “Why is the captive here?” This interrogative resonates from the specific, doubting the redeeming social value of such a display, to the general, questioning the necessity or justice of turning the continent’s natives into outlaws, victims, and prisoners: “For the beautiful City stands / On the Red Man’s wrested lands,” and “There is blood on the broken door” and on the “bronzed hands” of Rain-in-the-Face. This blood conveys meaning at several levels: the blood of Custer and the soldiers killed by the Sioux; the blood of Sitting Bull, killed in his own cabin, whose walls now display “relics of the fight”; and the blood of his and other tribes, displaced and killed by whites.

Coolbrith next appears to make a conventional turn toward the magnetic figure of Custer, “Like a sun-god overthrown.” But instead of evoking his spirit as heroic or eternal, she merely establishes a parallel between soldier and brave, by noting that they are both “Shut from the sunlit air” and by referring to Custer as “chief.” Concluding that he is now “Dust and a name alone,” the poet then makes a surprising shift to his living widow and envisions an encounter that in 1893 was entirely possible, if difficult to imagine: “What if she walked today / In the City’s pleasant way,” and “there to her sudden gaze” after all the “terrible years, / Stood Rain-in-the-Face” (58–59)? What would they say to one another? This question, like the earlier “Why is the captive here?” is one to which the poet has no plausible answer. Instead she offers elaborate
metaphors of irreconcilability: one might as well try to “Quench with a drop of dew / . . . / The prairies’ burning plains” as to “tame / The hate in the Red Man’s veins.” But Coolbrith refuses to locate this implacable hatred in the Sioux’s natural savagery, as the fair’s ideologists might have done. Instead it is the inevitable result of “the wrongs of the White Man’s rule,” from which “Blood only may wash the trace” (59).

The poem concludes by reiterating the unnerving incongruity of this juxtaposition. Jests and glad songs “Ring through the sunlit space” of the bustling modern city, built for the desires and enjoyment of its inhabitants. Yet in the midst of this “wild, free breeze,” like a visage from another time or world, “The captive sits apart, / Silent, and makes no sign,” answering none of the poet’s final questions: “But what is the word in your heart, / O man of a dying race? / What tale on your lips for mine, / O Rain-in-the Face?” (60). Rain-in-the Face can assert himself only through maintaining both his public presence and his silent dissent from Euro-American modernity. He cannot speak to the well-meaning white poet except by refusing to speak; she cannot speak of or for him without falsehood, except to reiterate his silence. Coolbrith thus discovers another way in which poetry’s marginality might become productive. In its indirection, its resonating obscurity, in all the qualities that provoked ideologists of mass culture to declare it useless, poetry speaks of what modernity cannot say about itself. It can approach the saying of the unsayable, as Coolbrith does with her title. Literally, Rain-in-the-Face is the captive of the midway and its voracious demand for living displays that could make its promoters money. But in describing him instead as “The Captive of the White City,” Coolbrith foregrounds the relationship between the midway’s ethnological ghetto and the shining city on the lagoon, built on usurped land. Evoking the various levels at which the city can be understood as “white,” the poem asserts racial difference not as something that can be ghettoized and forgotten, but as a shaping and wounding principle of American society, and does so with a subtlety and thoughtfulness that few discussions of race in the period were capable of sustaining.

YOU PROVIDE THE PROSE POEMS, WE’LL PROVIDE THE WAR

It’s remarkable how little attention has been paid to the Spanish-American War in American cultural studies. Featuring simultaneous military operations across two hemispheres, this complex event signaled the entry of the United States into a modern arena of global politics, and
combined moral idealism, paranoid isolationism, and naked imperialism into a self-contradictory ideological brew. It also set the pattern for many of the armed conflicts of the twentieth century, as indigenous guerrilla forces were pitted against an occupying army more powerful but less able to adapt to quickly changing circumstances. In an interval of only two years the United States acted from both sides of this axis. The war and its aftermath dramatized the fraught relations between the United States and peoples of color around the world, which continue today in terms of foreign aid and economic colonization. Finally, as my section title lifted from *Citizen Kane* implies, the Spanish-American War demonstrated the powerful and troubling links between the modern nation’s foreign policy and the mass-media sources by which information is distributed to its populace. The role of the American news media in fomenting the conflict has long been acknowledged. It is less well known that the nation’s poets not only responded to the fact of the war, but also commented powerfully upon “the War” as an ideological formation. As euphoria over victory in the Caribbean turned to confusion and outrage over events in the Philippines, American poetry was challenged to become a force of resistance to political rhetoric and inflammatory journalism driven by blatant ideological and economic expediency.

Despite all the forces inhibiting their engagement with contemporary subject matter, many turn-of-the-century poets treated the events of 1898–1902 as crucial to determining the political and ethical character of American modernity. Aaron Kramer has helpfully traced the broad trajectory of American verse pertaining to the war, beginning with poets’ widespread enthusiasm for the notion of the United States as liberator of the oppressed Cuban people and moral policeman of the western hemisphere, which produced an outpouring of conventional pieties and slogans in verse from early 1898 into the following year (276–87). This pro-interventionist verse can be surveyed in several anthologies hurried out in 1898: the largely jingoistic *War-Time Echoes: Patriotic Poems, Heroic and Pathetic, Humorous and Dialectic, of the Spanish-American War*, edited by James Brownlee; the slightly more balanced *War Poems, 1898*; and the most comprehensive, *Spanish-American War Songs: A Complete Collection of Newspaper Verse during the Recent War with Spain*, edited by Sidney J. Wetherbee.

Not all the verse collected in these anthologies expressed blind, pious patriotism. Some offered more thoughtful consideration of the war’s consequences and meanings, such as “The Negro Soldier” by R. M. Channing, which argued that “we’ve got to reconstruct our views on color, more or less, / Now we know about the Tenth at La Quasina” (a
unit of African American soldiers who distinguished themselves by their valor in a June 1898 battle) (105–06). This poem also included the hopeful notion, which echoes through much 1898 verse, that the Cuban volunteer force, drawn from all over the country and trained in Florida and Tennessee, had helped to heal the scars of the Civil War (now “the feud is done forever, of the blue-coat and the gray”) (106). Other anthology verses ventured outright critique of American behavior and policies. To note one example, James Barton Adams’s “The Jingo’s Soliloquy,” written as a parody of Hamlet’s (“To go or not to go—that is the question”), ridicules the jingoist who howls for war until his voice “Ran up a hefty bill for overtime,” yet soon reconsiders, deciding to play “the old rheumatic dodge, / Or vermiform appendicitis, or—/ Well, any old disease I think will stick,” because he doesn’t want to risk turning up, “name misspelled, perchance, upon / The telegraphic list of hero dead” (41–42). While not quite calling into question the courage of those who did go, this last cynical phrase certainly deromanticizes ideologies of military heroism. All in all, the poem presents home-front jingoism as a vicious form of compensation for the inadequacies of those Americans “somewhat streaked with yellow up the back” (41).

Despite poets’ widespread enthusiasm for the intervention of 1898, the euphoric notion of a “splendid little war” fought for all the right reasons did not outlast the century. The Treaty of Paris ending hostilities between the United States and Spain, ratified by Congress in February 1899, alarmed liberals and anti-imperialists in specifying that control of the Philippines would be ceded to the United States. In that same month, the first skirmishes between American and Philippine forces occurred in the outskirts of Manila. Over the next year the situation grew steadily worse as the Filipino willingness to continue armed resistance to achieve self-government became clear. By the beginning of 1900 the nation’s policy makers had committed the U.S. military to a campaign of outright imperialist repression, and most of the poets who had been enthusiastic about the liberation of Cuba were plunged into silence, shame, or indignation (Kramer 293–308).

Many poets who did continue to write about these events after 1899 distinguished between liberation and aggressive annexation, realizing that the geopolitical dynamics of modernity were too complex and dark to sustain the nation-as-liberator ideal without self-delusion. Kramer’s study emphasizes, and values most highly, poetic utterances that admit the least uncertainty of their own position and can be placed into clear-cut categories (such as “prophetic” and “anti-prophetic”). Instead of traversing that same territory, I’ll offer something lacking from literary
histories of the period: sympathetic attention to the responses of poets
distressed over the fall of idealistic hopes into imperialist venality, who
struggle to articulate both their disillusion and their continuing political
engagement, however chastened. I find that the most enduring poems of
the war tend to be those least certain of their ethical footing, most aware
of their own implication in the ideologies they struggle to challenge.
Through this ambivalent self-awareness, these works begin to rethink
the relation of poetic utterance to sociopolitical actuality. At their
strongest they propose a skeptical idealism that resists the discourses of
official certainty, not by countering with their own set of certitudes, but
by embracing modern strategies of obliquity, uncertainty, and irony.

Some poems in this category don’t mention the Spanish-American
and Philippine-American conflicts at all, yet still powerfully evoke their
effects and meanings. Many employ images of ruined empire to express
anxiety at the prospect of an imperial American future. “The Statue of
Liberty (New York Harbour, A.D. 2900),” a sonnet written by Arthur
Upson (1877–1908) probably in 1900, measures how harshly the idealism
of American poets had been assailed in the few years since Emma
Lazarus had celebrated the statue’s creation:

Here once, the records show, a land whose pride
Abode in Freedom’s watchword! And once here
The port of traffic for a hemisphere,
With great gold-piling cities at her side!
Tradition says, superbly once did bide
Their sculptured goddess on an island near,
With hospitable smile and torch kept clear
For all wild hordes that sought her o’er the tide.

’Twas centuries ago. But this is true:
Late the fond tyrant who misrules our land,
Bidding his serfs dig deep in marshes old,
Trembled, not knowing wherefore, as they drew
From out this swampy bed of ancient mould
A shattered torch held in a mighty hand. (254)

Though Upson does not directly link the shattering of American lib-
erties to imperialist practices in the Caribbean and the Philippines, he
challenges readers to ask difficult questions: Would the American future
be an imperial one? And what consequences would follow from that?
Upson envisions a grim regression into the tyranny and serfdom that
Americans associated with reactionary European nations, most of all Spain, whose imperialist scepter the United States had seized ostensibly to smash, but perhaps, it seemed by 1900, to keep for its own. We don’t know whether the misruling tyrant of 2900 is a native or a foreign conqueror, but in an interesting sense this doesn’t matter: either the nation’s fortunes eventually turned, and foreign tyrants now treat Americans as conquered colonists, as we had once treated others; or the American impulse to accumulation and control, our very success as imperialists, has destroyed our own liberty. Only dusty “records” and rumored “tradition” still preserve an earlier energy and idealism that promised, if never fully realized, a strong hospitable nation, inviting others into itself as guests, trading partners and citizens: in short, the antithesis of an imperialist power, as the United States had presented itself during the Cuban insurrection. Upson shows admirable restraint at the end, allowing just the merest hint, in the intact “mighty hand” and the tyrant’s unexplained trembling, that those earlier energies could still be revived. In managing this so subtly, he achieves the balance of disillusioned critique and persistent idealism that characterizes the most effective verse responses to the nation’s turn-of-the-century imperialist engagements.

Joseph Trumbull Stickney’s “Mnemosyne” (1902), perhaps the most mesmerizingly beautiful poem written in the United States between 1890 and 1910, is even further from direct reference to Spain, Cuba, or the Philippines, but it too imagines a wasted landscape of the future, a culture self-destroyed. As Kramer notes, “Mnemosyne” is but one of Stickney’s many verses “saturated with images of doomed empire” (301). Here Stickney, like Robinson in “The Dead Village,” transcends the conventional antimodernity of literary Harvard to achieve great elegiac intensity.

It’s autumn in the country I remember.

How warm a wind blew here about the ways!
And shadows on the hillside lay to slumber
During the long sun-sweetened summer-days.

It’s cold abroad the country I remember.

The swallows veering skimmed the golden grain
At midday with a wing aslant and limber;
And yellow cattle browsed upon the plain.
It’s empty down the country I remember.

I had a sister lovely in my sight:
Her hair was dark, her eyes were very sombre;
We sang together in the woods at night.

It’s lonely in the country I remember.

The babble of our children fills my ears,
And on our hearth I stare the perished ember
To flames that show all starry thro’ my tears.

It’s dark about the country I remember.

There are the mountains where I lived. The path
Is slushed with cattle-tracks and fallen timber,
The stumps are twisted by the tempests’ wrath.

But that I knew these places are my own,
I’d ask how came such wretchedness to cumber
The earth, and I to people it alone.

It rains across the country I remember.

(Poems of Trumbull Stickney 29–30)

A hymn in admirably direct language to the loss of life’s treasures, “Mnemosyne” is certainly nostalgic, but it eschews the simplistic polarity of bad modern present and golden mythic past. These disappearances are never attributed directly to the consequences of imperialism. Yet the wrathful “tempests” that have felled trees and twisted stumps, and the totality of loss (warmth, birds, companion, children, and home), suggest no simple change of seasons, or single disastrous act of God, but the cataclysmic self-immolation of an entire society. The final three-line group completes this enigmatic nightmare future. The speaker “would ask” how such “wretchedness” could have come to his world and why he must now “people it alone”; but he doesn’t really need to ask, because “these places are my own.” The title ironically invokes the goddess of memory; the single lines all end “I remember”: clearly the speaker remembers everything, including why his world is devastated. It would be a mistake to assume that Stickney must have had the Philippines in mind. And yet, viewed in the specific context of its composition—the
final months of this protracted, venal, and remarkably destructive national misadventure—the poem certainly registers American poets’ growing “hesitation,” in Moody’s terms, their unwillingness to accede to the consoling official pronouncements put forward to rationalize foreign conquest.

Another group of verses makes more direct reference to the Caribbean and Pacific conflicts, urging clear-eyed scrutiny of the values driving American policy. Edith M. Thomas’s “One Woman’s Voice against War” (published 1903) is among the most forceful of these, responding to American women who in print and in their personal relationships urged men to join the fight. The poem exploits the chasm between the imagery of war’s glory and the actualities of modern combat, a gap that would become a rhetorical and ethical staple of twentieth-century war poetry. Here there is no need for any governmental propaganda machine, since belligerent women have taken into their own hands the idealistic modeling of war, deceiving their loved ones into accepting the nobility of the fight. But Thomas also portrays the “valor” of the young men as a form of self-delusion that will eventually corrupt the American social stock, spilling “the blood of the brave,” while sparing the “sons of the craven” who will sire successive generations with “blood too pale to be shed” (Dancers 56, 57). In the poem’s most telling moment, she asserts, “One is the life of each mortal—and that is not theirs, which they yield!” (57): in other words, nobody has the right to yield up the life of anybody else. This negative assertion anticipates the postnational ethics of individualism embraced by disillusioned artists and intellectuals after the Great War, which admits no other person’s or institution’s right to determine the fate of the free, though necessary alienated, individual subject of modernity.

On the other edge of the tonal spectrum, the light verse “Humbler Heroes” (1903) by Edmund Vance Cooke (1866–1932) also critiques official wartime stories by redefining heroism away from the ideology promulgated by national war policy, toward a radically different set of values:

It might not be so difficult to lead the light brigade,
While the army cheered behind you, and the fifes and bugles played;
It might be rather easy, with the war-shriek in your ears,
To forget the bite of bullets and the taste of blood and tears.
But to be a scrubwoman, with four
Babies, or more,
Every day, every day setting your back
On the rack,
And all your reward forever not quite
A full bite
Of bread for your babies. Say!
In the heat of the day
You might be a hero to head a brigade.
But a hero like her? (Impertinent Poems 45)

The second stanza offers a similar contrast, between a political “reformer” tempted away from his ideals by the acclaim of the public, and the greater courage of one who “alone and unknown,” stays “true / To his view” (45). To the cynical Cooke, modern wartime heroism smacks of a peculiar sort of conformity and weakness: easier to do what one is bid than to follow one’s conscience. This poem, coming not from rarefied intellectual circles but from a writer routinely publishing in mass magazines like the Saturday Evening Post, furnishes striking evidence that the pressure to fall in behind official policies of national unity was far from uniformly effective, and that alternative political formulations were available to and through American popular verse.

In “Spain in America,” a long poem composed in early 1901, read in excerpts in June and published later that year in the volume A Hermit of Carmel, George Santayana looked critically at imperialism, particularly American expansion into the Caribbean. The main body of this poem offers an interpretation of Spanish culture, which is eventually degraded by the hideous mistake of attempting to control a distant empire:

What mounting miseries! What dwindling gain!
To till those solitudes, soon swept of gold,
And bear that ardent sun, across the main
Slaves must come writhing in the festering hold
Of galleys.—Poison works, though men be brave and bold.
(228)

Centuries of colonial exploitation had corrupted not just Spain’s American holdings, but the mother country’s ethical and practical efficacy as well: “By sloth and lust and mindlessness and pelf / Spain sank in sadness and dishonor down, / Each in her service serving but himself” (228). Now forcibly “withdrawn” from the western hemisphere, Spain enters another phase, which the poet hopes will be “healing.” It leaves
its former colonies to “watch the skies from Cuba to the Horn,” pondering their future, warily noting the United States, a “dove or eagle” hovering to the north. In the poem’s final pages, these former colonies address the United States, warning it against the same temptations that had undone Spain. Urging their powerful neighbor to “fear the southward flight,” they ask it to wait, to “Haunt still thy storm-swept islands, and endure / The shimmering forest where thy visions live,” until they are ready to intermingle with it on terms of equality. Till then, they plead, “Thrust not thy prophets upon us, nor believe / Thy sorry riches in our eyes are fair” (230). What the United States can do now is to “inspire” them as an example of austerity, industriousness, idealism, and hope: “Hang paler clouds of reverence about / Our garish skies,” and “leave in our skies, strange Spirit passing there, / No less of vision but of courage more” (231). The end of the poem thus struggles to wrest the definition of courage in the United States away from those urging military aggression as a form of valorous adventure, toward an anti-imperialist restraint that would help these societies groping toward identity and self-determination without trying to control them.

Divergent as they are in tone, the poems I’ve just discussed all register dissatisfaction with American official policy and public opinion. They demonstrate that turn-of-the-century American poets persisted in the belief that verse might possess political force. Two major figures of the era, Moody and Crane, moved beyond occasional critique into a more thoroughgoing oppositionalism. Sadly, neither man lived to participate in the great upwelling of socially engaged modern verse beginning around 1911. If they had done so, the continuity between turn-of-the-century verse and modern American poetry would be much clearer.

Perhaps the most widely discussed poem commenting on the war and its aftermath was Moody’s “An Ode in Time of Hesitation,” first published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in May 1900. The poem was a response to months of grim revelations detailing “the barbarity of American soldiers, and complaints of news correspondents about censorship of their reports” (M. Brown 104). By early 1900 Moody understood that the U.S. government had committed itself to an overseas military campaign of dubious morality, indefinite duration, and appalling ferocity. He sets the poem on a “bright March morn” (593), producing an ironic contrast between the anticipated approach of spring, which ought to be rejuvenating, and the benighted state of American policy and public opinion. Like many contemporaries, but more intensely than most, Moody was struggling with a fall of disillusionment, from initial pride at the nation’s willingness to sacrifice on behalf of Cuban freedom
fighters, to the realization that continued involvement in the Philippines could not be justified on similar grounds, but was instead “pure conquest put to hire” (20)—which threatened to taint claims that earlier actions in the Caribbean had been righteous. The emotional jaggedness of the poet’s transition from enthusiast to dissenter is evident everywhere in the poem and becomes one source of its considerable power.

Moody’s intervention into the Philippine debate is the first in a great series of artistic commentaries upon Augustus Saint-Gaudens’s bronze bas-relief overlooking the Boston Common, which honors the Massachusetts 54th regiment, the first African American combat troops in the American military, and their young abolitionist commander, Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, who were decimated attacking Fort Wagner in 1863. The statue had been unveiled on Memorial Day 1897 while Moody was in Europe, but according to his first biographer, the poet was immediately struck by its significance, and by the speech made by his former teacher William James at the opening ceremonies (Henry 51–52). In early 1900, living just a few blocks from the Common, Moody saw the statue for himself. Deploring the drift of national policy into rank imperialism, he drew upon the statue as a symbol of American idealism challenged by continuing racial injustice. Martin Halpern notes that Moody was likely evoking James Russell Lowell’s 1865 celebration of the Union dead, “Ode Recited at the Harvard Commemoration,” while his use of Shaw and the Massachusetts 54th as symbols of American ideals follows upon Lowell’s little-known 1863 elegy to Shaw, “Memoriae Positum” (73). Despite Lowell’s occasional evocations of America’s failures, however, his odes remain “firm patriotic affirmations” (Halpern 78), while Moody’s veers into oppositionalism halfway through and never returns.

Sixty years later in “For the Union Dead,” Robert Lowell would emphasize the struggle of black Americans for full citizenship by linking the volunteer soldiers of the 54th, yearning to demonstrate their honor in combat, to African American schoolchildren braving jeers and threats to desegregate southern schools. Moody uses the statue instead to evoke foreign peoples of color who had welcomed American military intervention in the (now-endangered) hope that it would convey them toward self-determination, not colonial status. Yet Moody and Lowell sound many similar notes, particularly about the “heedless” culture of their own times, which they fear no longer comprehends Shaw’s moral example. And as Lowell would, Moody includes a penetrating exploration of his own role as a comfortably situated white American in the events of the moment. This self-examination is the quality that makes the ode most important to the emergence of a modern sensibility in American
poetry. Not immune to the moral lassitude of his era, Moody’s speaker has “striven, striven to evade” his duty to create what the soldiers’ example demands: a “swift and angry stave” indicting deeds that should outrage American ideals, but are instead by “careless lips in street and shop [averred] / As common tidings” (18). Moody knows his mission: to denaturalize imperialist ideology by refusing to accept it as common tidings, as simply the way things are. The pressing question is whether he feels adequate to accept it. In acknowledging his impulses to evasion, the poet marks himself as the ethical and intellectual wanderer of modernity, alienated not just from social convention but from his own felt responsibility to express that alienation through swift and angry verses.

Moody foregrounds this self-examination through a striking appropriation of the canonical ghost topos I described in the previous chapter. In the first section, as he looks upon the “stern” faces of Shaw and the soldiers, and imagines that he hears their “fatal” tread, the statues become the sort of weighty predecessors by whom poets of this era felt oppressed yet often ironically inspired as well. The section’s final line makes this comparison explicit, as by the “pangs” of approaching spring “these resolute ghosts are stirred” (594). The ghosts are at once the figures of the dead on the statue, the vestiges of American idealism that they represent, and the poet’s own moral conscience, which he dreads yet still hopes may be stirred into useful action. Later, in the fourth section, oppressed by “Sounds of ignoble battle,” the speaker shrinks from the soldiers’ legacy (“Too sorely heavy is the debt they lay / On me and the companions of my day”), and yearns to retreat into remembrance of “My country’s goodliness,” to use his poetic gift to “make sweet her name.” But at this pivotal moment, implacable ghosts again appear to haunt his escapist desires: “Alas! what shade art thou / Of sorrow or blame” that “Liftest the lyric leafage from [America’s] brow, / And pointest a slow finger at her shame?” (595). This “shade” is again the shotty soldier, whose bravery disturbs the poet’s restless conscience and measures the nation’s shame (the pointing finger prefigures Lowell’s comparison of Shaw to the needle of a compass). As we discover in the sixth section, this ghost also evokes Moody’s canonical predecessors. His self-doubt is intensified by the weight of past political poets who spoke out against their times:

Surely some elder singer would arise,
Whose harp hath leave to threaten and to mourn
Above this people when they go astray.
Is Whitman, the strong spirit, overworn?
Has Whittier put his yearning wrath away?
I will not and I dare not yet believe! (597)

The “intolerable self-disdain” that will eventually turn Americans against their cupidinous leaders is also Moody’s nagging sense of inadequacy at the role thrust upon him. The time of hesitation is not just the nation’s, but the poet’s as well.

The ode’s last section recapitulates the stages of the conflict, from the creation of “Beautiful armies” willing to fight for Cuban freedom, through the blood spilled on San Juan Hill by “eager boys / Who might have tasted girls’ love and been stung / With the old mystic joys / And starry griefs” (lines that echo through Wallace Stevens’s works). Moody urges Americans not to allow these sacrifices to be stained by lust for economic gain, using a further enrichment of the ghost motif:

For save we let the island men go free,
Those baffled and dislaureled ghosts
Will curse us from the lamentable coasts
Where walk the frustrate dead. (598)

The ghosts now are the newly dead soldiers of Cuba and the Philippines, who believed that by dying for a noble cause they might take honored places beside Shaw, but whose sacrifice is now “dislaureled” by corruption and shame. However, the ghosts of the Massachusetts 54th, men of color whose going free was the central moral issue of the earlier war, hover around this passage as well. The freedom or enslavement of a racial other is still America’s crucible in 1900, no less than in 1861. Not to free these “island men,” to sell out the nation’s best ideals in “the market place of war,” will turn America into an accursed place.

Moody’s ode marks an important shift away from poetry’s traditional role celebrating the deeds of “our side,” to its usual twentieth-century function as antiwar commentary using negative gestures of alienation and repudiation to critique war’s immorality. Rather than developing a specific political critique of American policy in the Philippines, the poem’s primary achievement consists in honestly admitting the difficulty of this effort, while still persisting in it. And this was an achievement, since by 1900 the crumbling of their Caribbean idealism had thrown most American poets into confusion or silence. The distance Moody feels from his predecessors suggests that the crusading poet of Whittier’s type, absolutely convinced of the righteousness of his position, is not a
model that twentieth-century poets would generally follow. But the ode offers another model of the modern poet as dissident patriot: deprived of an authoritative position from which to speak, challenged by self-doubt, yet still aspiring to resist official stories and to maintain the best ideals of the nation’s heritage. In accepting limitation and uncertainty as preconditions to achievement rather than fatal impediments, Moody imbued “hesitation” with a complex affirmative charge. After all, in the moment of 1900, hesitation to pursue the Philippines—rather than the headlong conviction of the Hoveys and Roosevelts—was the moral position. By hesitating in a rhetorically forceful and institutionally prominent poem, which despite its self-questioning can’t possibly be read as endorsing the nation’s Philippine policy, Moody made a major contribution to the oppositional discourse against turn-of-the-century imperialism and helped to reinvigorate American poetry’s political relevance.20

Moody’s “On a Soldier Fallen in the Philippines,” written in late 1900 and published in the Atlantic in February 1901, draws upon the memorializing imagery of the ode, but moves further into oppositional political statement. Here is the poem in full:

Streets of the roaring town,
Hush for him, hush, be still!
He comes, who was stricken down
Doing the word of our will.
Hush! Let him have his state,
Give him his soldier’s crown.
The grists of trade can wait
Their grinding at the mill,
But he cannot wait for his honor, now the trumpet has been blown;
Wreathe pride now for his granite brow, lay love on his breast of stone.

Toll! Let the great bells toll
Till the clashing air is dim.
Did we wrong this parted soul?
We will make up it to him.
Toll! Let him never guess
What work we set him to.
Laurel, laurel, yes;
He did what we bade him do.
Praise, and never a whispered hint but the fight he fought was good;
Never a word that the blood on his sword was his country’s own heart’s-blood.

A flag for the soldier’s bier
Who dies that his land may live;
O, banners, banners here,
That he doubt not nor misgive!
That he heed not from the tomb
The evil days draw near
When the nation, robed in gloom,
With its faithless past shall strive.
Let him never dream that his bullet’s scream went wide of its island mark,
Home to the heart of his darling land where she stumbled and sinned in the dark. (288)

This poem initially presents itself as a dignified eulogy to the loss of American lives and ideals, but underneath this tonal reserve bitter opposition to the nation’s dominant values emerges. The dead soldier, brought back to his native town, is another ghostly moral compass, whose posthumous treatment will measure his country’s worth. Moody portrays the town as barely willing to pause from the roar of trade to acknowledge the arrival of its dead son. The signs of honor the town grudgingly supplies—tolling bells, laurel wreath, flag on his bier—purport to commemorate one who lost his life believing in a righteous cause, but instead merely expose the dishonor of the nation that does not live by its professed ideals. The nation told him this was a good fight; this deception must now outlast even death, as we will continue to feed him “Praise, and never a whispered hint but the fight he fought was good.” Moody here arrives at a forcefully modern awareness of the soldier as someone who fights simply because he’s following orders. Propaganda has replaced ethical volition or political understanding as the driving force in the relationship of soldier to nation. Even death brings no illumination, merely the same delusion maintained forever, a grotesque inversion of the eternal flame of remembrance. The soldier has become part of the “grists of trade,” the key phrase of the first stanza. Grist is something ground, but also anything that can be used to advantage, a double meaning that opens up a disturbing avenue of analogy. The “falling” of the soldier evokes the grinding up of material in the mills of trade, while his return, clothed in the trappings of honor, implies the packaging of this processed material to best advantage. The honoring of
dead soldiers thus becomes further grist for the propaganda mills of the new century, trading in human bodies and illusions. As for this dead soldier, the least—and the most—we can do is to prevent him seeing that, as he carried out the nation’s will, he succeeded only in spilling “his country’s own heart’s-blood.” But the poet now seems to believe that nothing will stop the approach of “evil days” when “the nation, robed in gloom,” will rue its past misdeeds.

These two works of Moody’s exemplify the modern poem whose power emerges through awareness of its own marginal position. Several of Stephen Crane’s late poems use war scenarios to develop this sort of oppositional function for poetry. The difficulty of dating Crane’s verse clouds the question of whether his “war poems” refer to the events of 1898–1900. But whether or not we see these poems responding to the Spanish-American War, they do speak to the conflicts Crane had seen in Mexico, Greece, and elsewhere over the previous decade. Some of them are eerily prescient of the problems that American involvement in Cuba and the Philippines would create. In such poems Crane works toward a mature politics that would maintain his precious skepticism toward conventional pieties, while also advocating positive action according to humane ideals.

The poem beginning “When a people reach the top of a hill,” sometimes known as “Blue Battalions,” exemplifies this uncertainty over the directness of reference to contemporary events. Its composition is dated by Hoffman as April 1896 (162) and by Bowers as sometime in 1897 (Poems and Literary Remains 232), but it wasn’t published until May 1898 in The Philistine. It reached a broader audience later that year by appearing in Witherbee’s Spanish-American War Songs, a venue that claimed it as a war poem regardless of the poet’s initial intentions. Here, pondering the United States’ emerging status as a world power, Crane portrays modernity as a hallucinatory panoply of chaotic change. It begins:

When a people reach the top of a hill
Then does God lean toward them,
Shortens tongues, lengthens arms.
A vision of their dead comes to the weak.
The moon shall not be too old
Before the new battalions rise
—Blue battalions—
The moon shall not be too old
When the children of change shall fall
Before the new battalions
Ever sensitive to modernity’s dynamics, Crane notes that arriving at “the top of a hill,” the global centrality that the United States was about to achieve (as Spain had done long before), would not end the convulsive processes of change that had produced this shift in the first place. As Marshall Berman’s reading of Marx proposes, perhaps the greatest irony of bourgeois society is that its ideological apparatus seeks the very condition of stasis and equilibrium that if ever achieved would spell the end of the bourgeoisie’s power. The United States, the quintessential nation of bourgeois modernity, populated by “the children of change,” thrives only in the state of continual disruption and instability that brought its ascendancy; but that same logic of change must fell its children before the next set of modern conquerors. Whether or not these “new battalions” will wear blue like the U.S. Army, they too will ask God to “lead them high,” “lead them far,” as they trample “mistakes and virtues” together.

The verse beginning “There exists the eternal fact of conflict,” if written in 1897 as Bowers proposes (Poems and Literary Remains 232), suggests that a “Spanish-American War” was going on in American minds and media well before the destruction of the Maine in February 1898. Crane begins by redefining war not as concerted moral crusade but as absurdist blur, retrospectively interpreted and justified according to ideological expediency. The first lines propose that in a world of conflict so continuous as to be virtually a cosmic principle, war erupts mostly out of trivial (“mere”) local circumstances, not out of any coherent goal or vision. Only “Afterward,” once the conflict has flared, do people scramble for interpretive prisms, “patriotism” above all, to justify their actions (Poems and Literary Remains 84). But in one of Crane’s more direct verse utterances, patriotism is condemned as a “godly vice” that “makes us slaves.” The poem’s shifting voice speaks both as a craven American “patriot” seeking easy answers and, more ironically, as a harsh critic of these venal desires:

And—let us surrender to this falsity
Let us be patriots
Then welcome us the practical men
Thrumming on a thousand drums
The practical men, God help us.
They cry aloud to be led to war
Ah—
They have been poltroons on a thousand fields
And the sad sacked city of New York is their record
Furious to face the Spaniard, these people, and
crawling worms before their task
They name serfs and send charity in bulk to better men
They play at being free, these people of New York
Who are too well-dressed to protest against infamy. (84)

Even if interventionists know at some level that their reasons for war are specious, they feel the urge to “surrender,” to cede political responsibility to the “practical men” eager to receive it. These practical types evoke the planners and implementers of realpolitik whose inhumane pragmatism would disfigure the next century of American history (William McKinley, Henry Cabot Lodge, Herbert Hoover, Robert Moses, Allen Dulles, Dean Rusk, Henry Kissinger, Donald Rumsfeld). In a disorienting pronominal shift, “they” also become those clamoring for war, particularly the small-minded jingo who insists on his own hardheaded pragmatism and loudly demands “to be led to war,” in this case “furious to face the Spaniard.” But true jingoes again and again have proved themselves “poltroons,” even “crawling worms” who are pathetically inadequate to the task, and so they find the naive and powerless (“serfs”) to fight instead and keep themselves “well-dressed,” imagining they are “free.”

Crane offers as the jingo’s “record” an unnerving image, “the sacked sad city of New York.” In what sense has New York been sacked? Not literally, since its preening inhabitants still go about well-dressed, but probably because their capacity for critical thought and free debate has been expropriated by a jingoist press, led by still more practical men whose politics are driven by their circulations and profit margins. Here Crane, like Upson, Stickney, and Moody, glimpses a vision of a nightmare American future, a culture incapable of protest, sacked by its own imperial pragmatists and ethical indifference. Yet if the nation’s moral lassitude comes in its inability to “protest against infamy,” then Crane is not arguing for isolationism at any cost but for principled humanitarian intervention against Spanish oppression in the Caribbean, which could demonstrate America’s ethical mettle. This position was ethically tenable in 1897 in contemplation of Cuba, whereas four years later about the Philippines it would have been mere imperialist apologetics. We can
only regret once again that this most prominent poetic iconoclast of the age was not around to dramatize in his distinctive idiom the transition from Cuba to the Philippines, from idealism to oppositionalism. Crane’s exploration of American imperialist modernity gains in power as he pushes his own subject position furthest in the direction of marginality. “On the brown trail,” which Bowers estimates as being from late 1897, Katz from late 1898, critiques American imperial munificence by using the marginalized voice of an oppressed, now ostensibly freed peasantry. Eschewing the pitfalls of attempting unfamiliar dialect, Crane constructs a collective persona of plainspoken dignity. Here is the poem in full:

On the brown trail
We hear the grind of your carts
To our villages,
Laden with food
Laden with food
We know you are come to our help
But—
Why do you impress upon us
Your foreign happiness?
We know it not.
(Hark!
Carts laden with food
Laden with food)
We weep because we don’t understand
But your gifts form into a yoke
The food turns into a yoke
(Hark!
Carts laden with food
Laden with food)
It is our mission to vanish
Grateful because of full mouths
Destiny—Darkness
Time understands
And ye—ye bigoted men of a moment—
—Wait—
Await your turn. (Poems and Literary Remains 85)

Rather than portraying a social and racial Other from the outside, emphasizing its conventional quaintness, exoticism, backwardness, or
abjection, Crane earnestly tries to imagine the perceptions people in such a position might have toward their “liberators.” The insistent refrain “(Hark! / Carts laden with food / Laden with food)” acknowledges their real need for the sustenance the outsiders bring. But the poem makes a sharp distinction between this material openhandedness and the effort to control the lives of its recipients often implicit in American foreign relations. As they hear carts of food lumbering into their midst, the villagers are already aware that the generosity of a powerful neighbor is a mixed blessing: “But your gifts turn into a yoke / The food turns into a yoke.” Challenging the notion of imperialism as the benevolent enlightenment of benighted cultures, Crane embraces instead the oppositional position that it’s the powerless “Other” who best grasps the ambiguous political and emotional logic of charity and the self-aggrandizing psychology of the liberator: “It is our mission to vanish / Grateful because of full mouths.”

The final lines denaturalize America’s role as the world’s liberator, portraying it instead as merely a temporary king-of-the-hill. In seeing through the attempt to co-opt them into the “mission” of imperial adventure, these liberated assert their refusal to vanish from the relationship—just as Crane’s open-hearted attempt to subvert longstanding ideological hierarchies of self and other, haves and have-nots, American and foreign, light-skinned and dark, reasserts poetry’s value for oppositional political statement. Long into the twentieth century, many white American poets found it difficult to identify with people of other races and nationalities without condescension or parody. Crane achieved this empathetic position before 1900 because he was so willing to wander in the social and cultural margins of his era and so unwilling to segregate this experience of marginality from contemporary political events.

POETRY WRITES THE NEWSPAPER

Poems that consider the media’s role in the conduct of the war challenge conventional accounts of modern poetry’s emergence by demonstrating urgent engagement with turn-of-the-century modernity. So too do several turn-of-the-century poems on the daily newspaper, which explore the gap between literary poetry and commercialized mass culture. The strongest of these works demonstrate how poetry’s response to mass culture, by avoiding the twin pitfalls of uncritical naïveté and knee-jerk elitism, could address central contradictions of capitalist modernity. Verses juxtaposing poem and newspaper foreground the problematic
status of individual experience in a culture of information packaged for
the millions. Significantly, none of the works I examine below dismisses
the latter to embrace the former. They all take seriously the need for
sources of information and opinion capable of reaching the vast literate
populace of modernity, and refuse to treat poetry as a vehicle of rear-
guard individualism that warrants ignoring that population.

Like her verses of the urban street, Edith M. Thomas’s “Cries of the
Newsboy” (1893) explores the modern city’s capacity to voice collective
human experience. The newspaper is a key symbolic arena for this
theme, since those who package and disseminate papers seek to shape
the nebulous yet powerful force of “public opinion,” which exists some-
where in the space between individual and collective consciousness.
Here Thomas develops these themes in surprising and whimsical fash-
ion, through the disembodied cries of newsboys hawking papers, heard
from afar:

Cruel the roar of the city ways,
    Where life on a myriad errands whirled;
But suddenly up from the jarring maze,
    Like a rocket thrown high, went a ringing cry:
    “New-Sunny-World! New-Sunny World!” (In Sunshine Land 103)

As the poem’s epigraph indicates, the boy is selling the *News, Sun,*
and *World.* In the lines that follow, aware that her misprision could
become mere sentimentality, Thomas addresses its implications directly:
“There wasn’t a glimpse of the sun anywhere” in an urban landscape of
“grim” light and “leaden” air. It’s not a new sunny world most of all, one
may imagine, for the newsboys themselves, at the bottom of the eco-
nomic ladder, beset by media corporations that seek not just to exploit
their labor, but also to mold them into docile citizens who will go where
newspapers take them and no further. But Thomas is unwilling to
reduce them to passive victims of economic injustice. Instead she wants
to explore what the newsboys’ presence means to the consciousness of
the modern city. If the boys lack agency over most aspects of their lives,
Thomas still assigns them an active role in the city that allows physical
mobility, an outlet for their energies, and a sense of purpose. Who’s to
say that starting as newsboys, immigrants who arrived with nothing
could not have chased and found some American dream, as Thomas had
found her dream of an independent life in the city? In the second section
the poet hears another sales cry as “morning papers,” inflected by the
“old-world accent” of immigrants, and converts it into “morning pipers,
piping blithe and clear / From some imagined sward or thicket near” (104–5). Their cries signify “wonderful news” to her, but not because of anything in the papers they sell. She knows that the “new sunny world” that these morning pipers offer is imaginary or even false, that there are no “sweet country sights and sounds” near. They are good news to her instead because of the ebullience of their sellers, who embody the inextinguishable high spirits of youth and the stimulating energies of the city. Shaping their surroundings with penetrating “rocket cry” and “shrill alarm” that cut through the sodden air and “murky streets,” clarifying the “maze” of city life, they evoke future prospects of a better world.

In the 1895 volume *Violets and Other Poems*, the twenty-year-old Alice Ruth Moore (1875–1935), who would later write under the compound surnames of two of her husbands as Alice Dunbar-Nelson, published a major poem of the era, “Legend of the Newspaper.” The poet approaches her subject in a mock-legendary tone and trochaic tetrameter line that gently parody the central mythic epic of the American genteel canon, Longfellow’s *The Song of Hiawatha* (1856), whose first lines are “Should you ask me, whence these stories? / Whence these legends and traditions . . . ?” (3). Here is the full text of “Legend of the Newspaper”:

Poets sing and fables tell us,
Or old folk lore whispers low,
Of the origin of all things,
Of the spring from whence they came,
Kalevala, old and hoary,
Aeneid, Iliad, Aesop, too,
All are filled with strange quaint legends,
All replete with ancient tales,—
How love came, and how old earth,
Freed from chaos, grew for us,
To a green and wondrous spheroid,
To a home for things alive;
How fierce fire and iron cold,
How the snow and how the frost,—
All these things the old rhymes tell,
Yet they ne’er sang of the beginning,
Of that great unbreathing angel,
That soul without a haven,
Of that gracious Lady Bountiful,
Yet they ne’er told how it came here;
Ne’er said why we read it daily,
Nor did they even let us guess why
We were left to tell the tale.
Came one day into the wood-land,
Muckintosh, the great and mighty,
Muckintosh, the famous thinker,
He whose brain was all his weapons,
As against his rival’s soarings,
High unto the vaulted heavens,
Low adown the swarded earth,
Rolled he round his gaze all steely,
And his voice like music prayed:
“Oh Creator, wondrous Spirit,
Thou who has for us descended
In the guise of knowledge mighty,
And our brains with truth o’er-flooded;
In the greatness of thy wisdom,
Knowest not our limitations?
Wondrous thoughts have we, thy servants,
Wondrous things we see each day,
Yet we cannot tell our brethren,
Yet we cannot let them know,
Of our doings and our happenings,
Should they be parted from us?
Help us, oh, Thou Wise Creator,
From the fulness of thy wisdom
Show us how to spread our knowledge,
And disseminate our actions,
Such as we find worthy, truly[“]
Quick the answer came from heaven;
Muckintosh, the famous thinker
Muckintosh, the great and mighty,
Felt a trembling, felt a quaking,
Saw the earth about him open,
Saw the iron from the mountains
Form a quaint and queer machine,
Saw the lead from out the lead mines
Roll into small lettered forms,
Saw the fibres from the flax-plant,
Spread into great sheets of paper,
Saw the ink galls from the green trees,
Crushed upon the leaden forms;
Muckintosh, the famous thinker
Muckintosh, the great and mighty,
Felt a trembling, felt a quaking,
Saw the earth about him open,
Saw the flame and sulphur smoking,
Came the printer’s little devil,
Far from distant lands the printer,
Man of unions, man of cuss-words,
From the depths of sooty blackness,
Came the towel of the printer;
Many things that Muckintosh saw,—
Galleys, type, and leads and rules,
Presses, press-men, quoins and spaces,
Quads and caps and lower cases.
But to Muckintosh bewildered,
All this passed in a dream,
Till within his nervous hand,
Hand with joy and fear a-quaking,
Muckintosh, the great and mighty,
Muckintosh, the famous thinker,
Held the first of our newspapers. (72–75)

In Dunbar-Nelson’s satiric conceit, epics of ancient cultures—Iliad, Aeneid, Kalevala—are ludicrously, anachronistically faulted because they don’t account for the newspaper, characterized as the “Lady Bountiful,” the source of modern endeavor and record of modern experience, in need of its own myth of origin. This farcical celebration lampoons the antihistorical attitude encouraged by the newspaper’s relentless ephemerality—a new issue coming each day, drowning us in ink, swamping our ability to make structural links between present events and past causes. Yet, declaring that poets must “sing . . . / Of the origin of all things,” the work also challenges the generic conventions that have ruled such defining features of modernity as the newspaper out of poetry’s purview. So although the poet does not actually blame ancient mythic texts for neglecting the newspaper’s origins, the parodic echoes of Hiawatha, which does indeed substitute “strange quaint legends, / All replete with ancient tales” for serious understanding of Native American civilization, suggest her unwillingness to let more recent poetry off the hook as easily. Hence her attempt to create a modern “legend” that balances facetious mythical spectacle against serious exploration of
emerging mass-market systems of information. This balance is embodied in the poem through the profoundly ambiguous figure of Muckintosh, who is both a Promethean disseminator of the “flame” of human knowledge and a venal paper baron raking through the muck and “sulphur” of modern experience to aggrandize himself into “Muckintosh, the famous thinker,” “the great and mighty.” (One thinks of Hearst and Pulitzer in the poem’s time, of Charles Foster Kane, and in our own day, of Ted Turner.) Though Dunbar-Nelson gives us good reason to suspect the motives of Muckintosh’s “prayer,” she also suggests that the needs it evokes are very real: to organize the proliferating information that threatens to “o’er-flood our brains,” and to share it with others who are otherwise “parted from us” through the fragmentation of modern knowledge.26

The poem’s deep engagement with modernity emerges in its willingness to consider that despite all shortcomings, the newspaper may have value in addressing those real needs. The narration’s preposterous mythic claims of iron and lead leaping from their mines straight into the elaborate shapes of printing equipment again lampoon the self-importance of the press, but at the same time, the technological detail in which the industry is rendered refuses to dismiss the newspaper as merely the vulgar target of an elitist critique. The poet is clearly interested in the material processes of newspaper production and assumes that her readers ought to be as well.

The infernal epos surrounding these technologies of modernity, which playfully evokes the palace of Hell in Paradise Lost, also takes a more contemporary social turn, as from this pit of sulfurous earth leaps not some satanic figure but the young “printer’s devil,” joined by the immigrant printer. They signal the emergence of a heterogeneous working class of many ethnicities, identified with a vigorous labor movement that provides a collectivist counterforce to the oligarchic capitalism that Muckintosh signifies. Thus Muckintosh might well feel “bewildered” and “nervous,” obscurely aware that the forces he has unleashed might not be fully controllable after all, might include “men of unions,” “men of cuss-words,” whose ability to master the technological and organizational demands of modernity will eventually convey them “From the depths” of subsistence labor toward full agency within a culture of information. The poem leaves us with two crucial questions about the value of modern cultural forms: might newspapers play a role in challenging capitalist oligarchy in spite of the Muckintoshes who own them? And if poetry can take account of the newspaper, might it also have a role?
Like Dunbar-Nelson, Stephen Crane spent much of his brief adult life as a newspaper journalist, working for both Hearst and Pulitzer in the same month in 1898 (Wertheim and Sorrentino 265). Some very fine recent scholarship, culminating in Bill Brown’s fascinating study *The Material Unconscious*, has shown that Crane’s prose engages in continuous and intricate dialogue with contemporary mass culture. In a historicist project seeking to interrogate long-unexamined assumptions about cultural value, Crane’s centrality is not surprising, since more than any other canonical American author, he challenges traditional distinctions “between the decent art of high culture and the vulgar art of the dime novel and the slums,” as Keith Gandal puts it (74). Still, none of this historicist work has dealt in a serious way with Crane’s poetry, which clings precariously to the margins of his canon. Yet his verse is not dead to historicist approaches. In fact, it is studded with tantalizing evocations of contemporary mass culture: newspapers and journalism, public “opinion,” sports, and “strange pedlers” transacting business in a recognizably modern world defined by heavily mediated and commodified forms of experience. Though sometimes responding to commercialized mass culture with skepticism or suspicion, Crane’s verses refuse to pretend lofty ignorance of its significance as the era’s genteel strictures dictated poetry ought to do. Collectively his poems assert that American verse writing has a key role in comprehending modern cultural conditions that sustain discourses as diverse as the lyric poem and the daily newspaper.

To suggest how Crane’s poems can be seen not as gnomic existential platitudes but as vivid responses to contemporary mass culture, we can look again at some of the many poems using the wanderer topos. Earlier I proposed that Crane’s wanderers are seldom truly alone but usually undergo some sort of socially resonant encounter. Several such poems feature cryptic economic encounters between wandering figures pitching some commodity to one another. In the verse that begins “There was one I met upon the road, / Who looked at me with kind eyes” (1894), the speaker is a wandering peddler, asked by the one with kind eyes, “‘Show me your wares.’” In the ensuing exchange, a nightmarish one for the aspiring purveyor of cultural wares, the wanderer-peddler-poet becomes an object of pity and moral condemnation:

And this I did,
Holding forth one.
He said, ‘It is a sin.’
Then held I forth another;
He said, 'It is a sin.'
Then held I forth another;
He said, 'It is a sin.'
And so to the end;
Always he said, 'It is a sin.'
And, finally, I cried out,
'But I have none other.'
Then did he look at me
With kinder eyes.
'Poor soul,' he said. (Black Riders 34)

The fourfold repetition of the condemnatory refrain “It is a sin” pointedly exceeds the conventional narrative structure of parables and jokes in which the third element brings a moral or punch line. This structural excess marks the figure as capable only of reflexive condemnation, and for Crane, deligitimizes his moral or cultural authority. His “kind eyes” get even kinder as more moral condemnation issues from them, suggesting his kinship with those repressively benevolent icons (righteous pictures) of moralistic genteel culture whose influence still dominated American poetry.28 We have seen Crane make this sort of critique of genteel culture before, but here he has thematized it as a primal scene of modern artistic creation: the individual “on the road,” with no ready audience or intrinsic authority, forlornly hoping to interest whoever comes along in his or her wares.

In “I stood upon a highway” (1894), Crane takes this primal scene of cultural modernity a step further, blurring sellers with customers. Here the wandering speaker on the highway is approached by equally itinerant salesmen (“Many strange pedlers”) hawking versions of God, each making his own curious “gestures” and holding forth “little images,” saying, “This is my pattern of God. / Now this is the God I prefer”:

I said, “Hence!
Leave me with mine own,
And take you yours away;
I can’t buy of your patterns of God,
The little gods you may rightly prefer.” (Black Riders 35)

The speaker’s refusal of commerce implies the poet’s rejection of the hairsplitting sectarianism of organized religion. But by conceding that the peddlers “may rightly prefer” their own patterns to anyone else’s, Crane elevates a simple critique of religion into an ironic affirmation of
the unalienable right of individuals—not only the speaker, but the peddlers—to choose their own “patterns,” “gestures,” and “images.” One thing this refusal of commerce does not imply, however, is that cultural and religious commodities, “patterns of God,” cannot be bought and sold. In fact, the only stated reason he “can’t buy” their patterns is because he already has his “own”—a satiric gambit that foreshadows the reply of the demoniac French knight to King Arthur’s invitation to join the quest for Monty Python’s holy grail (“We’ve already got one!”). Noting the rhetorical symmetry of this poem’s speaker with the peddlers, we may suspect him of being a strange peddler himself, only temporarily off duty. We may also recall that “images” is the term that Crane paired with “pictures” to evoke the repressive icons of established culture in *The Black Riders*. Then as now, the selling of images and pictures typifies the cultural commerce of modernity. Given how much of Crane’s own life was devoted to producing fungible journalistic “pictures,” we can hardly doubt that he intends to satirize a futile genteel elite that clings to a dusty and shrinking corner of the marketplace, still refusing to acknowledge its own commodified character.

In other poems, Crane uses scenes of mass commercial culture to reimagine poetry as a vehicle of oppositional social commentary—though his conclusions are not always optimistic. “There was a crimson clash of war” (1894), although written years before the Spanish-American War, presciently imagines its effect on American public discourse: “One who understood not” the reasons for going to war asks “Why is this?”—evoking poetry’s capacity to question authoritative versions of the political world (*Black Riders* 15). This questioner is met not by a cosmic void of silence, or even by a single hegemonic official story, both comprehensible answers of sorts, but by “a million,” all striving to answer him simultaneously, producing “such an intricate clamor of tongues / That still the reason was not” (15). Crane here dramatizes the same primal paradox of modernity that Dunbar-Nelson sketches in her legend. Distanced from direct access to the world’s crimson clashes, we receive instead a fragmented overload of information that can destroy our ability to evaluate or oppose them, because no one can even understand what anyone else means to say. Dunbar-Nelson’s poem is more sanguine about the role of mass print media in this process, positing that the newspaper might have a role in reintegrating this informational babel, whereas Crane here seems doubtful that the mass media will do anything but exacerbate it.

As this poem suggests, Crane is finally less interested in cosmic isolation or existential loneliness than in dramatizing the experience of living
in a frantic commodity culture. In the six-line verse “There came whisperings in the winds” (1894), unidentifiable and uncountable “Little voices called in the darkness” without end; but exasperatingly, all the voices ever say is “Good-bye! Good-bye!” (Black Riders 46). In the two middle lines, this speaker, like Robinson’s in “The Pity of the Leaves,” seeks communion with these voices but fails utterly: “Then I stretched forth my arms. / 'No—no—.'” The poem’s last four lines merely repeat the first four verbatim, reiterating the mechanical and inaccessible character of all these good-byes. In “A slant of sun on dull brown walls” (1895), the world sends “Toward God a mighty hymn” that appears initially to evoke a Whitmanesque all-inclusiveness of experience (“A song of collisions and cries, / Rumbling wheels, hoof-beats, bells, / Welcomes, farewells, love-calls, final moans, / Voices of joy, idiocy, warning, despair”). But this soon degenerates into a giddy cacophony in which every utterance becomes the same futile existential lamentation, which Crane lampoons with fierce brio:

The unknown appeals of brutes,
The chanting of flowers,
The screams of cut trees,
The senseless babble of hens and wise men—
A cluttered incoherency that says at the stars:
“O God, save us!” (War Is Kind 42)

For Crane, this futility is not an inevitable consequence of the activity of writing, as occasional more affirmative poems such as “There was a man with tongue of wood” (1894) suggest. This poem anticipates a twentieth-century thematics of audience in which if even a single listener can perceive a distinct artistic truth (“But there was one who heard / The clip-clapper of this tongue of wood, / And knew what the man / Wished to sing”), then even a “lamentable” song could be judged valuable (“And with that the singer was content”) (War Is Kind 44). But another poem counters by proposing that in a society so large, literate, and heterogeneous that even elite forms such as poetry were produced in overwhelming profusion, genuine communication had become next to impossible:

Yes, I have a thousand tongues,
And nine and ninety-nine lie.
Though I strive to use the one,
It will make no melody at my will,
But is dead in my mouth. (Black Riders 4)

Even if the poet finds his one true tongue out of the thousand, the resulting writing will remain at the level of neglected commodity, lying indistinguishably among its infinite likenesses, as in the 1897 poem that begins:

A little ink more or less!
It surely can’t matter?
Even the sky and the opulent sea,
The plains and the hills, aloof,
Hear the uproar of all these books.
But it is only a little ink more or less. (War Is Kind 21)

The uncontrollable proliferation of “all these books” of modernity produces a condition of uproar and fragmentation in which any one book can hardly command value. Thus even for the poet most intensely engaged with turn-of-the-century modernity, the very concept of “mass culture” threatens to become a contradiction in terms, since the unlimited reproducibility of cultural activity seem to vitiate the coherence and communicability that its ideologists claim for it.

But this anxious frustration, while important, is only part of Crane’s response to the mass-market culture of modernity. Just after arriving at these morose insights, “A little ink more or less” makes an intriguing turn in which immersion in the incoherent “uproar” of modern culture creates a space for energetic opposition. The turn begins, as if responding to an offstage voice of unwelcome authority, “What? / You define me God with these trinkets?” (War Is Kind 22). Again we see Crane’s refusal to accept dictation that triggered the violent blasphemy of “You tell me this is God?” As soon as anyone—even his more defeatist alter ego of the poem’s first part—tries to define him reductively against some heavy figure of authority, Crane responds with sardonic fury:

Can my misery meal on an ordered walking
Of surpliced numskulls?
And a fanfare of lights?
Or even upon the measured pulpiting
Of the familiar false and true?
Is this God?
Where, then, is hell?
Show me some bastard mushroom
Sprung from a pollution of blood.
It is better.

Where is God? (22)

Echoing Huck Finn’s willingness to go to hell if staying with God means accepting the godliness of social institutions, Crane stands his ground and finally achieves a blasphemous self-affirmation, defiantly asking “Where is God?”—as if by staring down the godly and accepting hell instead, he has rid himself of God’s oppressive presence. The phrase “fanfare of lights” can refer equally to the showier rituals of organized religion and to the spectacular imagery of new mass amusements with which Crane was intimately familiar. This ambiguity suggests that the poet is still not confident of mass culture’s role in his struggle toward self-definition. Still, his avant-garde energy is catalyzed by realizing that “uproar” and incoherence are defining qualities of modern experience. After all, the surpliced numskulls are the ones defined and limited by their “ordered walking”; it follows that only by accepting and plunging into the very disorder that the text initially decries can the modern poet survive as an individual personality. In the face of “all these books” that threaten to submerge creative identity in a wash of generic sameness, the only kind of self-definition that Crane can accept involves total commitment to differentiation, and so he finds even a hellish recipe of “some bastard mushroom / Sprung from a pollution of blood” to be “better” than God’s measured pulpiting. The efflorescences of Crane’s avant-garde poet of modernity may well be off-color, unwholesome, even polluted, but they are without doubt his own bastards, expressing and nourishing his own misery.

Crane achieves this avant-garde sensibility not by constructing the “world elsewhere” of classic high modernism, but by consistently engaging the messy world of modernity. His enactment of primal modern encounters is pressed furthest in two poems that develop a direct (if never transparent) commentary on mass culture’s quintessential symbolic form, the newspaper. The briefer of these reads:

In a lonely place,
I encountered a sage
Who sat, all still,
Regarding a newspaper.
He accosted me:
’Sir, what is this?’
Then I saw that I was greater,
Ay, greater than this sage.
I answered him at once,
‘Old, old man, it is the wisdom of the age.’
The sage looked upon me with admiration. (Black Riders 12)

This verse aims its barbs equally at the head-in-the-sand mentality of genteel culture, exemplified by the unworldly “sage” who has no understanding of the newspaper’s significance, and at the philistine speaker whose smug confidence (“I answered him at once”) reveals a ludicrously uncritical acceptance of the newspaper as the “wisdom of the age.” Of course Crane is also playfully critiquing his own deep involvement in the world of newspapers, but like Dunbar-Nelson, he knows that the vexed question of the newspaper’s meanings cannot be adequately answered by simplistic disdain.

The poem beginning “A newspaper is a collection of half-injustices” (c. 1894) is Crane’s nimblest elaboration on the ambiguous significance of modern mass culture and the newspaper as its emblem (“a newspaper is a symbol,” he eventually announces). Here is the text in full:

A newspaper is a collection of half-injustices
Which, bawled by boys from mile to mile,
Spreads its curious opinion
To a million merciful and sneering men,
Where families cuddle the joys of the fireside
When spurred by tale of dire lone agony.
A newspaper is a court
Where every one is kindly and unfairly tried
By a squalor of honest men.
A newspaper is a market
Where wisdom sells its freedom
And melons are crowned by the crowd.
A newspaper is a game
Where his error scores the player victory
While another’s skill wins death.
A newspaper is a symbol;
It is feckless life’s chronicle,
A collection of loud tales
Concentrating eternal stupidities,
That in remote ages lived unhaltered,
Roaming through a fenceless world.

*(Poems and Literary Remains* 52)

The poem presents a series of nouns laden with paradoxical adjectives and adverbs: the million men are both merciful and sneering; the jury of readers, at once squalid and honest, judge everyone kindly but unfairly; in the economy (“market”) of the newspaper, wisdom “sells its freedom” so that it may be disseminated more widely. Crane makes an acute analysis of modern cultural value in which families now use the newspaper to “cuddle the joys of the fireside / When spurred by tale of dire lone agony.” Genteel poetry was designed to enhance familial joy by offering idealized models of behavior and experience that readers might aspire to re-create around their own fires. Nearly a century before Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* explores the theme with great wit, Crane demonstrates that in mass-culture discourses, the relationship between reader and subject matter has already been inverted into a spectatorial hunger for vicarious experience so extreme that few could possibly want to emulate it. Thus the newspaper, like radio and television after it, contributes to a suburbanization of information reinforcing what Berman calls the “modernized pastoral” of twentieth-century American life (168), in which domestic joy is measured by one’s distance from what one reads, hears, or watches.

However, Crane cannot fairly advance this critique (and it is a critique) of the newspaper’s modeling and valuing of modern experience without acknowledging that as a daredevil journalist sending back these same tales of agony, he himself was inextricably implicated in the emergence of a spectatorial mass culture. The poem makes this acknowledgment in two ways that demonstrate poetry’s embeddedness in modern culture and its capacity for incisive commentary on that culture. Crane signals this self-critique by strategically adopting the accelerated urgency of the newspaper’s linguistic conventions. The only plausible syntactic models for the oddly clipped phrase “tale of dire lone agony” are either the telegraph by which journalists relayed their information, or the newspaper headline itself.30 Indeed, the poem’s entire structure is drawn from the newspaper’s distinctive sectional form: first there is the sensational front-page headline; then the more sober section of court reporting “where everyone is kindly and unfairly tried” by a million readers; a business (“market”) section; a feature section where “melons”—the frivolous celebrities of the moment?—are “crowned by the crowd”; and, as we will see below, there is a sports section. Crane’s will-
ingness to structure his poem after the object of its critique provides another instance of his interest in multiple levels of irony, and signals that the critique, while necessary, is not a sufficient account of the newspaper’s relation to modernity, or of poetry’s relation to the newspaper.

The irreducible heterogeneity and ambiguity Crane associates with the newspaper are theorized by the poem’s first line. The phrase “a collection of half-injustices” does not mean that half the newspaper’s items are true and half false, but that every item functions as half injustice, therefore half justice. Crane here anticipates the poststructuralist premise that the character of knowledge, justice, truth, or what you will, is structurally transformed by its medium of transmission into a textuality whose relation to truth-value is murky at best (but not necessarily invalid, since all textuality must be similarly compromised). This exploration of ambivalence intensifies in the superbly calibrated final lines, where the newspaper becomes “feckless life’s chronicle”—hardly a complimentary description, yet if life is indeed feckless, the newspaper can be seen as its accurate chronicle. Likewise, the “stupidities” reproduced by the newspaper are indeed stupid, but to a sensibility as dark and skeptical as Crane’s, they may well represent the “eternal” elements of human nature. When he wrote this poem Crane still had ahead of him the corrosively disillusioning experience of seeing the United States in a Hearst-kindled war against a pathetically unequal opponent. But its last lines reveal his already acute awareness of the power of modern mass culture to “concentrate” human stupidities, once diffused and largely unknown outside local circles, into a critical mass capable of incendiary results. And yet, this critique is not the whole story either. The muckraking journalism of the 1890s had produced some serious social benefits, as Crane also knew from personal experience. In gathering the record of human stupidities into one place and exposing them as relentlessly as possible, the newspaper might “halter” them from roaming freely through the world.

Perhaps the most interesting of the poem’s many paradoxes is the oblique metaphor of newspaper as “game,” which evokes Crane’s personal investment in athletics as college baseball player and then as sports reporter, as well as the newspaper’s role in the construction of sports as central to modern spectatorial culture. Yet this is by no means an unambiguous site of hegemonic oppression either. In a February 1896 letter, Crane remarked, “I see also that they are beginning to charge me with having played base ball. I am rather more proud of my base ball ability than of some other things” (Wertheim and Sorrentino 169). Since those “charging” him of having played baseball were undoubtedly the
same critics deploring his sordid fiction and formless verse, Crane here
defiantly embraces sports as a locus of opposition to codes of normative
behavior.

The newspaper is an important form of spectatorial culture, because,
as Trachtenberg points out, it provides and valorizes “surrogate experi-
ence” that can increase the separations it purports to overcome (125). If
the newspaper is game, it is game as box score. At some points in his fine
analysis, however, Trachtenberg reifies the contrast between experience
and information, between “active” participation and “passive” specta-
torship (122), into a binary that does inadequate justice to the variety
and fluidity of spectatorial experience. Spectators at theatrical produc-
tions and sporting events do engage in forms of participation, if not in
the show or game, then in the spectacle itself. Usually they do not inter-
act directly with the players, but they do interact with other spectators,
generating a variety of emotional, imaginative, and social meanings (as
William Carlos Williams’s 1923 masterpiece “At the Ball Game” will
explore).

Furthermore, the disjunction between undergoing an “actual” expe-
rience and perusing a discursive account of that experience in a newspa-
per may not be such a clear-cut opposition of activity and passivity. In
fact, as diehard baseball fans know, the box score is a fascinating discurs-
ive statement because it can be used to generate infinitely many imagi-
native versions of the game.33 To substitute a discursive account of a

In his book on Crane, Bill Brown describes a problematic that is cen-
ten to accounts of the political significance of mass, popular, and recrea-
tional cultures, one typically articulated through theories of play:
“though play has a history of exceeding theoretical structure in (or as)
the margin of unpredictability, the dynamics of capital have a history of
converting any such excess into surplus value. Still, if we recognize cap-
ital itself as an incomplete (permanently developing) system, then we
can understand its recreational pleasures as strongly marking, while
masking, the paradoxes of capitalist life” (11–12). The newspaper is an undoubted component of a capitalist economics of culture. Must it (like forms of organized sport and, for that matter, all of mass culture) therefore function only as an instrument of hegemonic oppression? Or in its voracious, one might say excessive, drive to collect and disseminate all kinds of information, might the newspaper possess enough unpredictability, enough play, to function as a site of creative resistance to the hegemonic? If, as Brown concludes, “the question whether the transformative potential of play lingers in the field of commercial pleasure remains a question” (13), these works of Crane and Dunbar-Nelson richly demonstrate that turn-of-the-century poets made it their business to play with such questions.

Both “Legend of the Newspaper” and “A newspaper is a collection of half-injustices” value the newspaper’s ability to gather information from the world into new forms that can then be deployed to influence that world. I see this refractive trope as mirroring these texts’ own achievement in thematizing the value of poetry in the modern scene. They demonstrate that poetry can gather the multifarious elements of the newspaper’s significance into a structurally intensified meditation that is more complex and insightful than the newspaper is capable of producing about itself. These texts respond to poetry’s turn-of-the-century crisis neither by capitulating to the reductive instrumentalism of mass culture, nor by fleeing into the phantom purity of genteel culture’s drafty house on the hill. They invite us to reread the era’s apparent expressions of futility, such as Crane’s “A little ink more or less—/ It surely can’t matter,” as articulating productive incoherencies of American modernity. True, poetry is so submerged in the seas of ink generated by newspapers, novels, and other forms of mass culture that its presence is often barely detectable. Yet, these verses posit, modernity may be sufficiently heterogeneous and self-contradictory that poetry’s “little ink more” might continue to perform valuable social functions that confound the captains of capital. In arguing that various cultural forms constitute a society’s “material unconscious,” Brown proposes that literature, “in its conscious and unconscious relation to other recreational forms, discloses their liberating and restricting contradictions” (13)—and I would add, its own as well. If we accept this characterization even provisionally, it follows that the poetic ink of the 1890s and 1900s, invisible for so long, deserves to be reread as articulating the seismic shifts of cultural value that shaped modern American experience.