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Symmetrical Womanhood: Poetry in the Woman's Building Library

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Abstract

Late-nineteenth-century women poets shed midcentury sentimentality unevenly and at some cost, losing a sense of privacy, a (Christian) frame of reference, and an "imagined community" of women who shared their worldview. They also gained more public, secular, and professional sources of identity. The exact nature of this postsentimental self was unclear. Postsentimental poets often wrote in the "genteel tradition," which trumpeted eternal truth and beauty while working from a position of subjective instability. Ultimately, their verses must be seen as powerfully fluid and transitional, registering (like the Woman's Building Library) women's struggle to inhabit more public forms of authority.

Article Text

The Court of Honor at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition was dominated by a perfectly proportioned, sixty-five-foot-tall woman: the *Statue of the Republic*, with her arms held aloft, echoed "the almost perfectly symmetrical arrangement of the architecture" around her.¹ The most au courant American poets of the 1880s and 1890s were also in thrall to principles of balance and symmetry, seeking to perfect their mastery of established forms. Readers wanted, and rewarded, conventional themes and predictable prosody, just as visitors to the fair wanted to see spectacular renderings of familiar neo-Renaissance design principles.² Machines (such as the Ferris wheel) could provide the shock of the new, but art was supposed to gesture toward eternal

Arnoldian values of sweetness and light. Thus, inspired by a telescope, Lillian Rozell Messenger wrote in "Star Depths" (1891):

Ah! who may limits yet define
Of large, or great, or small,
Since the Unseen is the Real, Divine,
And the Symbol is key to all?
Who measure endless or finite being
When spirit through riven veils is seeing
Springs of life, beyond eye of sense,
That flash to Mind's omnipotence?
Forever there stealeth on, apace,
The rhythm of law and truth: all space
Is rhythmic-bound, and music-fed.
The Ideal is spirit-robe of fact
Seen or not, that clothes all things!¹

Messenger's professed secular faith in an eternal "rhythm of law and truth" is typical of many late-nineteenth-century poets. This vagueness (what law? what truth?) hints at the transitional quality of much late-nineteenth-century poetry, which is no longer grounded in antebellum assumptions but is not yet fully modern either. The contemporary poetry in the Woman's Building Library, poetry published in the 1880s and 1890s, registers-like the fair itself-the struggles between the residual norms of midcentury sentimentalism, the dominant ideologies of late-nineteenth-century genteel idealism, and the barely emergent innovations of modernism.

To trace these uneven developments and their effects on female subjectivity I examined all of the American poetry that was identified as such in the Woman's Building Library catalog and that was published after 1882, that is, in the ten years leading up to the fair. Some poets (Cornelia Huntington, b. 1805) were ending their careers in the 1890s, while others (Ruth Ward Kahn, b. 1872) were just beginning. But taken together, these ninety-plus volumes are a fair sample of what was acceptable "contemporary" poetry in 1893. Paula Bennett has argued that nineteenth-century women's poetry was a form of public speech, even when framed within the intrasubjective lyric mode.⁴ Taking her point, I read each of these volumes as a bid for public agency. Through their collecting and cataloging efforts the library organizers were constructing-at least theoretically-a public sphere for women poets. However, the library's actual historical functions as a public sphere were limited, since the books were locked up under glass and not really in conversation with one another or with readers. Moreover, as I read the volumes-bringing them into belated dialogue with one another? an even more deep-seated problem emerged: the idea of a public sphere presupposes the existence of individuated, authoritative speakers.⁵ And yet these qualities-individuality and authority-are only faintly present in the late-nineteenth-century female lyric voice. Because it is so dependent on established forms, American poetry of this period perhaps more so than fiction or other forms of writing-shows the external and internal obstacles that women writers faced in their bid to establish themselves as legitimate authors.

Issues of individuality and authority also arose among the Board of Lady Managers as they organized the Woman's Building. If women's art were displayed in its own building, would this "separate sphere" automatically undermine its authority as art? Conversely, if women's art were integrated with men's art, would it gain more main stream respect, or would it just become invisible? Bertha Palmer describes the conflict in "The Growth of the Woman's Building":

Upon the assembling of the Board of Lady Managers in Chicago, we found that the most important duty to be settled was whether the work of women at the Fair should be shown separately or in conjunction with the work of men under general classifications. This was a burning question, for upon this subject

every one had strong opinions, and there was great feeling on both sides, those who favored a separate exhibit believing that the extent and variety of the valuable work done by women would not be appreciated or comprehended unless shown in a building separate from the work of men. On the other hand, the most advanced and radical thinkers felt that the exhibit should not be one of *sex*, but of *merit*, and that the women had reached the point where they could afford to compete side by side with men with a fair chance of success, and that they would not value prizes given upon the sentimental basis of sex.⁶

The poetry of the Woman's Library is as ideologically split as the Woman's Building organizers themselves. While all of the poets agree—implicitly, by the very act of writing—that women should have a voice, their voices are mediated by their conflicting assumptions about the sources and limits of their power. Most, though not all, of the poets fall into one of two categories: they are sentimental poets who construct a lyric voice on the basis of their domestic credibility; or they are genteel idealist poets who reject domesticity to speak the more "universal" language of art for art's sake. These two imperfect choices reflect a broader question that was implicitly posed by almost all of the Woman's Building's programs: what forms of female agency were imaginable-and what forms remained unimaginable in 1893?

Among the participating state committees, the women of Connecticut were given a special award for their carefully chosen book collection.⁷ Harriet Beecher Stowe, the state's most famous writer, was allotted her own cabinet full of translations and editions. But second only to Stowe was Lydia Sigourney (the "Sweet Singer of Hartford"), who was honored by the inclusion in the library of original leaves from her diary and an oil portrait as well as her *Selected Poems* (1838) and *Illustrated Poems* (1849). Like Stowe, Sigourney advanced the ideology of domestic sentimentalism even as she trumpeted the national issues of abolitionism, Native American rights, and temperance. Sigourney's speakers situate themselves within an imaginary private sphere ("imaginary" because her lyrics are, of course, public speech acts), and from within this sphere they engage in moral suasion and emotional appeals. Thus "Erin's Daughter" (1849) addresses the plight of an Irish servant:

Poor Erin's Daughter cross'd the main
In youth's unfolding prime
A lot of servitude to bear
In this our western clime.⁸

Sigourney's poems present compelling types: "the mourning mother," "the suffering girl," "the rapturous nature lover." As types they represent what Jane Tompkins calls nodes within a network, "expressing what lay in the minds of many or most" antebellum poetry readers.⁹ Sentimental conventions led to commercial viability because they reinforced the sentimental consumer's already-firm convictions and validated her sense of self-worth as a socially confined but morally superior Christian woman. Sigourney was popular because she told her antebellum readers what they already knew? about her, and about themselves.

As a literary progenitor Sigourney is a towering but problematic figure in the context of the Woman's Library. On the one hand, her sentimental approach continued to operate as a powerful force within American women's poetry, even in the 1880s and 1890s. If sheer numbers are any indication, then the women poets in the library, right up to 1893, found Sigourney's model of the (feminine, domestic) self worth emulating. But on the other hand, the Woman's Library, the Woman's Building, and the Congress of Women were organized by mostly forward-thinking leaders who sought to contain, or at least to redirect, the cultural power of sentimentalism. Ambivalence toward Sigourney emerges in Laura E. Richards's chapter on literary history in *Art and Handicraft* in the Woman's Building. Richards mentions her almost reluctantly: "Next we must mention Mrs. Sigourney, a writer of wide repute, though little read today. 'Pocahontas and Other Poems,' 'Lays of the Heart,' 'Tales in Prose and Verse,' the very titles breathe of by gone days and thoughts; yet Mrs. Sigourney was a noble and lovely

woman, and one might spend an hour much less profitably than in making or renewing acquaintance with her writings."¹⁰

Richards's attitude toward Sigourney is ironic because so much the poetry in the Woman's Library-poetry published much later than Sigourney's-can also be said to breathe of "bygone days and thoughts." If Richards, the urbane daughter of Julia Ward and Samuel Gridley Howe, could see Sigourney as "bygone," her fellow writers in the provinces had not advanced far enough to perceive the sentimental worldview as anachronistic. As I read the poetry volumes from the library, then, I was reminded of the perils of periodization. The vast majority of poets, right up to 1892, draw on what is generally understood to be the midcentury cult of domesticity. They pose as amateurs (even when aspiring to professional publication); they posit their use-value as noncommercial (even as they pen salable volumes); they seek affiliation through conventional tropes (rather than aspiring to distinction through innovation); and they somewhat paradoxically claim authority through a "common language" of Christian resignation.

Sentimental poetry, as Mary Louise Kete has argued, derives much of its power from its social use-value: it is based on an ethos of sharing gifts and empathizing with sufferers.¹¹ These poets imagine communities through "intimate" public dedications; thus Josephine Pollard's *Vagrant Verses* (1892) is "dedicated to the Home Circle," Louis J. Hall's *Verses* are offered "to my friends quite conscious that there is not a spark of genius in them; but as a genuine expression of deepest feelings," and Sybil D. Wolcott's *Crest on the Wave* (1889) is addressed to "my many too partial friends . . . hoping it may afford them some pleasure, or at least amusement, without the shadow of alloy."¹² This reflects one conceit of sentimental poetry: it is, Kete argues, meant to bind people together through shared emotional responses, making them feel connected. Even a stranger might join Pollard's "Home Circle" or feel like one of Wolcott's "too partial friends." Such dedications seek to give ordinary readers a collective voice rather than voicing the idiosyncrasies of the writer; indeed, in a sentimental poem, the excessive display individual style or slick professionalism is inappropriate or even antisocial.

Prefaces, too, emphasize the "accidental" and unprofessional work of writing. Just as slave-narrative prefaces often sought to authenticate the writer's race, prefaces to sentimental women's poetry books authenticate their authors' gender, stressing their modesty and their essentially private nature. Sentimental prefaces are often either apologies by the women themselves or justifications from their ministers or husbands. Thus Helen M. Hurd begins her *Poetical Works* (1887) by blaming her efforts on involuntary natural talent, well-meaning advisors, and an unspecified illness: "If, in coming before the public, any apologies are needed, there are only these I can offer: At a very early age the gift of arranging ideas in rhythmical measures was manifest, and although my talent may be a limited one, yet I have been advised not to bury it; also a physical deficiency which renders other methods of maintenance quite difficult has influenced me, to some extent."¹³

On a related note, Cora A. M. Davis's *Immortelles* (1887) offers an account by her husband: "This collection of writings of Mrs. Davis was originally made with the intention of printing a volume simply for private distribution among relatives and friends, as a memento of her whom they had lost. In the belief, however, that the poems possess decided merit, it has been decided to place them before the public which will, it is hoped, appreciate them at their true value."¹⁴ Mr. Davis makes the "true value" of his wife's poems clear: they are worthy because they were not originally written for public consumption, and their worthiness has only increased now that the poet is dead and thus not tempted to promote them. They are represented as artifacts from a private, localized, sociable circle of family and friends. *Katydid's Poems* (1887) by Mrs. J. L. McKinney goes one step further by representing its preface as a private letter from one Mr. Williams to Katydid (Mrs. McKinney's nickname) herself. Williams emphasizes her lyrical purity with an image that also connotes undefiled sexuality: "No one can listen to your 'Chirpings' and feel like touching the bough from which you sing with a rude, critical hand; he would rather listen through the live-long night to the end of your song."¹⁵ Katydid, in other words, conforms to

conservative gender stereotypes because she chirps instinctively; her sentimental "naturalness" shields her from the rude public even as she ventures into print.

In lieu of the public stage sentimental poetesses claim not just the private sphere but a whole network of private-or at least personal exchanges. Wolcott's *Crest on the Wave* makes the social functions of her poems explicit in her titles: "Upon Presenting a Thread-Case to a Bachelor," "On the Death of a Beloved Child," "Written in Miss Annie Perry's Album," and "Description of My Cottage at Esculapa Springs."¹⁶ However, the poems themselves are free of concrete identifying details: women are like flowers, children become angels, and mornings are either sunny or stormy, but not otherwise distinguished. "Written in Miss Annie Perry's Album" is not, in this case, actually handwritten in an album; but as it is reprinted it weds emotional intimacy (generated by the supposed social function of the poem-as album inscription) to deliberately generic language:

Annie, dearest, shall I bring
Praises from the rosy Spring,
Fragrance from the lily white,
Purity from dewdrops bright;
Freshness from the breathing morn,
Of the dewy starlight born

.....

Bring these treasures, and still more,
From all nature's beauteous store,
Lay them prostrate at thy feet,
Of thyself fair emblems meet?¹⁷

We learn nothing about Annie's actual appearance, and this is precisely the point. Wolcott is providing her readers with a usable album verse that can be recopied using almost any (white) woman's name. The verse's generic quality is the key to its success in the faux gift economy: because it is vague, it can circulate; Wolcott's lines could be almost any woman's.

Annie's pure white body also reflects the ideology of separate spheres that energizes much sentimental poetry. When women poets analyze gender roles in this mode they tend to (sometimes angrily) deploy, rather than resist, the idea of women's innate purity. Thus Mrs. M.J. Serrano, writing in *Destiny and Other Poems* (1883), addresses "a husband":

Go, sordid soul! the depths regain,
From whence an angel drew
With pitying hand thy steps in vain,
To thy base nature true.
Too long the whiteness of her robe
Thy touch impure has soiled;
And sufferings, Life's rose that rob
Of bloom, its sweets despoiled.¹⁸

The husband in this poem gets his comeuppance when his wife dies and ascends to heaven, where she is treated much better by the heavenly Father. The constant references to whiteness in sentimental poetry also hint at its attractions: this poetry offers (some of) its readers a racialized, gendered, middle-class identity that distinguishes them not as individuals but as a group.

Even the professionally successful Helen Hunt Jackson seems resigned to separate spheres on earth; her poem "A Woman's Battle," from *Sonnets and Lyrics* (1886), addresses a man as an enemy:

Dear foe, it will be short-our fight
Though lazily thou trains't thy guns;
Fate steers us, -me to deeper night,
And thee to brighter seas and suns;
But thou'lt not dream that I am dying,
As I sail by with colors flying!¹⁹

Here again, the privileged man fails to realize a woman's martyrdom; she "sails by with colors flying" in a ship that resembles her foe's ship—just as Jackson's facile, traditional prosody resembles Longfellow's. Ironically, the ideology of separate spheres did not result in a separate or distinctive style of women's poetry, although women were more drawn to domestic themes. Part of this speaker's despair stems from the fact that her gendered experience seems incommunicable.

I was not surprised to note that sentimental strategies are often (though not always) accompanied by conservative gender politics in the 1880s and 1890s just as in Sigourney's day. If Serrano and Jackson simply assume "separate spheres," Mary Elizabeth Blake, in *Verses Along the Way* (1890), actively enforces a conservative agenda in a poem praising the "women of the revolution":

Not in the Forum's seat and aping the wrangler's course
Did they strive with barbed word the target of right to reach;
But moulding the will of their kind with eloquent, silent force,
Stronger than sting of the pen, louder than clamor of speech,
Honor they taught, and right, and noble courage of truth.²⁰

Instead of aping politicians, women should nurture the nation privately. In case readers do not get the message, Blake also includes a "comical" poem, "To a Very Learned Lady with a Knitting Basket," reminding a girl who can speak Spanish, Gaelic, Latin, and Greek that she should not let it interfere with her housework.

I was surprised, however, at the ways in which some late-nineteenth-century sentimental poets managed to challenge aspects of sentimental ideology. These women's views (like the vigorously partisan newspapers of the period) are all over the map. Emily Thorton Charles's *Lyrical Poems, Songs, Pastorals* (1886), for example, begins predictably enough by establishing the author's authority as a mother; the volume is dedicated to "my son and daughter who, from their infancy, have been my solace and care; whose tender devotion has been my compensation in hours of sorrow and adversity; whose love has been the inspiration to guide my pen to love's expression; to lift my mind to beautiful realms of thought; to wake in depths of feeling, a sympathy for all who love and all who suffer, THIS VOLUME is affectionately inscribed by their mother, THE AUTHOR."²¹ Charles also includes the obligatory preface, half-apologizing for "many crude specimens of verse, lacking in artistic finish." Her lyrics are diverse but overwhelmingly sentimental; they depict personal suffering ("At his feet lies the gem; the casket I lift / Now 'tis heavy with aching pain"),²² celebrate wifely duty ("Softly stirred is womanly duty / To what I should do for my love. / I would halo his life with a beauty / As fair as the heavens above"),²³ and eulogize violent death. Her "An Address To the Body of a Man in the Whirlpool—Niagara" begins: "Ah how ceaseless the rounds which, in darkness and gloom, / Thou hast made in the noisy confines of the tomb."²⁴ Emmeline Grangerford could not have put it more lugubriously.²⁵

And yet, the longest poem in Charles's volume, titled "Women's Sphere," tackles the problem of sentimental resignation that the other verses merely embody. In its opening stanzas a "sympathy for all who love and all who suffer" becomes the basis for a political salvo:

I studied human rights and pondered long
Ere first I lifted up my voice in song,
Whose burden was the weight of woman's wrong;
For sympathy doth help oppressed be strong.²⁶

She then ponders all of the suffering women of history, comparing them to men, whose complacent privilege serves to "the mind encrust / With inactivity and slothful rust." Again women are martyred and pure, while men lazily reap the benefits of manhood. But instead of imagining a triumph for the noble female martyr in heaven, Charles depicts female suffering as a socially constructed pathology:

Men mean us well, but give so little heed
To what is just, or of what we have need;
They cannot know that many a woman's mind
Preys on itself, so closely 'tis confined.

And since the problem is now a politicized form of American nervousness (rather than a version of Christian martyrdom, as Sigourney would assume), it demands a secular solution, albeit one framed in the language of redemption:

We work for our salvation, bravely do
The things we can, and are best fitted to,
And we, in time not very far remote?
In this free land-we women mean to vote.²⁷

Maternal power and feminine suffering remain powerful themes in Charles, but they are supplemented (not supplanted) by an optimism and progressive political vision more characteristic of the late nineteenth century. She gets her authority from sentimental sources (the home, her children, her modesty as a poet) and then uses this authority to dismantle a central tenet of sentimental ideology.

Late-nineteenth-century sentimental poets, then, were scrappy and resourceful, responding to market demands even as they manipulated the conventions that constrained them. Indeed, what is most striking about many of these volumes is not their distinctive qualities as "women's poetry" but rather their protean eclecticism. "Sentimentalism" was never a stable philosophy but rather a cluster of assumptions and practices available to both men and women-and like any cultural practice, its meanings were always in flux. As a practice, sentimentalism could be deployed (e.g., at a child's death) and then cast off (e.g., when celebrating a presidential election). These works reveal not so much "sentimental women" as "sentimental occasions." Such subjective instability was further encouraged by the publishing market in the second half of the nineteenth century. While elite magazines (*Harper's*, *Scribner's*) published established figures such as Helen Hunt Jackson, most women poets in the Woman's Library collection had appeared mainly in local newspapers. The newspaper market did not reward individual "names" and indeed often published poetry unattributed. There was no reason to cultivate an individual voice and every incentive to court an almost bizarre stylistic diversity, churning out poems for particular occasions and audiences. Thus, Marion Manville, in *Over the Divide* (1888), juxtaposes, on a single page, "The Fairy Fudgy-Wudge" and "Goethe." The effect is less one of poetic range than of wild oscillation, but this is the point: these sentimental poets are not aiming for a singular voice or even for a polyvocal chorus. They aim to disappear behind their poems; their authority as poets is a function of their modest and yet marketable status as Everywoman.

Ironically, one of the most distinctive volumes of sentimental poetry in the Woman's Library is Emeline L. Knox's *Gems from the Field of Thought, or a Glimpse into Mute Life* (1891). Her "Song," inscribed "To Little Frankie Simpson, aged four, in reply to 'Why don't you sing?'" follows all of the conventions of sentimental verses:

You ask me why I do not sing,
Alas, I cannot tell;
I cannot train my voice to join
In songs I loved so well.

For sickness came and stole away
The gift that God had given,
I woke to life and consciousness,
But found a voiceless prison.

Those blue eyes looking in my own,
A depth of meaning bring,
Alas, I cannot hear again,
Alas, I cannot sing.²⁸

Despite her deliberately generic language, Knox breaks with sentimental convention almost inadvertently because she derives her authority as a writer from her physiological difference as a deaf-mute woman. Rather than expressing a collective identity based on gender, she reveals (like Emily Dickinson) specific forms of pain that can't be fully shared by others, as when she describes, in "My Wish," how she was told she could never return to school:

They told me that I could not hear,
And then I felt the change;
No well known voice came to my ear,
No well known voice came to my ear,
Forgotten-all seemed strange.²⁹

Knox's poetry draws on sentimental clichés, but it also reveals the limits of sentimentalism by transgressing those limits. After reading her poems readers are forced to confront not their *own pain* but *Emeline Knox's pain* as expressed through her own artless voice. Most sentimental writers speak only in a collective voice, even when they are working through anger or grief: they do not locate their agency in their individual bodies, so they seldom reveal flashes of what Alicia Ostriker has called the *actual I*.³⁰ Knox's damaged body stands in marked contrast to the disembodied voices that populate most sentimental poetry: she confesses her pain, and that pain is disconcertingly personal. Despite its ritualized work of mourning, most sentimental poetry is not confessional in this way; rather, it speaks a language that builds community by suppressing individual voices and obscuring individual bodies.

By 1893, however, the sentimental ethos was under fire even as it remained ubiquitous. The Woman's Building was ringed with perfect angels; one of them even posed with a pelican, symbolizing the sentimental myth that these mother birds will wound themselves to feed blood to their offspring. And yet, the transcript of Bertha Palmer's speech at the opening of the Woman's Building contains a critique of "the sentimentalists," who hold "poetic theories about the sanctity of the home and the refining, elevating influence of women in it." The problem, she asserts, is not the idea of housewifery; indeed, "every woman who is presiding over a happy home is fulfilling her highest and truest function."³¹ However, she points out that many women do not have this option: they are widowed, married to drunkards, or simply poor, and they have to find respectable work.

Sentimental ideology is problematic, Palmer argues, because even as it makes women feel virtuous it masks the truth about their lives, resorting to collective bromides that obscure people's individual situations.

The structure and function of the Woman's Library also works against the assumptions of sentimental poetry, despite its visual homage to Sigourney. The whole point of cataloging the books was to show women's professionalism and efficiency; it demonstrated that they could produce national, public institutions and participate in the wider economy. The community that the Woman's Building imagines is cosmopolitan and professional, not local or amateur. Indeed, the naivete of the typical small-town poetess was a source of amusement to library organizers. Mrs. Gregory, of the Connecticut Women's Club, described her efforts to collect literature for the library:

We put in all the State papers, notices that the Connecticut women were to be represented by their books and writings at the Fair and a few aspiring poetesses warmed to the invitation. One woman sent us some fifty or a hundred verses upon temperance, infant baptism, and true religion, a fireman's duty, etc., etc. She said that she had read in the newspaper that poems from the pens of gifted women of Connecticut were to be published at the expense of the State, for the World's Fair; therefore she sent us these few verses, which had called forth the greatest admiration, and she would like them printed at once in pamphlet form, entitled "Flowers of Thought," and as many copies forwarded to her address as we could conveniently spare.³²

This Connecticut poetess earns Mrs. Gregory's bemused dismissal by misunderstanding the economic and cultural codes of the fair. She is working in a gift economy, writing newspaper verses with mostly local use-values, claiming that she has earned the "greatest admiration" of non professional readers, and mistakenly assuming a kinship (of taste and of true womanhood) with Mrs. Gregory. Mrs. Gregory, on the other hand, can describe this poetess without further comment because her fellow ladies' club members will all recognize (and chuckle at) the type.

Indeed, the Woman's Library contained its own gloss on sentimentalism in the form of a story, "A Poetess," from Mary Wilkins's collection *A New England Nun* (1891). Wilkins's poetess lives in a disappearing New England town and is well known for her "suitable" occasional verses; in one scene a neighbor, Mrs. Caxton, asks her to write some:

"And that brings to mind what I come for. I've been thinkin' about it ever since—our-little Willie—left us." Mrs. Caxton's manner was suddenly full of shamefaced dramatic fervor, her eyes reddened with tears.

Betsey looked up inquiringly, throwing back her curls. Her face took on unconsciously lines of grief so like the other woman's that she looked like her for the minute.

"I thought maybe," Mrs. Caxton went on, tremulously, "you'd be willin' to—write a few lines." "Of course I will, Mis' Caxton. I'll be glad to, if I can do 'em to suit you," Betsey said, tearfully. "I thought jest a few—lines. You could mention how—handsome he was, and good, and I never had to punish him but once in his life, and how pleased he was with his little new suit, and what a sufferer he was, and—how we hope he is at rest—in a better land." sufferer he was, and—how we hope he is at rest—in a better land."

"I'll try, Mis' Caxton, I'll try," sobbed Betsey. The two women wept together for a few minutes.³³

Later, we see Betsey at work: "Betsey in this room, bending over her portfolio, looked like the very genius of gentle, old-fashioned, senti mental poetry. It seemed as if one, given the premises of herself and the room, could easily deduce what she would write, and read with out seeing those lines wherein flowers rhymed sweetly with vernal bowers, home with beyond the tomb, and heaven with even."³⁴

Wilkins's treatment of Betsey Dole is simultaneously condescending and sympathetic; clearly, the poetess does not meet Wilkins's own standards of sophistication, but, just as clearly, she occupies a valuable but declining social role. Without Betsey Dole Mrs. Caxton's grief would have no voice, and in this context literary sophistication seems beside the point.

And yet, in Wilkins's story, Betsey Dole is ultimately silenced by a savvier "professional" poet. He whispers that her poems are in bad taste precisely because they are rooted in the female domestic sphere: they are amateurish, mawkish, and predictable. Wilkins's story, like much regionalist fiction, memorializes a way of life that was fading in the wake of urban consumer capitalism. America was still producing sentimental poetesses, but their role at the fair was limited: behind glass, in an international library, they could not circulate through the local networks that sustained them. No one could cut their poems out with scissors to paste in an album or send to a grieving mother; divorced from its cultural context, sentimental poetry was not so much bad as irrelevant. A sentimental poem at the World's Fair was an artifact from an earlier era, even if it was written in the 1890s. It offered a fixed identity-rooted in amateurism, small-town newspapers, and Protestant Christianity—that was increasingly unattractive to urban progressive women.

The sentimental lyric self enjoyed a special status: she was protected from the public, exalted by her faith, strengthened (like the Lamb of God) by her weakness, and armed with a generic gender identity. Postsentimental women poets experienced the loss of this status along with the waning of religious certainty and the fading of the provincial "island communities" that had provided poetesses like Betsey Dole with readers.³⁵ They also gained—at least theoretically more secular, cosmopolitan, and professional sources of identity. But, as debates among organizers of the Woman's Building reveal, the exact nature of the postsentimental female self (separate but equal? integrated but different?) was far from clear. Postsentimental poets often wrote in what George Santayana dubbed the "genteel tradition," which trumpeted eternal truth and beauty.³⁶ But despite their embrace of such fixed values, genteel idealists (as I will call them) worked from a position of subjective instability that is reflected in their poetic voices: their speakers are, by and large, not sure who they are or who their audience is. They can gesture toward Truth, but they can't pinpoint what the truth is, exactly.

In Freeman's story it is no accident that when the small-town poetess, Betsey Dole, is replaced, she is replaced by an urbane man. In abandoning sentimental ideology all professional women faced some hard questions: if they eschewed time-tested sentimental mores, would they still be feminine? Would they have anything unique to contribute as women? Would they need to become exactly like men? Or would womanhood simply become redundant? Louisa Parsons Hopkins's article "Women in Science," in *Art and Handicraft in the Woman's Building*, offers a genteel idealist's solution, ending with a curious half-question, half-assertion: "May we not assure ourselves that whatever woman's thought and study shall embrace will thereby receive a new inspiration; that she will save science from materialism, and art from a gross realism; that 'the eternal womanly shall lead upward and onward?'"³⁷ The historian Beryl Satter has described the late nineteenth century as an era in which the "New Woman" felt free to express her ambitions but mainly in spiritual (no longer precisely religious) terms:

As a rational, pure, and deeply moral being, the New Woman could help redeem a race and a nation now threatened with moral dissolution. Instead of representing laissez-faire practices that sanctioned selfishness and greed, she stood for social scientific or sociological efforts to rationally understand and altruistically improve society.... Her higher education and growing political involvement in society would accelerate the nation's evolution towards a new era, one crowned by a new model of selfhood. No

longer would humanity be bifurcated into desirous, impassioned, and rational men and spiritual, passive, and irrational women. Rather, both men and women would aspire to a pure, desireless, and rational character. Manly and womanly "spirit" would triumph over masculine "matter" or sensuality. The pure woman, not the desirous man, would be the model of selfhood in a dawning "era of women."³⁸

This "spiritual" worldview underwrites much of the genteel idealist poetry in the Woman's Library. Genteel women assume that they must work to spiritualize the material world (rather than encountering it as a God-given landscape); they must intervene into the public sphere (rather than serving via private moral suasion); they should seek hap (rather than serving via private moral suasion); they should seek happiness on earth (rather than postponing it until after death); they should take themselves seriously as professionals (rather than striking an amateur pose); and they should cultivate a balance of rationality and spirituality (rather than displaying excessive emotions).

In this way women could supposedly remain feminine, spiritualizing the public sphere even as they competed against men. As Mrs. Wesley Smith put it in an address to the Congress of Women entitled "Symmetrical Womanhood," "All things are lovely, when rightly proportioned and nicely adjusted to the eternal balance."³⁹ Genteel poetry was the perfect medium for the New Woman's quest for symmetry, since it was seen as inherently balanced and antimaterialistic. In keeping with this new

emphasis on balance (and reflecting trends imported from England) there was a renewed interest among genteel poets in poetic forms. And in this unsettled "twilight interlude" of American poetry forms were attractive perhaps in part because, as Fredric Jameson has put it, they could invent "imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions."⁴⁰ But of course contradictions remained as the "New Woman" entered the public sphere, and these contradictions are reflected in genteel women's poems-even as their elegant command of form seems to resolve them.

Blanche Fearing captures the newly symmetrical "manly-and womanly" model of the self in "My Angel and I" from her collection *The Sleeping World* (1887):

An angel was born in the soul of my soul;
His forehead shone like a lucent gem
In its setting of golden hair;
I felt his angelic pulses roll;
Like the floor of the new Jerusalem,
His bosom was white and fair.⁴¹

Fearing's vision of a man's soul inside of a woman's soul is initially material, with images of gems, gold, and even a sensual bosom. But by the last stanza the two souls have "broken" into a "marvelous" spiritual orgasm:

My life, when cast on his glistening breast,
Broke into rainbow hues, whose glow
Was marvelous to behold,--
Like a sunbeam drawn from its golden rest,
And dashed on a prism, and shattered so
Into violet, red, and gold.

Even gold is no longer crassly material by the end of the poem, which advances a vision not of separate spheres but of an ecstatic merging of the male and the female. If the imagery remains Christian, the narrative moves straight toward pleasure-even instant gratification instead of detouring through pain toward heavenly

redemption. The instead of detouring through pain toward heavenly redemption. The poet is authorized to speak by a spirit that is inside of herself—unlike a sentimental poetess, who is always careful to credit God. And yet the spirit is gendered male, suggesting that a female "actual I" has yet to be found. Even as the speaker is authorized from within, her identity as a woman is "shattered."

Some genteel poets in the library write about seeking spiritual authority outside of organized religion, resorting to an "immortal principle" that is not quite coterminous with the Christian God. Carlotta Perry's "Our Easter Day," from *Carlotta Perry's Poems* (1888), begins,

When is our Easter? Nay, nor book nor creed
Can tell for you nor me.
Though over all the land, with joyous speed,
The bells ring merrily.⁴²

Perry develops the Easter theme, substituting the self for Christ; her poem ends:

When to the heart's neglected garden-plot,
Comes Joy's awakening ray;
When from some grave that human eyes see not
The stone is rolled away;

When with clear eyes we see the mountain height
Above the mist that bars;
When through the clouds we see the constant light
Of Truth's eternal stars.

Despite its religious language, Perry's "Our Easter Day" is clearly a poem about the loss of faith: it relies on the human eye to reveal the Truth, and the poem's aim is not liberation through death but happiness in life. To achieve this happiness, however, "we" must gaze at "Truth's eternal stars," although the exact Truth that the stars reveal remains unspecified. The poem offers a formal, lyrical "resolution" in its closing stanza, but it can't really answer its own questions: When is our Easter? And who are "we"? A central paradox of genteel idealism—the paradox of "spirituality" without "faith"—remains unresolved, and this leads to continued subjective instability.

Genteel poets often simply gave up on Christian imagery, turning instead to the classical tradition as a source of spiritual authority. In their reliance on the classical world women poets echoed the aesthetic principles of the Woman's Building and the White City. The fair was designed in a neo-Renaissance style according to strict guidelines that assured its proportionality and uniformity, and it was this sense of planning that so impressed visitors. As William Dean Howells put it, describing the White City, "This beauty that we see here is not at all describing the White City, "This beauty that we see here is not at all picturesque. If a painter were to attempt to treat it picturesquely, he must abandon it in despair, because the charm of the picturesque is in irregularity, and the charm of the beautiful is in symmetry, in just proportion, in equality. . . . The highest quality of beauty is a spiritual quality."⁴³

As I have argued, genteel idealists were quick to appropriate this spiritual quality for themselves, aligning the eternal feminine against what was seen as crass (and transient) masculine materialism. Thus Maude Howe Elliott praised Sophia Hayden's Woman's Building as "essentially feminine" while claiming for women those qualities that Matthew Arnold had already named as critical to the perfection of culture: "If sweetness and light were ever expressed in architecture, we find them in Miss Hayden's building. Every line expresses elegance, grace,

harmony."⁴⁴ Like a "symmetrical woman," the Woman's Building was beautiful not because it expressed Sophia Hayden's personal architectural vision but because it blended so harmoniously with other classically inspired buildings. Form trumped content as visitors marveled over the beauty of the Court of Honor and the Woman's Building.

Genteel idealists, like architectural idealists, aspired to elegance, grace, and harmony (but not "picturesqueness" or excessive individuality) in every line. Of course, Greek, Roman, and Renaissance sources have long been a rich frame of reference for English-language poetry, but in the 1890s the classical tradition was linked specifically to what Lawrence Levine has called the "sacralization of culture," a project many New Women adopted as their own. Poetry must not just console or divert; it must elevate, evoking the great civilizations of the past. Ironically, however, the classical tradition itself was not readily accessible to many women, who were seldom schooled in Greek and Latin. To claim this heritage was to move into a public sphere that was barely open to women—just as Sophia Hayden took her place among male architects when she designed a building based on Beaux-Arts principles, even though she could not be admitted to the famous Parisian institution where Beaux-Arts had originated.

But, once in the public sphere, how was a woman to define herself? Frances L. Mace, for one, uses classical references to express her desire for a universal form of public subjectivity in "Hesperus," from *Legends, Lyrics, and Sonnets* (1884):

O to be like thee, Hesperus!
To climb the heights of truth,
And there to drink of celestial airs,
To glow with immortal youth;
There wrapt in the light which is born in skies
Where blessed angels are,
To hear earth's harmonies only rise
Floating sweetly from afar.
Hesperus!
How can my spirit be made a star?⁴⁵

Mace does not want to be a star in the twentieth-century sense of a standout individual; on the contrary, she wants to be one of many perfect apparitions. Despite its glow of immortal youth, this celestial self is disembodied. It is freed from the crass material world, but it is likewise freed from any distinctive—or "picturesque"—embodied womanhood. Like Blanche Fearing's hermaphrodite soul, Mace's self comes to terms with femininity by divorcing it in favor of an ethereal spiritual idealism. While a New Woman might call such idealism the highest form of femininity, it is impossible to visualize what is womanly or feminine about a star. In rejecting sentimentalism's boundaries women poets were also rejecting a clear identity-rooted in separate spheres—to adopt a more "universal" form of agency. Mace's self is individualistic in the sense that she imagines herself as isolated, without a community, but it remains generic in the sense that she sheds all identifying physical characteristics and with them, perhaps, her "actual I."

The rush to disembodiment must be understood in the context of a fair that was crowded with perfect—and perfectly immobile classically inspired female bodies. Although Bertha Palmer asserted in her opening speech that "freedom and justice for all are infinitely more to be desired than pedestals for a few," the conventions operating in American poetry (as well as in the fair design) seemed to invite idealization and pedestals. As Weimann points out, "Everywhere in the Fair 'women's forms divine' appeared: supporting roofs, ornamenting friezes, perching on domes."⁴⁶ In "The Prayer of the Caryatid," from *Seven Sonnets of Sculpture* (1889), Virginia McClurg gives voice to a caryatid, expressing the ambiguity of her embodied position:

"Dread Zeus! how can I bear this heavy weight, —
Hiding all heaven and crushing down my brows?
My lithe limbs fail, my heart within me bows;
Why hast thou placed me in this drear estate?
Aeons roll by while motionless I wait."

When Zeus finally answers he affirms the caryatid's value, but her worth turns out to be mainly as a channel for his own power:

"She whom from hope and love must stand aloof,
Whose marble lips are set without a smile,
She more than all the rest may work my will;
She more than all the rest may work my will;
Her frail frame bears the everlasting roof
Of the high gods' most holy temple pile."⁴⁷

Like the caryatid, and like Sophia Hayden, McClurg derives a certain authority from her association with the past: through it she can show her command of both Renaissance forms and classical references. At the same time, her poem allegorizes the paralyzing power of hegemony: the caryatid speaks, but Zeus *interprets* her speech as silence emanating from "marble lips set without a smile" and praises her for her everlasting support of the gods. Alan Trachtenberg has argued that the fair represented an assertion of national unity that suppressed the actual diversity of the nation; elite "ideals" were a way of maintaining hierarchical control at the expense of democracy's messier incarnations (suffragism, populism).⁴⁸ As women poets embraced the classical tradition they produced poems that ratified-but did not often challenge-the elite vision of a unified public sphere. McClurg's caryatid suggests that the problem of the female body is almost insoluble: it is a paralyzing ideal, marked by its very beauty for a subservient role. It is not surprising, then, that, as we have seen, many genteel women poets—like their sentimental counterparts—chose "imaginary or formal solutions" to the problem of the body. For example, the African American poet Henrietta Cordelia Ray withdraws into traditional forms, classical references, and models of greatness (Beethoven, Milton, Raphael) drawn from the Western canon.

"The Poet's Ministrants" begins:
The smiling Dawn, with diadem of dew,
Brings sunrise odors to perfume his shrine;
Blithe Zephyr fans him, and soft moonbeams twine
An aureole to crown him, of a hue Surpassing fair.⁴⁹

Ray's frame of reference seems to force her hand, and "the poet" becomes not just a male but a "fair," or white, male. And yet Ray—like Frances Mace, Virginia McClurg, and other women poets—is in one sense performing her competence by crossing into the public sphere of the classics. Unlike many women wielding classical references, Ray could actually read Greek. She is showing here that she can go anywhere as a poet—or, rather, that her poetry can go anywhere when it is detached from the poet's physical self. The few critics who have written about Ray struggle with this aspect of her work, which strikes even her modern editor, Joan Sherman, as artificial and museumized.⁵⁰ But artifice is critical to the postsentimental project: it distances women writers from suffering (the source of sentimentalism) and from their own bodies (the source of sexual and, in Ray's case, racial difference). This distance allows their poems to circulate in a public sphere that values social harmony over personal suffering and formal symmetry

over individual differences. Unlike sentimental poets (who recruited their husbands or ministers to vouch for the femininity in prefaces) and, indeed, unlike some earlier African American writers (whose work was prefaced by

white authorities "vouching" for their authenticity as African Americans), Ray stands alone. Her sonnets rise on their own merits, just as the Isabella Society had argued that all women's work should rise. The problem with this kind of idealism, however, is that it forecloses collective political expression, leading to a strange paradox: even though sentimental ideology is fundamentally conservative, sentimental poetry volumes are much more likely to contain political poetry (even progressive political poetry) than their genteel idealist counterparts. Thus, among African American poets the sentimental poems of Frances Harper are more political than the genteel sonnets of H. Cordelia Ray—even though in life both poets were activists. Postsentimental women were perhaps *more* free to *act* politically, but prevailing literary conventions meant that, as poets, these same women were *less* free to *write* politically.

Edith M. Thomas allegorizes the attractions and costs of idealism and classicism in her classically inspired sonnet, "Grief's Stratagem":

In Helen's house (Ulysses counted dead)
The hearts of all by sorrow's wave were swept,
And host and guests, unashamed, together wept,
Yet wept not all for great Ulysses sped:
Though plenteous tears the youth from Pylon shed,
Seizing the tearful chance like grief's adept,
He mourned his own, his brother dear, who slept
Where hostile soil with best Greek blood was fed.
Thus I—if fortune would so far befriend
To hither bring some spirit scourged sore,
Some wrong that loudly knocks at pity's door
Might seem in charity those tears to spend,
That otherwise I dare not let descend
To ease my heart of grief's occulted store!⁵¹

Here the emotional life of the speaker is not once but twice removed: the speaker displaces her grief onto a "youth from Pylon," and the youth displaces his grief in appearing to keen for Ulysses. The speaker—and her historical moment, and her gender—disappears behind the sonnet, even as she mourns her disappearance.

If the genteel stratagem was widely deployed in the 1880s and 1890s, its reach was not universal. Some volumes in the library, such as Venelia R. Case's *Grange Poems* (1892) and Jean W. Wylie's *Luther An Illustrated Poem* (1890), are frankly didactic, addressing narrow audiences of populists or Christians for whom idealism was entirely beside the point. But others keep one foot in the mainstream while pushing the conventional boundaries of genteel poetry and gesturing (though not necessarily deliberately) toward the aesthetic values of the twentieth century. Hannah Parker Kimball, for instance, expresses the common theme of religious doubt in "The Soul's Sabbath," from *The Cup of Life* (1892):

My soul kept Sabbath on a summer day,
Upon a breezy upland far away.

The tenderness of the hillsides entered in;
The patience of the gray, mossy-stained old rocks
That through the grass their wrinkled foreheads press
Like mighty bulls; the quaking earth might win
Observance from them by repeated shocks,
But nothing less.⁵²

In Kimball's case—and this is vanishingly rare among the poets of the library—her "Soul's Sabbath" leads her eye away from vague "eternal truths" and toward specific natural objects. She describes the "old rocks" with an idiosyncratic verve that seems almost protomodern, with its sharp images (which offer "repeated shocks") and its agnostic respect for scientific laws. Miracles and angels have been replaced by forces of nature—forces that demand a keenly scientific (if ultimately also "spiritual") eye. "The Soul's Sabbath" continues:

But most the holiness of sailing clouds
Did fill me. These in splendid white all clad
Move on in solemn pomp across the sky,
Like saintly dead in snowy, radiant shrouds,
Passing God's throne in a procession glad
Of joyful mystery.⁵³

Like Emily Dickinson (whose 1890 volume, *Poems*, was also in the library), Kimball is willing to make her images sharp and her God ambiguous. She allows the clouds to resemble the dead without pressing on toward an affirmation of faith or truth: the clouds are just metaphors, and God's throne is part of the metaphor rather than part of an established theological system. Kimball makes doubt work as an organizing principle in her poem rather than "resolving" her uncertainty by reaching for vague spiritual or classical ideals. My edition of *The Cup of Life* marks Kimball's unsentimental professional ambition; it is inscribed "To the Editor of the *Chap-Book* with the writer's Compliments," thus aligning Kimball with *fin-de-siecle* Chicago's tiny avant garde. This explains Kimball's own aesthetic: like the Arts and Crafts prints in the *Chap-Book*, her poems forego idealism in favor of rough-hewn images that dare to be slightly out of proportion, or "picturesque."

Clara Doty Bates's poems in *From Heart's Content* (1892) also eschew ideals in favor of concrete objects and experiences, veering away from the dry symmetry of much genteel poetry. But if Kimball was influenced by the innovative Arts and Crafts movement, Bates's voice reflects equally innovative developments in the material history of childhood. Bates's involvement in the fair was direct, since she served as the librarian of the Children's Library, in the Children's Building adjacent to the Woman's Building. One peculiar feature of nineteenth-century women's volumes is the mixture between adult's and children's verses, which often appear side by side in the same book. Bates takes this a step further, writing poems that are not precisely for children but are infused with "childhood's" virtues as they were understood in the 1890s. The Children's Building naturalizes an assumption that was actually fairly new: that play was not a waste of time but a crucial activity. As Virginia Thrall Smith told the Congress of Women, "The universal instinct of play means something. It should be turned to good account. It should be made constructive in its income instead of destructive."⁵⁴ Bates's poems bristle with the kind of "constructive play" that the Children's Building—with its covered rooftop garden and specially designed gymnastics equipment promoted. "Grass Gypsies" begins:

Why, here is a camp,
On the wayside grass!
Let's look at the tents
Before we pass.
Beaded with dew is every one
Ah, 'tis only webs
The spiders have spun.

They are gypsies. Think
When night fell down,
How they set to work,

So tiny and brown,
To pitch these tents
Each gathering boughs
To kindle a fire
Before his house.⁵⁵

The voice's note of wonder is poised between that of a child's and that of a teacher's; through its awareness of childhood "Grass Gypsies" escapes the lofty ambitions of much genteel poetry and manages to "look at the tents" without allegorizing or idealizing them. Bates's fanciful connection between spiders and gypsies implies that playful thinking not straining after eternal truths—is inherently productive.

By abandoning idealism both Kimball and Bates are able to concretize their poems, at least when they write about nature. But poetry exploring inner terrain—psychological and emotional states—was more beholden to sentimental and ideal conventions and less likely to break into original or playful forms of expression. This was perhaps especially true among women poets, who labored under the period's ongoing concerns about modesty. If women were free to move into the public sphere to, say, imitate classical architecture or praise the works of Beethoven, they were less welcome to venture forth as women with specifically feminine concerns. One woman who did present herself as a woman and who became tremendously popular in the 1880s and 1890s was Ella Wheeler Wilcox. I want to end my analysis of the Woman's Library with Wilcox because she represents so clearly the Zeitgeist of the World's Columbian Exhibition and its ambivalence toward feminine self-examination and self-display.

While Wilcox's poems—with their ringing rhymes, facile forms, and inflated emotions—are clearly products of the genteel idealist sensibility, they are distinctive in one striking respect: they are rooted, firmly and explicitly, in the female body. Her poems neither veil the self in sentimental modesty nor escape into an ideal disembodied universalism. Instead, they make the author's desires into a driving force. *Poems of Passion* (1883) sold more than 60,000 copies in its first two years, partly due to the excellent "bad" publicity that Wilcox received. The book was rejected by her first publisher as immoral, and she was accused by one Chicago newspaper of trying to "out Swinburne Swinburne and out-Whitman Whitman."⁵⁶ "Love's Language," the first poem in *Poems of Passion*, implicitly addresses the relationship between a poem and a woman's body:

How does Love speak?
In the faint flush upon the telltale cheek,
And in the pallor that succeeds it; by
The quivering lid of an averted eye
The smile that proves the parent to a sigh
Thus does love speak.⁵⁷

"Love's Language" dilates on its theme, and each stanza grows longer by one line, so that the poem swells voluptuously toward its eleven-line concluding stanza:

How does Love speak?
In the wild words that uttered seem so weak
They shrink ashamed to silence; in the fire
Glance strikes with glance, swift flashing higher and higher,
Like lightnings that precede the mighty storm;
In the deep, soulful stillness; in the warm,
Impassioned tide that sweeps through throbbing veins,
Between the shores of keen delights and pains;

In the embrace where madness melts in bliss,
And in the convulsive rapture of a kiss
Thus does Love speak.⁵⁸

Wilcox's "convulsive raptures" stop short of picturing the specifics of men's and women's bodies. Instead, what they express is physical yearning, a consuming desire for intense pleasure rather than for salvation or truth.

Poems of Passion is an ambitious volume; it is about striving, wanting, and getting what one wants. The body is no longer something to be transcended; rather, it is to be used-but used not for mere pleasure but for pleasure that elevates the speaker. In this way Wilcox's book echoes the material economy of the World's Columbian Exhibition, which promised to sate physical desires even as it claimed to elevate the soul. But Wilcox is also relentlessly focused on romantic love, seemingly expecting it to meet all of her needs. To "out Swinburne Swinburne" might be to meet male poets on equal terms, but Wilcox's poems ultimately assert women's limitations. Sentimental poets often assumed that women's emotional "nature" made them more fragile than men; Wilcox posits that this same emotionalism makes women stronger; by the end of "Communism" she tells her lover that her emotions "would clasp you, and crush you, and kill you, / In the insurrection of uncontrol."⁵⁹ And yet her poems show otherwise; they are trapped in the formal control mechanisms of Victorian prosody, just as Wilcox's "passionate" body was covered and corseted even in her most daring author photo.

Dennis B. Downey has argued persuasively that the images and ideas unleashed by the Columbian Exposition ultimately contributed to the

birth of that cultural phenomenon known as the Gibson Girl: "As a standard for women's beauty and decorum, the Gibson Girl owed much to the unprecedented attention devoted to women's interests at the Chicago world's fair."⁶⁰ Wilcox's speakers are the poetic equivalent of Gibson Girls: strong women defined by consuming desires but not so innovative or feminist that they risked their popularity. It should not be surprising that Wilcox remained one of the most popular writers of the late nineteenth century; nor is it surprising that by the turn of the century we find her disciplining women's bodies in a "physical development" magazine: "No woman need grow corpulent if she will control her appetite and use her will-power and take systematic exercises for reduction. Health, beauty, and symmetry all lie in the power of each human being, but, like every thing else worth having, they must be obtained by toil and patience."⁶¹ Wilcox's poems obtain symmetry and, despite their effusive emotionalism, ultimately teach women to control their appetites by diverting all of their energies and ambitions toward romantic love. Or perhaps they use romantic love as a model for other types of desire; surely, Wilcox's many (and she wrote *many*) popular poems are fascinating not because of the faceless men that the women speakers supposedly love but because of the women speakers themselves: they are strong feminine women who do not so much depart from gendered conventions as rewrite the terms of those conventions.

The Gibson Girl is a type, and Wilcox's speakers are also types; despite the breathless references to veins and hearts (but never to anything so erogenous as skin) we never learn anything specific about these women. Nevertheless, Wilcox's desiring women are not akin to the suffering martyrs of sentimental verse, who tend to appeal to men for succor. If Wilcox counseled women to control their diets so they wouldn't get too large, she was reflecting a concern that was made manifest in an essay she wrote specifically for the Columbian Exposition. Asked by the American Press Association to predict what the world would look like one hundred years after the fair, she wrote an optimistic essay with eugenic and "spiritual" inflections, opining that "clairvoyancy or spiritual insight will be almost universal," poverty will be eradicated, and "women will be financially independent of men." Moreover (and here Wilcox channels a wider cultural anxiety), women may well outpace men: "If our men keep pace with our women in athletic development and in clean morals, the race will be larger and handsomer. Otherwise we shall produce splendid amazons and pygmy men."⁶² Symmetrical humanity will be

threatened if women are allowed to gain too much disproportionate power—and yet, in "Love's Language," the body of the poem grows alarmingly larger and larger as the woman iterates her desires.

The library catalog offers a synchronic cross-section of women's contemporary poetry circa 1893, allowing some large-scale conclusions to be drawn. First, although genteel idealism was the reigning ideology of the fair and of middlebrow culture more generally, it was only unevenly absorbed by women writers of the period. Although it gave poets a *raison d'être* (since poets could become the custodians of "elevating" culture as fiction writers descended into realism), it deprived them of an audience. This uneven development underscores the deceptive nature of academic periodization that links sentimentalism to a specifically early to midcentury time frame. The library's numerous sentimental poetry volumes suggest that class and region also played a role: rural, isolated, and slightly less educated (though still middle-class) women continued to write and read sentimental poetry well into the 1890s and beyond because it met their needs. Genteel idealism, like the Court of Honor's monumental architecture, was impressive but impractical; there was too little substance behind the paste and plaster. This lack of substance can be linked not to philosophical vacuity but to the transitional quality of the 1890s: genteel poets were no longer sure how to define "Truth" and "Beauty," which made them all the more determined to talk about them. Women's internal selves were also in flux: many poets were no longer strongly Christian, but the new psychological and psychoanalytic vocabularies had not yet emerged. Ella Wheeler Wilcox embodies the contradictions of the period because her poems' speakers are independent but also limited in their range of motion and emotion. Her poems are middlebrow, self-assured, daring (but not too daring), and committed to expressing specific ambitions that can be realized within a mainstream poetic framework. In like manner the Woman's Building both registered the transitional status of women in 1893 and tried to imagine moving forward into a new era.

Notes

1. Neil Harris et al., *Grand Illusions: The Chicago World's Fair of 1893* (Chicago: Chicago Historical Society, 1983), 83.
2. Many scholars have discussed the fair's design; for an overview see Reid Badger, "The Site, the Plan, and the Design," in *The Great American Fair: The World's Columbian Exposition and American Culture* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1979), 63-71.
3. Lillian Rozell Messenger, "Star Depths," in *The Southern Cross and Other Poems* (New York: C. W. Moulton, 1891), 27.
4. See Paula Bennett, *Poets in the Public Sphere: The Emancipatory Project of American Women's Poetry, 1800-1900* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 3-4.
5. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into the Category of Bourgeois Society*.
6. Bertha Palmer, "The Growth of the Woman's Building," in Maude Howe Elliott, ed., *Art and Handicraft in the Woman's Building of the World's Columbian Exposition* (Faxis: Goupil, 1893), 11.
7. Stowe and Sigourney are the only two American women authors that H. H. Bancroft mentions by name in his definitive *Book of the Fair* (Chicago: Bancroft, 1893), 288. Bancroft writes, "A collection of autographs and portraits of women of France, Great Britain, and America, the property of Mrs. John Boyd Thacher, forms one of the attractions of the library. Another is a cabinet containing forty seven different translations and editions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in front of which stands a bust of Harriet Beecher Stowe. An oil portrait of Mrs. Sigourney and two leaves from her diary accompany the Connecticut books. Other American authors are also represented."
8. Lydia Sigourney, "Erin's Daughter," in *Illustrated Poems* (Philadelphia: Cary and Hart, 1849), 175.
9. Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), xvi.
10. Laura E. Richards, "Woman in Literature," in Elliott, *Art and Handicraft*, 97-98.
11. See Mary Louise Kete, *Sentimental Collaborations: Mourning and Middle Class Identity in Nineteenth-Century America* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000).

12. Josephine Pollard, *Vagrant Verses* (New York: Phillips and Hunt, 1886); Louisa J. Hall, *Verses* (Cambridge, Mass.: privately printed, 1892); Sybil D. Wolcott, *Crest on the Wave* (Lexington, Ky.: privately printed, 1889).
13. Helen M. Hurd, *Poetical Works* (Boston: Robinson and Stevenson, 1887), i.
14. F. M. Davis, "Prefatory Note," in Cora A. M. Davis, *Immortelles* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1887).
15. Mrs. J. L. McKinney, "Letter to Katydid," in *Katydid's Poems* (Kentucky: Courier-Journal Printing, 1887), i.
16. All in Wolcott, *Crest on the Wave*, 13, 17, 64, 70.
17. In *ibid.*, 70.
18. Mrs. M.J. Serrano, "To a Husband," in *Destiny and Other Poems* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1883), 175.
19. Helen Hunt Jackson, "A Woman's Battle," in *Sonnets and Lyrics* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1886), 33.
20. Mary Elizabeth Blake, "Women of the Revolution," in *Verses Along the Way* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1890), 77.
21. Dedication, in Emily Thorton Charles, *Lyrical Poems, Songs, Pastorals* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1886).
22. Emily Thorton Charles, "The Offering," in *ibid.*, 159.
23. Emily Thorton Charles, "Sweet Wishes," in *ibid.*, 159.
24. Emily Thorton Charles, "An Address: To the Body of a Man in the Whirlpool-Niagara," in *ibid.*, 110.
25. Emmeline Grangerford is, of course, the morbid poetess from Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.
26. Emily Thorton Charles, "Women's Sphere," in *Lyrical Poems*, 72. Charles notes that the poem was "read before the National Woman's Suffrage Convention in Washington City, January 19, 1881."
27. *Ibid.*, 77.
28. Emeline L. Knox, "Song," in *Gems from the Field of Thought, or a Glimpse into Mute Life* (Utica, N.Y.: T.J. Griffiths, 1891), 52-53.
29. Knox, "My Wish," in *ibid.*, 12.
30. For a discussion of women's expression of their authentic autobiographical selves see Alicia Ostriker, "The Nerves of a Midwife: Contemporary American Women's Poetry," *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* 6 (Fall/Winter 1977): 69-87.
31. Bertha Palmer, quoted in Jeanne Weimann, *The Fair Women* (Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1981), 251.
32. Mrs. Gregory, quoted in *ibid.*, 365.
33. Mary E. Wilkins, "A Poetess," in *A New England Nun and Other Stories* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1891), 141.
34. *Ibid.*, 143.
35. The historian Robert H. Wiebe discusses the loss of "island communities" in *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967).
36. Santayana introduced the phrase "genteel tradition" in a 1911 lecture entitled "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy." David Perkins discusses the lecture and its relevance to poetry in *A History of Modern Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), 102-11.
37. Louisa Parsons Hopkins, "Women in Science," in Elliott, *Art and Handicraft*, 95.
38. Beryl Satter, *Each Mind a Kingdom: American Women, Sexual Purity, and the New Thought Movement, 1875-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 12.
39. Mrs. Wesley Smith, "Symmetrical Womanhood," in Mary Kavanaugh Oldham Eagle, ed., *The Congress of Women* (Philadelphia: International, 1895), 217.
40. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981), 79.
41. Blanche Fearing, "My Angel and I," in *The Sleeping World and Other Poems* (Chicago: A. McClurg, 1887), 113.
42. Carlotta Perry, "Our Easter Day," in *Carlotta Perry's Poems* (Chicago: Belford, Clarke, 1888), 39.
43. William Dean Howells, *Letters of an Altrurian Traveller (1892-94)* (Gainesville, Fla.: Scholar's Facsimiles and Reprints, 1961), 33.
44. Maude Howe Elliott, "The Building and Its Decoration," in Elliott, *Art and Handicraft*, 28.
45. Frances L. Mace, "Hesperus," in *Legends, Lyrics, and Sonnets* (Boston: Cupples, Upham, 1884), 17.
46. Weimann, *The Fair Women*, 263.

47. Virginia McClurg, "The Prayer of the Caryatid," in *Seven Sonnets of Sculpture* (Boston: Soule Photographic, 1889), 17.
48. See Alan Trachtenberg's discussion of "The White City" in *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 208-34.
49. H. C. Ray, "The Poet's Ministrants," in *Sonnets* (New York: J. J. Little, 1893), 21.
50. Joan Sherman, "Introduction," in *Henrietta Cordelia Ray, Collected Black Women's Poetry*, vol. 3, *Poems* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 22. Quoted in Bennett, *Poets in the Public Sphere*, 198.
51. Edith M. Thomas, "Grief's Stratagem," in *Lyrics and Sonnets* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1887), 129.
52. Hannah Parker Kimball, "The Soul's Sabbath," in *The Cup of Life and Other Verses* (Boston: J. G. Cupples, 1892), 40.
53. *Ibid.*, 41.
54. Quoted in Weimann, *The Fair Women*, 335.
55. Clara Doty Bates, "Grass Gypsies," in *From Heart's Content* (Chicago: Morrill, Higgins, 1892), 88.
56. Quoted in Cheryl Walker, *The Nightingale's Burden: Women Poets and American Culture before 1900* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 122.
57. Ella Wheeler Wilcox, "Love's Language," in *Poems of Passion* (Chicago: Bedford, Clark, 1883), 2.
58. *Ibid.*, 3.
59. Wilcox, "Communism," in *Poems of Passion*, 18.
60. Dennis B. Downey, *A Season of Renewal: The Columbian Exhibition and Victorian America* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2000), 125.
61. Ella Wheeler Wilcox, "The Quest for Health and Beauty," *McFadden Physical Development* (January 1912): 65.
62. Dave Walter, ed., *Today Then: America's Best Minds Look 100 Years into the Future on the Occasion of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition* (Helena, Mont: American and World Geographic, 1992), 36-37.