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The Milwaukee School of Fleshly Poetry: Ella Wheeler Wilcox's *Poems of Passion* and Popular Aestheticism

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"How can one begin? Where can one leave off?" ([Woolf 97](#)). Faced with Ella Wheeler Wilcox's autobiography, *The Worlds and I*, Virginia Woolf was—or claimed to be—stymied:

There never was a more difficult book to review. If one puts in the Madame de Staël of Milwaukee, there will be no room for the tea-leaves; if one concentrates upon Helen Pitkin, Raley Husted Bell . . . must be done without. . . . [A]nd as for Ella Wheeler Wilcox—Mrs [sic] Wilcox is indeed the chief problem. It would be easy to make fun of her; equally easy to condescend to her; but it is not at all easy to express what one does feel for her.

(97)

Beginning with the publication of *Poems of Passion* in 1883 and continuing through the first decades of the twentieth century, Ella Wheeler Wilcox¹ was quite possibly the most commercially successful and most ridiculed poet in the English-speaking world. On the one hand, her popularity was indisputable;

as her obituary in the London *Times* put it, she was "the most popular poet of either sex and of any age, read by thousands who never open Shakespeare" ("Death of Ella Wheeler Wilcox").

Yet her reputation was also bad, as the *Literary Digest* noted: "Few poets in American letters made so sudden and sensational a success as she did with her initial volume, 'Poems of Passion,' and most persons to whom such luck befell would not have had the staying power to pass through nearly a generation of more or less kindly treatment as a joke" ("[Current Poetry](#)" 38). Since the advent of modernism, her work has survived as a negative—a ghostly reference point for moderns from Harriet Monroe to S. J. Perelman, marking what American poetry is not or what it should not be. In his 1929 study *Practical Criticism*, I. A. Richards suggests that Wilcox is bad because she "overdoes" commonplace emotions, thus insulting the reader while revealing her own (low) rank (207). The joke continues to resonate, as evidenced by John Ashbery's faux-homage, "Variations, Calypso, and Fugue on the Theme of Ella Wheeler Wilcox," in which, Mark Silverberg argues, Ashbery embraces Wilcox precisely because she is so bad (286).

Lately, however, a few critics have included Wilcox in recovery projects that stress her commonalities with other neglected women poets.² Shira Wolosky, for instance, argues that Wilcox's poetry is good, like that of Julia Ward Howe, Frances Harper, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, because it advances the *common* good, offering "a poetic self-representation deeply continuous with the situated selfhood of nineteenth-century women, recognizing the sources of the self to be in community and history. In this, [poetry] provides both a countermodel and a critique of the possessive individualism increasingly dominant in American society and of the loss of civic life to private interests" (689). Wolosky's description certainly fits the poetry of Gilman, Howe, and Harper, but it does not entirely apply to Wilcox, who did not offer a countermodel to the dominant discourse of laissez-faire economics. Rather, as my reading of *Poems of Passion* will show, Wilcox refined and feminized possessive individualism, developing a vocabulary of aesthetic intimacy that seemed to expose private (interior, psychological) feelings but that was ultimately—or also—about amassing private (autonomous, commodified) property.

Perhaps a more illuminating context for *Poems of Passion* is the fad of commercial aestheticism that swept through American popular culture in the wake of Oscar Wilde's 1883 tour of America. Later nineteenth-century popular culture, as described by Rachel Bowlby, Ellen Gruber Garvey, and Martha H. Patterson, made women increasingly visible both as consumers and as objects of consumption. Bowlby has further argued, "The aesthete, far from being different from the new consumer of the period, turns out to be . . . his or her 'perfect type'" ([Shopping with Freud](#)). Drawing heavily on the popularity of Wilde, and even more heavily on the extravagant style of Algernon Swinburne, Wilcox's aesthetic tropes respond to a set of subtle shifts in mainstream, middle-class values. Her *Poems of Passion* pushed the limits—not of behavior, but of taste—by displaying new forms of desire and by catering to (and shaping) the consuming desires of her readers. The mass market for poetry shrank between 1880 and 1920, but Wilcox appealed to a mass readership by confirming their growing sense that it was not bad to be bad—if bad meant rich, famous, and sexy.

Wilcox's national reputation as a bad woman writer was sparked in 1883 when her Chicago publisher rejected her fourth book, *Poems of Passion*. Wilcox blamed the hoopla on sensation-seeking newspaper editors. As she put it in a sketch for *Cosmopolitan*,

My amazement can hardly be imagined . . . when Jansen & McClurg returned the manuscript of my volume, intimating that it was immoral. . . . The next day a column article appeared with large headlines:—

"TOO LOUD FOR CHICAGO.

"THE SCARLET CITY BY THE LAKE SHOCKED

BY A BADGER GIRL, WHOSE VERSES

OUT-SWINBURN E SWINBURN E AND

OUT-WHITMAN WHITMAN."

[\("My Autobiography" 421\)](#)

When another Chicago house, Bedford-Clarke, finally published the book, some reviewers condemned it even as they leered. A headline in the *Milwaukee Journal* announced: "SCARLET POEMS IN SCARLET BINDING. Ella Wheeler Finds a Publisher in the Wicked City Who Will Father Her 'Poems of Passion,'" commenting that their "publication is a *consummation* devoutly to be wished" ("Scarlet Poems in Scarlet Binding").³ One might deduce that the scandal was mainly about the propriety of being a woman of (scarlet) letters—an anxiety that has, of course, been a constant in American literary history since Anne Bradstreet. Such attitudes are perhaps overfamiliar, invested in maintaining fixed binaries of Woman as either angelic or utterly fallen.

But the most influential commentator struck a subtly different note. Charles A. Dana, editor of the *New York Sun*, noted with dismay the emergence of a "Milwaukee School" of fleshly poets:

As there are centers of atmospheric disturbance so also are there centers of intellectual disorder; just at present the vortex of the aphrodisiac movement in poetry seems to hang over Milwaukee, Wisconsin. We have been astonished by the amount of Swinburnian verse sent to us by different young women living in a town heretofore chiefly celebrated for its bricks and beer.

("The Immodesty of Certain Female Poets")

"A young woman dreams at night she is a man," Dana continues disapprovingly, quoting from Wilcox's "Delilah":

She touches my cheek, and I quiver—
I tremble with exquisite pains;
She sighs—like an overcharged river
My blood rushes on through my veins;
She smiles—and in mad-tiger fashion,
As a she-tiger fondles her own,
I clasp her with fierceness and passion,
And kiss her with shudder and groan.

(1–8)

The publication of *Poems of Passion* caused Dana to revisit the subject of the "Milwaukee School":

A few months ago it became our duty to speak with plainness concerning the immodesty of certain female poets. There recently appeared in the West a school of young women who have chosen verse as the medium for the misrepresentation of their own character. In real life they are probably good girls; in print they sing the songs of half-tipsy wantons.

("Kiss and Bliss Poetry")

Dana was not misreading *Poems of Passion*; on the contrary, he understood Wilcox's "shudder[s]" and "groan[s]" as a series of theatrical poses, and he realized that Wilcox was not really "wanton." Thus the problem, from Dana's perspective, was not bad women, but good women with bad taste.

While Dana dismissed Wilcox's "kiss and bliss" poems as tacky, however, respectable clubwomen, especially in the Middle and Far West, were embracing her extravagant style as the perfect complement to their Moorish throw pillows. The cosmopolitans might condescend, but the ambitious provincials, from Milwaukee to Spokane, were ready for Wilcox's *Poems of Passion*—precisely because in this volume she represented herself (and addressed her readers) as economically and socially mobile. *Poems of Passion*, then, is less about sex than about the specific freedoms and anxieties generated by a laissez faire economy that was revaluing not just gold and real estate, but poetry as well. The day that *Poems of Passion* was published, the city of Milwaukee feted Wilcox with a program that emphasized her success in financial terms. The Milwaukee *Sentinel* reported that her first success came when Frank Leslie paid her \$4 for a poem; "since then, she has been quite successful until her efforts have been crowned with the publication of her 'Poems of Passion'" ("Reception to Ella Wheeler"). The evening ended with the presentation of a "testimonial purse" containing \$500 in gold. Wilcox used the money, as she reports in her autobiography, to reroof her house. In up-and-coming Milwaukee, celebrity clearly trumped propriety, money spelled success, and passion could emanate even from a moral woman—even if (or especially when) that passion was lucrative.

The "Milwaukee School" sold readers an "aphrodisiac" fantasy that they were eager to consume—not in spite of the fact that they were marooned in bricks and beer towns, but perhaps precisely for that reason ([Dana, "The Immodesty of Certain Female Poets"](#)). The controversy surrounding *Poems of Passion*, in short, was not one of prudes versus bohemians; it was also at least partly about fixed (eastern) versus mobile (western) values, a particular Gilded Age anxiety that Walter Benn Michaels has linked to debates about the gold standard and the free coinage of silver (149–51). Were Wilcox's poems really worth \$500 in gold? Were they worth \$4? Were they worthless? If poets were free to use poetry to generate "the misrepresentation of their own character," then how could established social hierarchies of gender and class be maintained?

Aestheticism was attractive to many middle-class Americans precisely because it offered them mobility and a sense that they could *act* as they wished. The historian Mary Warner Blanchard has pointed out that aesthetes in America differed from their British antecedents: "In the United States, aesthetic style was far more extensive and pervasive through all regions and all classes than previous accounts have suggested" ([Oscar Wilde's America](#) [xiii](#)). Whereas British aestheticism was controlled by a coterie of educated upper-class men, Americans embraced aesthetic principles less systematically but more widely; if aestheticism was a movement in Britain, it was (as the Milwaukee *Sentinel* put it) a "craze" in the United States. In "these days," a critic for the *Sentinel* remarked in 1882, "we hear so much twaddle about the aesthetic—a good deal of it by people who have but a faint idea of the meaning of aestheticism—we read constantly of aesthetic dresses, hats, houses, and house-furniture" ("Aesthetics

in the Kitchen"). This very superficiality—this lack of ideological coherence—made American aestheticism distinctive. As practiced by Wilcox, aestheticism became a vehicle for cross-gender free play but also for cross-class free play. Dana addresses this issue directly, asserting that Wilcox and her fellow Milwaukeeans are poseurs:

[They] seem to have been charmed out of healthy common sense by the earlier productions of ALGERNON SWINBURNE and DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI . They miss the finer qualities of these writers; the crude indecency is what they have seized upon. The *Laus Veneris* affords them both a dialect and a vocabulary. They affect the dialect of fleshly mysticism.

("The Immodesty of Certain Female Poets")

By referring to common sense, Dana is grasping at precisely that which was vanishing: a shared sense of what was commonly valued, or good, to be determined and policed by a properly educated eastern establishment.

Although Wilcox was a prolific producer, her poems concentrate on the speakers' passions—their desires—and emphasize aspirational consumption. Persons and objects are valued less for their labors than for their magnetism. The speakers in her poems are never satisfied for long, which can be seen, for example, in "Queries":

Since Time, the rag-buyer, hurried away
 With a chuckle of glee at the bargain made,
Did you discover, like me, one day
 That hid in the folds of those garments frayed
Were priceless jewels and diadems—
The soul's best treasures, the heart's best gems!

Have you, too, found that you could not supply
 The place of those jewels so rare and chaste?
Do all that you borrow, or beg, or buy;
 Prove to be nothing but skillful paste?
Have you found pleasure, as I find art,
 Not all sufficient to fill your heart?

(13–24)

Wilcox acted as a bricoleur, plucking those "jewels" that she could use (or sell) and affecting "the dialect of fleshly mysticism" as she saw fit ([Dana, "The Immodesty of Certain Female Poets"](#)). In the temperance-minded 1870s, she published a book of temperance poems, *Drops of Water*; by 1882, given Wilde's popularity, an aesthetic collection such as *Poems of Passion* reflected her pitch-perfect marketing (if not common) sense.

Blanchard has identified the 1880s as an "interlude . . . between two periods of militarization, the Civil War and the rise of imperialism in the 1890s" (21). It was this interlude, she argues,

that allowed the legitimacy and scope for the theatricality in personal presentation that extended the aesthetic range of both men and women.

. . . At this time, some women used their bodies and their dress as public art forms not only to defy the moral implications of domesticity but to assume cultural agency in their society at large.

[\("Boundaries and the Victorian Body" 21–22\)](#)

Wilcox embraced the transformative power of the aesthetic: She fringed her bangs, dressed in uncorseted Mother Hubbard gowns, and used her poems to express subjective female desires that made her female speakers into artistic subjects.

In *Poems of Passion*, the poetic voice is monological, containing all of its tensions within the expanding and contracting boundaries of a subjectivity that is garbed in exquisite poetic forms. On the one hand, Wilcox's speakers are relentless sensation seekers, but on the other hand, they apprehend beauty only through displays of disciplinary technique. They are both hardworking and utterly hedonistic; they want to produce what they will then consume.

This struggle, in the opening poem "Love's Language," succeeds in bringing the interior to the surface, making the private public and yet still seductively intimate:

How does Love speak?
By the uneven heart-throbs, and the freak
Of bounding pulses that stand still and ache,
While new emotions, like strange barges, make
Along vein-channels their disturbing course;
Still as the dawn, and with the dawn's swift force—
Thus doth Love speak.

(7–13)

Wilcox's "throbs" and "pulses" echo Walter Pater's edict that aesthetes should "[get] as many pulsations as possible into the given time" (238), but her prosody, as Dana noted, clearly derives from Algernon Swinburne. Wilcox herself claimed that, when she was writing *Poems of Passion*, "bit[s]" of "Shakespeare, Swinburne, and Byron (I had never possessed an entire volume of any of these poets) no doubt lent to my imagination and temperamental nature the flame which produced the censured verses" (*The Worlds and I* 81).⁴ Wilcox's emphasis on the fragment is telling: She had access to stylistic models but not to their full cultural context. Richards, noting what he sees as Wilcox's bad manners, also compares her to Swinburne, who—he avers—has *no* manners.⁵ In other words, the aristocratic Swinburne can afford to devalue everything that the upstart Wilcox desperately overvalues, so that he tends toward irony and she tends toward camp. Their aesthetic styles converge, but Wilcox plays with the very gender and class hierarchies that Swinburne reinscribes, marking the distance between the British literary tradition of aestheticism and its redeployment as an American fad.

Like Swinburne, Wilcox builds "pulsations" into her poems on a structural level, making the texts themselves organs of aural pleasure, at once stimulating and soothing. Natural (or at least physical) internal feelings are invaded by the unwieldy, external, vaguely commercial image of "strange barges" that carry emotions along "vein-channels." But the channels—the musical lines of the poem—admit to no disturbance. Typically in *Poems of Passion*, disturbances (losses, fears, uncontrollable passions) are described by Wilcox's speakers but not registered in the fluidity of the prosody. This produces a disconnect: "Love's Language," for instance, reports "uneven heart-throbs," but reports them in

metrically even verse. The effect—as with the poems of Swinburne—is high artifice, although in Wilcox's case the artifice borders on camp precisely because she is so relentlessly serious.

"Love's Language" is finally less about the beloved than about the evolving public self. When the speaker asks, "How does Love speak?" she is not interested in what her beloved has to say. She is interested in producing—and consuming—her own autoerotic displays, and indeed the entire poem is structured around questions the speaker both poses and answers. This public intimacy could be deceptive in its effect; in her scrapbook, Wilcox saved a few of the many letters she received from fans who felt they knew, and even loved, her. One correspondent begged leave to visit her: "Though I am a stranger to you I have thought of you often as one of my friends. . . . I have read many of your poems. I think I love you. I feel that you understand life, and would comprehend, perhaps in understanding sympathy, the struggles of a nature such as mine" (Anonymous to Wilcox, September 1898, Ella Wheeler Wilcox Scrapbook). The letter writer is oddly self-absorbed; she or he assumes that feelings alone are enough to make Wilcox a friend, perhaps even a lover. Wilcox's poems invite this form of emotional hermeticism; indeed, they model it.

Scholars have long noted the elements of gender play in British aesthetic poetry. According to Thäis E. Morgan, the Victorian literary critic Robert Buchanan first used the term "Fleshly School" to attack Swinburne, Rossetti, and Morris. Morgan argues that Buchanan saw their deviant masculinity as a threat to the public order (109). But while Swinburne surely blurred gender distinctions, his very theatricality tended to reinscribe them. Swinburne plays with gender roles, but his imagination returns repeatedly to stock Victorian notions of Woman as Body, as Animal, and as Eve. In "Laus Veneris," Venus is void of reason, beckoning the male speaker in order to unman him. But, like traditional drag skits at Oxford (Swinburne's alma mater), his poems dress up only playfully, without renouncing the phallus. "Laus Veneris" opens with a small violation of Venus by the speaker:

Asleep or waking is it? for her neck,
Kissed over close, wears yet a purple speck
 Wherein the pained blood falters and goes out;
Soft, and stung softly—fairer for a fleck.

(1–4)

This hickey—and the vampirism it presages—marks the woman with the man's mouth, and his gaze. The "I" in "Laus Veneris" is the eye of male erotic fantasy, and Swinburne tips his hand when he rhapsodizes, "Behold, my Venus, my soul's body, lies / With my love laid upon her garment-wise" (29–30). To cross-dress (garment-wise) is not to transfer power from the male to the female; it is to assert the power of the male to assume any subject position he so desires.

Wilcox's "Ad Finem," which was one of her most censored poems, also begins in a half-dream and with a similarly seductive image:

On the white throat of the useless passion
 That scorched my soul with its burning breath,
I clutched my fingers in murderous fashion,
 And gathered them close in a grip of death;
For why should I fan, or feed with fuel,
 A love that showed me but blank despair?

So my hold was firm, and my grasp was cruel—
I meant to strangle it then and there!

I thought it was dead. But with no warning,
It rose from its grave last night, and came
And stood by my bed till the early morning,
And over and over it spoke your name.
Its throat was red where my hands had held it,
It burned my brow with its scorching breath;
And I said, the moment my eyes beheld it,
"A love like this can know no death."

(1–16)

British aesthetic necks are ample and visible as symbols of women's objectification; one need only picture the long-stemmed sirens in the paintings of Dante Rossetti and Edward Burne-Jones (including the scarlet-clad woman in Burne-Jones's painting, also titled *Laus Veneris*). In Swinburne's "Laus Veneris," Venus's neck metaphorizes her magnetism and her muteness as she lures the speaker away from God and toward eternal lust. But "Ad Finem" is different; here, the objectified neck is male and explicitly, even embarrassingly, phallic. The woman is not drained or penetrated; rather, her potentially castrating grip inspires the reddened "neck" to rise again in the morning. Her lover is not unmanned by her power; rather, Wilcox empowers her female subject without necessarily disempowering the male. This is key because it meant that a poem such as "Ad Finem" could be daring but not threatening; after all, the phallus is ultimately stimulated, and the man's manhood remains intact.

At the same time, the female speaker is the agent who interprets the image: "A love like this can know no death." Her erotic object is male, and this changes the balance of power: Instead of simply mirroring Victorian assumptions about dangerously insatiable women, "Ad Finem" makes the female a desiring subject while maintaining the male lover's virility. Rather than being an animalistic creature like Venus, who at one point in "Laus Veneris" sprouts snakes for hair, Wilcox's woman is an aesthetic connoisseur: She takes pleasure, but one major source of pleasure for her is her own status as an erotic object. What love promises is not salvation, precisely, but endlessly renewable opportunities for sensual pleasure and performance.

For Wilcox's speakers, the source of female power is not collective or public; it is personal, basing its authority on the intensity of the speaker's sensations. Like Swinburne, and like Byron before him (but unlike most nineteenth-century American women poets), Wilcox self-consciously championed the cause of secular humanist individualism. But the poet and her speakers are more isolated than any British aesthete; they speak, not as part of a movement or in reaction against earlier romantic poets, but truly in a *laissez-faire* market-place of desire. They are intellectually and spiritually homeless, defined only by themselves and their passions. "Ad Finem" announces,

For just one kiss that your lips have given
In the lost and beautiful past to me,
I would gladly barter my hopes of Heaven
And all the bliss of Eternity.

(17–20)

The speaker here is engaged in a quasi-commercial transaction, bartering salvation for pleasure. She can do this with impunity because the scope of her poem is so small: It has only two people in it, and there is no room for the demands (and restrictions) of the world beyond the boudoir. There are no parents, no children, no neighbors—and, in contrast to Wolosky's understanding of Wilcox—no history or community apart from the economy.

Rather than being a space of confinement (a cage for a nightingale, as Cheryl Walker would describe it),⁶ the bedroom in this poem becomes private in the liberal economic sense; here, the speaker can fully possess her lover, and this form of ownership is more important than anything else. It is certainly more vital than mere Christianity:

To know for an hour you were mine completely—
 Mine in body and soul; my own—
I would bear unending tortures sweetly,
 With not a murmur and not a moan.
A lighter sin or a lesser error
 Might change through hope or fear divine;
But there is no fear, and hell has no terror
 To change or alter a love like mine.

(33–40)

Louise Bogan once archly described Wilcox as having brought "the element of 'sin'" into American poetry (20). But Wilcox does precisely the opposite; she essentially moves her speaker beyond good and evil. Private property is paradise because it offers the speaker complete control; the poem is not "ours" but "mine," and there is no question of a moral consensus. In a stanza from another poem, "Old and New," she neatly summarizes the demise of Judeo Christianity and the acquisition of a new creed that sounds suspiciously like a new frock or tablecloth:

When the old creeds are threadbare, and worn through,
And all too narrow for the broadening soul,
Give me the fine, firm texture of the new,
Fair, beautiful and whole!

(17–20)

To disappear into consumer fantasy is not to renounce morality but to render it irrelevant to the private sphere of capital accumulation and expenditure. Unlike the British aesthetes, however, Wilcox is not working within a clearly demarcated hierarchical society in which the distinctions between classes and genders are strongly fixed by "old creeds." Her self-dramatizing is sincere rather than ironic; the breakdown of the old offers not the thrill of transgression against enduring institutions, but an earnest opportunity for self-transformation.

Swinburne's capacity for irony is a result of his "finer qualities," which stem in turn from his social position ([Dana, "The Immodesty of Certain Female Poets"](#)); as an upper-class poet, he had cultural capital to burn, and his poems (again, like Byron's) were read in the context of his decadently aristocratic life. Swinburne's poetry is notable—even compared to other Victorian poets—for its dense allusions. Although his position in the canon has been subject to debate, he always embeds his work in canonical literary history, engaging with the classical, medieval, French, German, and English traditions. This gives his self-absorption the "finer qualities" that Dana appreciated ("The Immodesty of Certain

Female Poets"); his voice is powered by the history that he can afford to both draw upon and disdain. As Pierre Bourdieu has pointed out, when upper-class people affect the dialect of decadence and degeneration, their ability to cross classes actually shores up their power base (472–73).⁷ Just as cross-dressing emphasizes Swinburne's access to every gender role (he keeps the phallus and is in no danger of becoming a woman), bad behavior in public (and in poems) simply underlines that he is from a good family. His public identity is fixed by institutions of gender and class that make it hard for him to fall.

Wilcox, by contrast, writes poems that distance themselves from traditions, embracing trends instead. When she affects Swinburne's dialect, she is moving not down or up a visible class scale but rather into a position of stylishness.

She is working within a system of aesthetic values that previously made no room for Midwestern American farm girls, and by simply affecting a dialect, she changes the system, placing herself and her appreciative middle-class readers at the center of fashion, not history. In *Poems of Passion*, her sparse allusions to western intellectual history are ambivalent; in "Isaura" the speaker mentions that Shakespeare's plays bore her ("Why, I tire even of Hamlet and Macbeth!" [9]), and in "Answered" a male speaker announces,

You have heard me quote from Plato
A thousand times no doubt;
Well, I have discovered he did not know
What he was talking about.

(21–24)

But if Wilcox's poems display little learning, they also require little learning: They offer the texture of Swinburne without his challenges, and in this way, their sensations are easily accessible to any reader. Her poems remake the middle class as a social location of legitimate pleasure seeking. The lovers in her poems sing around pianos, smoke cigarettes (even the women), and kiss unrepentantly, and the only despair they express is the misery of an unfulfilled—or even temporarily postponed—desire.

For Wilcox, the location of middle-class pleasure is the body: It is portable property that can (as "Love's Language" suggests) both express consuming desires and fulfill them. This leads her to frame love in terms of private property, even in a poem titled "Communism" that describes a bloody "revolution" in which the speaker's feelings overwhelm her common sense. "Communism" concludes,

And like Communists, as mad, as disloyal,
My fierce emotions roam out of their lair;
They hate King Reason for being royal—
They would fire his castle, and burn him there.
O Love! they would clasp you, and crush you and kill you,
In the insurrection of uncontrol.
Across the miles, does this wild war thrill you
That is raging in my soul?

(25–32)

These communists are not workers; or rather, they work simply as metaphors for the speaker's internal emotions, taking a collective ideal and making it utterly private and personal. And yet, Wilcox's seemingly apolitical metaphor takes a final detour—back into a kind of public arena—in the last lines,

when the speaker asks if the "wild war" in her soul "thrills" the beloved (or is it the reader)? Suddenly, intimate emotions become part of a public performance as the speaker takes a break from her frenzy to ask if we are impressed. The poem is about giving way to bodily desire—it is about the urge to consume—but it is also about selling itself. The speaker wants to be both an agent and an object, a body and a soul; she wants to both own the gaze and enthrall her audience. "Communism" is thus political in the sense that it reworks communism into a metaphor for the erotics of capitalism.

If *Poems of Passion* did not directly address current events, it was nonetheless topical in the 1880s as cities expanded, the economy fluctuated, and the relatively fixed social categories of antebellum America broke apart. Addressing Dana in defense of Wilcox, Max Maukick wrote,

In reference to your open comments upon Ella Wheeler, let me say, as another Western poet, if you will, that the firm and unflinching Ella Wheeler has accomplished her aim. She is heard, and she has achieved success. . . . I am among what you call (a misnomer, by the way) the fleshly school. I interviewed Oscar Wilde in the West. I found him a gentleman, with gentlemanly instincts, and many of the poets and poetesses I have met are thorough gentlemen and ladies but they have the courage to speak what they so feel; they see the world in its true light; they write according to the world as it is now.⁸

This letter oddly links aestheticism to realism, implying that Oscar Wilde is a font of truth as well as cleverness and that Wilcox's poems—however performative and artificial, or perhaps precisely because of these qualities—are reflections of a new real world. Unlike Dana, however, Maukick approves of these changes, understanding the "fleshly school" as a coterie of brave self-starters. The artifice of aesthetic taste allowed even working people to be "thorough gentlemen and ladies" if they acted the part. For example, on 3 September 1882, the Milwaukee *Sentinel* reported on Mrs. Grace Wells's reception for the literati of Wisconsin, including Ella Wheeler: "Dancing, interspersed with literary exercises, was the order of the evening, and a rarely pleasant time was enjoyed" ("Mrs. Wells' Reception"). Just below this article, readers of the *Sentinel* found another item believed to be newsworthy: "A young working girl of this city, by the exercise of her own good taste and putting every spare penny where it would do the most good, has furnished forth a charming room at comparatively small expense and sufficiently aesthetic to please the most fastidious person." This girl's decorating choices included a fake stained-glass window, a clothes-horse decorated with scenes from Walter Crane's arts-and-crafts Cinderella, and a wardrobe "draped with olive Canton flannel" to hide the "unaesthetic dustpan." This girl's ability to "affect the dialect" of a leisured lady (hiding signs of labor like the dustpan) is seen as admirable; the article ends by describing her as both industrious and self-respecting ("Taste in Spite of Poverty"). The young Ella Wheeler and the working girl thus mixed, if not at Mrs. Grace Wells's, at least on the society pages that celebrated elevation through taste.

Wilcox's *Poems of Passion* obscures her industry behind kisses, autumn walks, and waltz quadrilles, but this does not mean it was proffered, or read, as a sign of indolence. In her autobiography, Wilcox describes her youth: "There was so much I wanted! I wanted to bestow comfort, ease and pleasure on everybody at home. I wanted lovely gowns—ah how I wanted them! and travel and accomplishments. . . . I would awaken happy in spite of myself and put all my previous melancholy into verses—and dollars" (*The Worlds and I* 33). She was clearly aware of her middle-class status, resigned to it, and annoyed by its devaluation:

Early I was told that all had been said before me, by great writers; that I could only repeat, in a crude form, messages already delivered by inspired masters. Still I wrote on, as thoughts came, and believed I

had been given my own personal message for the world. Later, as I made certain successes, I was told that my work was ephemeral and only ranked with the third class in literature, and that it could have no lasting effect upon the world. Still I continued writing, glad to do what was given me to do, though in the third class, and satisfied to let its influence die with me so long as it was helpful while it lasted. Critics have called my poetry versification, my prose platitudes. And while they have criticized I have kept at work. I have been assured that rare, choice souls did not recognize me in literature; that I appealed only to the common, indiscriminating minds. And yet I have worked on.

(The Worlds and I 30)

The undercurrent of class consciousness is unmistakable, and she answers her critics by making her work into a spectacle. Unlike mid-century sentimental poetesses who represented their bodies as passive conduits for poetic forces, Wilcox puts her Horatio Algerian struggle on display in her autobiographical writings, which of course only made her seem more vulgar to critics such as Dana and Woolf, as well as to more recent readers such as Bogan, who calls Wilcox (not admiringly) "thoroughly middle class" (31).

Wilcox's choice of publication venues further compromised her status: "When I turned my literary craft from the still waters of magazines to the large, rushing rivers of American newspapers . . . [my critics] said I was prostituting my talent" (*New Thought Common Sense* 291). To appear in a newspaper was to leave the realm of the literary and enter the space of the sensational; it was to leave the space of the refined (though still dressed, as it were, in the refined language of poetry) and enter the space of common reader. Throughout her life, Wilcox's poems appeared next to accounts of domestic violence, lynchings, and political corruption—stories that reflect the urban instabilities of the later nineteenth century. And because of reprint conventions between newspapers, they (rather than magazines, which protected their copyrights) spread her work most widely. Readers encountered her poems in newspapers and in many cases cut them out and pasted them in scrapbooks, making their own folk anthologies that, like the "rushing rivers of American newspapers," mark not fixed values but rather ongoing cultural changes. In one such scrapbook, compiled by an anonymous Milwaukee resident in the late nineteenth century, page one opens with "Solitude," from *Poems of Passion*; it is affixed at the top of the page and decorated with inky scrolls. But pasted below Wilcox's poem are two sensational stories. Their headlines scream: "'WOMAN' LION TAMER FATALLY HURT NOW PROVES TO BE A MILWAUKEE BOY" and "WHITES DANCED WITH NEGROES: MAN WHO CONDUCTED SALOON IS FINED \$100" (Scrapbook, n.a., n.d., City of Milwaukee Historical Scrapbooks Collection). Both of these news stories represent border-crossing anxieties in a late nineteenth-century urban environment where race, class, and gender identities are in flux.

"Solitude" begins,

Laugh, and the world laughs with you;
Weep, and you weep alone,
For the sad old earth must borrow its mirth,
But has trouble enough of its own.
Sing, and the hills will answer;
Sigh, it is lost on the air,
The echoes bound to a joyful sound,
But shrink from voicing care.

This poem—Wilcox's most popular—is framed as a piece of advice, and a warning: If "you" allow others to see your weeping, you will be rejected. The gap between being and acting is stressed (just as it is stressed in the story about the cross-dressing lion tamer), but in Wilcox's poem this gap is assumed to be an inevitable feature of every later nineteenth-century middle-class life. "Solitude" is not moral in the Judeo-Christian sense; rather, it is therapeutic, helping people adapt to an unpredictable, boom-and-bust world where what matters is not how you feel but how you seem to feel. Her poem thus mirrors and responds to the issue of unfixed identities in American life; when in doubt, the poem suggests, fake it.

Wilcox reports that when she published in newspapers, she was accused of "prostituting" herself. The word prostituting may be metaphorical here, but it is a loaded metaphor in the context of later nineteenth-century public life. To succeed in the marketplace, Ella Wheeler presented herself as a sex symbol even as she guarded her virtue. She participated in the erotics of capitalism with her body as well as through her poems, and in one private letter she confesses to feeling like a "carnation in a shop window," evoking Wilde's emblematic flower (Letter to Robert Wilcox, 5 June 1883, Wilcox Papers). Rhonda K. Garelick has argued that in Britain, female celebrities emerged in the 1880s and 1890s, taking advantage of the cultural space opened by the dandy. At the same time, she suggests, they modified the aristocratic aura of dandyism through their manipulation of popular media forms (41–42). However, at least in Wilcox's American case, to occupy a middle-class niche—as opposed to an aristocratic, Swinburnian one—was to be in a constant state of tense negotiation with middle-class norms.

A report of an 1883 interview with Wilcox in the Chicago *Daily News* opens with a description of her appearance:

The eyes are brown. The mouth seems formed less to speak than to quiver; less to quiver than to kiss. Some might add, less to kiss than to curl. Viewed sideways, the closing lines of her lips form, with almost geometrical precision, the curves so well known in the arts of design as the *uma rector* [sic], or cupid's bow.

("Poesy of the Passions")

The reporter's tone is not precisely disrespectful, but it is certainly intimate, assuming that Wilcox is an objet d'art designed for viewing. As a site of middle class pleasure, her body is attractive but not coded as sinful, and indeed the article ends by imagining her as a diva in a kind of betwixt and between, half-Western, half-Eastern paradise: "In Heaven she will probably sit between the Heloises and the Cleopatras" ("Poesy of the Passions").

To escape imputations of sin was a challenge, however, that required not just reflecting the status quo but changing (while not overtly challenging) it. In the literary marketplace of the 1880s, a professional woman like Wilcox was still in danger of being labeled a *professional* woman, and perhaps as a result of this fine line she was obsessed with protecting her reputation. Wilcox was no bohemian in the later mold of Mabel Dodge Luhan or Edna St. Vincent Millay. Her mores were decidedly middle class, and this was part of her market value; she was teaching her public a lesson that twentieth-century consumers take for granted—that celebrity is about promises and fantasy, not the literal delivery of sexual favors.

I have suggested that, thanks in part to the aesthetic craze, the reading public was ready for Wilcox and able to discern that she was a good girl with a bad (and thrilling) patina. But social mores do not change easily or quickly, and in this regard, some of the most tellingly ambivalent readings of the author's famous body during the crucial years of 1882–1883 were produced by her future husband, Robert Wilcox. In his early letters, Robert (I will use first names to avoid confusion) misreads Ella. But Ella doggedly corrects him, as she negotiates what it means to be the poetess of passion, drawing what might be described as a new line between acting and prostitution. She is, as it were, sexy for sexy's sake, advertising her own magnetism and that alone.

This private exchange has ramifications far beyond Ella's private life, because she was negotiating, as I have argued, a new aesthetic of intimate self-display that many women were ready to emulate. In Robert's first letter to Ella, posted from the Westminster Hotel in New York, he describes himself as an "honest admirer" who, while visiting Milwaukee, had watched her "talking to an old man" in a jewelry store. He asks, "Can you not suggest some way in which I can accomplish my earnest desire and thus enable me to enroll myself as a humble friend to the talented little lady that I admire with all honesty?" ([9 October 1882, Wilcox Papers](#)). Despite protestations of honesty, however, he signs his letter "Arthur R. Wilson." His second letter to her persists with this fiction (they still had never formally met), expressing his desire to "share the grate" of a fire with her. His aim is clearly seduction or, as he puts it, "a sort of comradeship that would be more pleasant and durable even than friendship" ([5 November 1882, Wilcox Papers](#)). In subsequent letters, he describes a "Princess," a lady-friend in New York with whom he is having an affair ([2 February 1883, Wilcox Papers](#)). He clearly reads Ella Wheeler as akin to the "Princess," and in one letter he calls her an "Empress" ([15 April 1883, Wilcox Papers](#)). He initially sees her as a public woman—not precisely a prostitute, but certainly an unescorted hotel habitu  whose favors can be procured.

In her responses to Robert, Ella controls her own value while continuing to engage him. She tells him, as bluntly as was possible in the 1880s, that she does not intend to sleep with him: "No, I am not puritanical in my ideas of right and wrong. I am very liberal—though not as liberal as you had hoped. . . . I think I have a fairly good [guiding] light—it gives me a good deal of room in which to roam about and enjoy this palpitating life—but it does *not quite extend to the latch-key*. . . . We can never be the 'comrades' that you wish, but we can be companionable friends." Significantly, though, the reasons she gives for maintaining her virtue involve her class status: "I *have* to be moderately careful, Faust [her nickname for Robert]! . . . I am 'received' in conventional society besides and must not ignore or defy all its customs. And people *do* strike at me at every possible opportunity—but I mean to give them no actual hold on me while I mean to do just about as I please beside" ([3 February 1883, Wilcox Papers](#)). Artificial display, for Ella, is not constraining; it gives her the freedom to do "just about" as she pleases while she keeps the value of her social capital holding steady.

Robert struggles to adjust to this new form of womanhood; after assuming that Ella is a professional woman (and being corrected), he tries to frame her as a private woman, remarking piously,

I shall be completely discouraged if you have the public ovation which you describe during your last visit—I hate crowds, and do not like to think of my dear one being worshipped by everyone. When a lad, I learned to look for the sweetest berries—away from where my companions crowded and that to toss an apple around, like a ball, amongst a crowd of mates made it unpalatable. I do not think I am naturally jealous—I have never been accused of it—but I would shudder as much on kissing a pair of public lips as I would drink out of a public dipper.

[\(11 February 1883, Wilcox Papers\)](#)

There is, he implies, something polluting in the notion of a public woman; Robert's letter evokes both the literal threat of venereal disease and also the threat of visible social disgrace. Ella shoots back,

If you don't like a lady who is run after by crowds—you better just—let me go. I am *not* a flower born to blush unseen. I am no gem, lying in a cave, for you to discover. I have been discovered for years, and every day more people seek me. The world and I are in love with each other. . . . Now if this shocks and disgusts you—why keep away. You can find many more charming and lovely girls who are not public property.

[\(13 February 1883, Wilcox Papers\)](#)

Ella is clearly proud to be "public property." She does not shrink from self-commodification and commerce; indeed, these forces define her. What she objects to is the notion of herself as outside the capitalist fray, waiting passively to be discovered by a man. The terms of respectability are being rewritten here: The "gem in the cave" is no lady; she is part object, a sexualized jewel like Robert's "Princess." However, the "lady run after by crowds" remains a lady in a chaste and lucrative love relationship with the world. This type of lady is possible only in the age of the urban mass media and mechanical reproduction; in such a context, the metaphor of the public dipper is an anachronism, implying as it does a single, low-tech material object. Ella was not being passed around in this way; rather, her circulation was virtual and spectacular, based less on her physical self than on endlessly multiplying images of that self.

Poems of Passion sold thousands and thousands of copies because it portrayed what might be called screen kisses, and behind the screen was not sex but passionate consumerism. At the same time, sex is not irrelevant to the discussion; in the process of selling aestheticism to the masses, Wilcox also helped to produce a new kind of good (though still slightly bad) public sexuality. Part aesthete, part huckster, Wilcox was less a feminist reformer than a mainstream celebrity diva. Readers have long commented bemusedly that Wilcox's scandalous book was actually pretty "innocuous."¹⁰ But this is precisely what made it revolutionary. Wilcox parlayed the success of *Poems of Passion* into a series of gigs as a mainstream self-help writer and advice columnist for the Hearst newspaper chain, churning out advice books such as *A Woman of the World: Her Counsel to Other Peoples' Sons and Daughters*. She did not rebel against middle-class values; she helped to change them, so that by 1904 a "woman of the world" could be a sympathetic advisor rather than a demimondaine.

More broadly, she embodied, in her poems and in her persona, several critical transitions. First, she marked the shift from Judeo-Christian morality to marketplace amorality, a change that affected the implied function of popular poetry because, instead of acting as moral exemplars, poems were now expected to convey sensations. These destabilized cultural values also destabilized the value of poetry as a genre, since it no longer had a commonsense didactic role. Additionally, Wilcox's work reflects changes in the lyric self: No longer an essential, moral character, by 1883 the self was beginning to work instead as a series of pragmatic actions or dramatizations. Ironically, British aestheticism became useful—indeed, instrumental—in the hands of the practical Wilcox. Her Swinburnian verses expressed the inflationary aspirations of middle-class American self-makers and self-dramatizers. Wilcox, then, can be seen as good for the same reason that she verges on bad: By commodifying herself and her poems, she achieved what Richards calls "the perfect recognition of the writer's relation to the

reader," if the reader is understood to be mobile, middlebrow, and eager for instant gratification (207). Or perhaps it is more accurate to echo Nietzsche, her contemporary, and to suggest that she moved poetry *beyond* good and bad into a marketplace where values are reflected, not in morals or even in manners, but in prices.¹¹ And on the open market, Wilcox made poetry pay.

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Notes

- ¹ *Poems of Passion* was written before Ella Wheeler married. To maintain consistency with how her works are usually indexed, I refer to her throughout this essay by her married name, Ella Wheeler Wilcox.
- ² See Emily Stipes Watts 143–45 and Cheryl Walker 117–38. In "'Pomegranate Flowers'" 189–213 and "Critical Clitoridectomy" 235–59, Paula Bennett shows that forms of sexuality were a constant in American poetry, though such sexual explicitness did not achieve mass cultural scandal status until Wilcox pushed the envelope.
- ³ The *Milwaukee Journal* was more sensational and catered to a more working-class readership than its rival paper, the *Milwaukee Sentinel*. Of the two major Milwaukee papers, the upscale *Sentinel* printed more articles sympathetic to Wilcox; it also regularly printed her poetry.
- ⁴ References to Swinburne far outnumber references to other nineteenth-century poets in the contemporary conversation about Wilcox, and this makes sense because her resemblance to Swinburne is so marked. While early newspaper accounts also linked her to Whitman, this seems to have been based solely on their shared status as scandalous poets.
- ⁵ "Tone in Swinburne frequently lapses altogether; he has neither good nor bad manners, but simply none. This, perhaps, aristocratic trait in part excuses his longwindedness for example" (Richards 208n 1).
- ⁶ Walker advances the thesis that nineteenth-century women's poetry is defined by its images of confinement, including, prominently, the caged bird (21–22). This compelling argument applies to many poets, but not, I think, to Wilcox.
- ⁷ Bourdieu describes upper-class crossings (he gives the example of a Rolls Royce owner taking the metro) as "condescension strategies" (472–73). The metro rider's status is actually enhanced in this case.
- ⁸ This letter was reprinted in the *Milwaukee Sentinel*.
- ⁹ While "Solitude" is included in *Poems of Passion*, the version pasted into this scrapbook is from a reprinted media source rather than from a book.

¹⁰. By way of example, I quote, in full, the entry from *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry in English*: Wilcox, Ella Wheeler (1850–1919), was born in Wisconsin, her father a dance-teacher, her precocity encouraged—at the age of 8 she was earning a substantial writing income. Poetry remained her favourite mode, starting with her first collection, *Drops of Water* (1872), which preached temperance, although she also wrote a number of prose volumes, including *The Story of a Literary Career* (1905) and *The Worlds and I* (1918). She snared a national audience when her innocuous *Poems of Passion* (1876) was rejected by the first publisher approached on grounds of "immorality." In 1884 she married Robert Wilcox, and they moved to Connecticut. The forty-odd volumes of verse perpetrated by Wilcox, which evolved from prosy didacticism and pseudo-eroticism to Theosophist mysticism, have deservedly disappeared, her sole claim to poetic fame two lines paraphrased from Shakespeare in "Solitude": "Laugh, and the world laughs with you; / weep [sic], and you weep alone." (Butscher)

¹¹. For a brief discussion of Wilcox in the context of German culture, especially Nietzsche and Wagner, see Horowitz 195.

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