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A COMPANION TO  
**MODERNIST  
POETRY**

EDITED BY

**DAVID E. CHINITZ and GAIL McDONALD**

**WILEY Blackwell**

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## The Georgian Poets and the Genteel Tradition

*Meredith Martin and Erin Kappeler*

In many twentieth-century literary histories, the concepts of an American “genteel tradition” and a British early twentieth-century “Georgian poetry” are described in similar terms: conventional, predictable, old-fashioned. As early as the 1920s, both “genteel” and “Georgian” became monikers of disdain: in America, modernist poets advertised their break with the genteel past, and, in England, “Georgian” poetry was the movement that failed to take shape and was replaced by high modernism. Much is obscured by these histories; indeed, we know that the writers associated with what we now call the modernist avant-garde were products of the very gentility against which they were said to rebel, and in England, poets like Rupert Brooke (the most famous “Georgian” poet) and Ezra Pound participated in rivalries for public affection. Keeping in mind the fundamentally transatlantic nature of literary circulation at the beginning of the twentieth century, this chapter asks in what ways these categories – a genteel tradition, a Georgian poetry – circulated and functioned as primarily nationalistic. What publications, institutions, and exchanges underlay the American cultivation of the “new” as opposed to the “tradition”? And how, in London particularly, did the idea of what was Georgian – and why that mattered – change between 1911 and 1922? This chapter seeks to clarify and complicate the received history of the literary scene at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century in both America and England.

### The “Genteel Tradition”

The “genteel tradition” is understood to refer to American poetry before it found its footing. Genteel poets imitated English Victorian poetry too closely, which led their



poetry to become "stale, unadventurous, and conventional" (Szefer 560), and even "hopelessly nostalgic, prudish, feminine," and "enervated" (DuBois and Lentricchia 12). Though many critics concur that the genteel tradition was the past from which the rapidly modernizing United States needed to break free, few can agree on precisely which poets and works constitute that tradition, in large part because no poets self-identified as members in the way that the Georgian poets did. (There was never a Genteel Poetry anthology, for instance.) Christopher Beach points to the Harvard School of poets (George Santayana, William Vaughn Moody, Trumbull Stickney, and George Cabot Lodge) as the core of the genteel tradition; John Timberman, Newcomb looks to the Fireside poets (William Cullen Bryant, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John Greenleaf Whittier, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and James Russell Lowell); Ellery Sedgwick identifies a diffuse "network" of gentility, instituted by "an American cultural gentry" and comprised of "colleges, literary societies, chautauquas, magazines like the *Atlantic Monthly* and a flourishing didactic literature" (51). Because of the lack of critical consensus about its content, "the genteel tradition" often functions as a catchall term for any poetry that seems to be conservative in form or subject matter. As R. P. Dickey pithily argues, poetry can be classified as genteel if it "uphold[s] traditional moral, social and literary standards in badly crafted forms" (739).

The phrase itself was coined by the Harvard poet and philosopher George Santayana (who emphatically did not identify as genteel) in his 1911 address "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy." Santayana's speech was only tangentially related to literature; his true object was to criticize Romantic idealism (the titular genteel tradition) and to champion modern pragmatism. In describing these philosophies, however, Santayana created a powerful vision of America as the site of cultural innovations that were helping to liberate modern subjects from the confines of European intellectual traditions. Santayana posited that there was something in "the American atmosphere" that was inhospitable to European idealism (61); the very landscape, in its grandeur, forced the American people to return "to experience, to history, to poetry, to the natural science of [their] day," and to turn away from the "arbitrary fancies" of subjective idealism (48, 44). This "native-born American mentality" was only beginning to show itself, according to Santayana, producing a split in the culture between old-world "beliefs and standards" and new world "instincts, practice, and discoveries" (42, 39). Santayana used an architectural metaphor to explain how the two strains coexisted in American intellectual life:

a neat reproduction of [a] colonial mansion . . . stands beside [a] sky-scraper. The American Will inhabits the sky-scraper; the American Intellect inhabits the colonial mansion. The one is the sphere of the American man; the other, at least predominantly, of the American woman. The one is all aggressive enterprise; the other is all genteel tradition. (40)

By aligning American pragmatism with the natural world, innovation, modernity, and masculinity, on the one hand, and a superannuated European idealism with arbi-

trary convention, tradition, and femininity, on the other, Santayana created a powerful framework for critics and poets who wanted to assert the value of contemporary American poetry as the first sign of a new national literature.

John Tomsich has noted that "the genteel tradition" functioned rhetorically rather than descriptively for critics such as Van Wyck Brooks, whose 1915 polemic *America's Coming-of-Age* was "less interested in understanding the past than in creating a new and vital future" (3). Brooks argued that modern poetry, whose forms had yet to be perfected, was the only cultural force that could dialectically reconcile the opposing poles of idealism and pragmatism that Santayana had identified, thereby creating a new, unified American character. Brooks explained that America in the 1910s was "like a vast Sargasso Sea," a "welter of life which has not been worked into an organism," and that the function of modern poetry was to create a "genuine [American] type" out of the heterogeneous national body (164–65). Whitman was the first American poet to attempt such a synthesis, according to Brooks, and although he failed to fuse the "raw materials" of American life into a national type, he helped America to become "[conscious] of its own character." Whitman thus freed American poetry from the grip of the genteel tradition, embodied in a clique of "New York men of letters" – Edmund Clarence Stedman, Richard Henry Stoddard, "and their group" – whose emphasis on style, decorum, and convention kept American poetry in thrall to an English literary tradition (117–21). Ironically, Brooks adopted the idea of a modern, representative poetry that would save America from its genteel past from Stedman, who was the first to use the term "Victorian" as a description of a literary period, and who famously dubbed the late nineteenth century an "interval of twilight." Stedman predicted that the coming post-Victorian dawn would see American poetry emerge as a distinct national tradition that would "correspond to the future of the land itself, – of America now wholly free and interblending" ("Twilight" 800). For Stedman, as for Brooks, the development of a coherent literary tradition and a unified national identity were part of the same historical process. By positing a distinction between a British Victorian tradition and a distinctively American, post-Victorian poetry, Stedman thus helped to produce the terms of the genteel/modern debates that ultimately condemned him as genteel poet, reminding us that, as Michael Cohen argues, genteel poetry was not a "pre-existent field or discourse," but was rather "called . . . into being" by both genteel and modernist critics (166).

Nevertheless, many contemporary critics have taken Brooks's genealogy to be explanatory rather than polemical, and have attempted to distinguish the genteel idealism of Stedman's circle from the realism of Whitman's modernist descendants, transmuting Santayana's struggle between idealism and realism into the struggle between genteel poetry and the so-called new poetry. According to this view, genteel poets "wrote sonnets, odes, and dramatic monologues in imitation of English Victorian poetry" (Beach 8), while modernist poets experimented with the forms of the future. Andrew DuBois and Frank Lentricchia claim that the magazines and anthologies published in the 1910s and 1920s – especially "little magazines" and Louis

Untermeyer's "groundbreaking anthology" *Modern American Poetry* (1919) – provide material evidence of the differences between "the genteel powers and the burgeoning avant-garde" (14), but this is true only if one ignores the significant points of overlap between the genteel and the new poetry. If Untermeyer's anthology was indeed the corrective to Stedman's 1900 *American Anthology* in its promotion of poets "whose work flew in the face of genteel idealism," as F. Brett Cox suggests (221), then it is difficult to explain why Untermeyer included George Edward Woodberry (identified by Willard Thorp as one of Stedman's "heirs"), William Vaughn Moody (whom Beach names as a genteel poet), Thomas Bailey Aldrich (a member of Stedman's circle, added in the 1921 edition of the anthology), and Arthur Davison Ficke, Sara Teasdale, Joyce Kilmer, and many other poets now considered genteel. If we understand both Stedman's and Untermeyer's anthologies as different articulations of the same nationalist literary project, however, these points of contact begin to make sense.

Stedman and Untermeyer both understood turn-of-the-century American poetry to be facing the same problem: poets had "turned away from the forms that best express[ed] the people, choosing instead forms that merely express poetic over-refinement" (Cohen 175). This was particularly problematic in a nation as heterogeneous as America, which badly needed a representative poetry to both construct and mirror a characteristic American type. Stedman argued that the ballad was the only genre that could properly produce such a type, and that John Greenleaf Whittier's ballads in particular, as the direct speech of an imagined "Yankee race," could most effectively "absorb the heterogeneous cultural traditions at play in America and condense them into the distinctive American type" (Cohen 175). Untermeyer, by contrast, argued that no extant genre could create a national identity. The new poetry, which encompassed both the "most conventional metres" and "the freest free-verse" (*Modern American Poetry* x), pointed the way to a future form that could absorb and express the nation; it had turned poetry back into "the organ of the people, an instrument which registers not only the music of the moment but anticipates the harmonies of tomorrow" ("Spirit" 99). Eventually, he believed, America's heterogeneous poetic forms and its diverse population would become a "startling fusion of races and ideas," expressed in a singular hybrid form that had not yet been fathomed (*New Era* 13).

Stedman's endorsement of Whittier's ballads as the poetry of the future has come to "seem hopelessly genteel" (Cohen 175), while Untermeyer's more catholic taste has allowed him to appear more prescient. Both the genteel tradition and the new poetry that these figures have come to stand for, however, can be understood as "productive fictions" that shaped modern American poetics, as Sarah Ehlers argues. By "describing poetry as if it were in grave danger," Stedman and Untermeyer created "opportunities] to exalt and thus preserve an ideal of poetry" (47). Though their visions of an ideal American poetry differed, their nationalist literary projects were structurally identical.

### "Georgian" Poetry

Unlike the fairly abstract "genteel tradition," the term "Georgian" is attached to a series of five anthologies, published by Harold Monro's Poetry Bookshop and edited by Edward Marsh between 1912 and 1922. But while "Georgian Poetry" is undeniably a thing, what that thing was has received scant attention. Over the course of ten years of anthologizing, we find not so much a unified coterie but a useful means of tracking the evolving ways that English poets view poetry's role in national culture as well as England's role on a quickly and violently changing international stage.

Scholars have spent quite a bit of effort thinking about the period between 1909 and 1922 in order to characterize the rise of avant-garde modernism, but they have failed to characterize the "Georgian" poets as anything other than failures. John Press neatly summarizes:

Some writers are at pains to deny this title to any poet of merit who flourished between 1912 and 1922. Robert Graves, we are assured, was not a Georgian, nor were D. H. Lawrence, Edward Thomas, Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, and Edmund Blunden. Whether or not they appeared in *Georgian Poetry* is, according to such critics, totally irrelevant. What matters is the quality of their work: if it is good it cannot be Georgian; if it is Georgian it must, ipso facto, be feeble. (1)

Peter Childs agrees that

the expression "Georgian poetry" has almost become a term of abuse. To be a Georgian poet is to be a bad poet in nearly all critical commentary since the 1930s, even though in the 1910s and 1920s [the "Georgians"] were enormously popular and [were] praised by such independent minded critics as D. H. Lawrence. It is the canonization of modernism that has made the Georgians appear so conservative and unoriginal. (26)

As Linda Williams writes: "Georgianism perhaps epitomizes the popular notion of English poetry – parochial, solid and unironic, celebrating English rural life, particularly the home counties variety" (65). Unironic (despite Thomas Hardy, that great ironist very much alive in the Georgian age), unoriginal, and conservative: Georgian poetry, like the "genteel tradition," has become the abstract catchall for the kind of poetry against which the various movements associated with experimental modernism could react, even though "Georgian poetry" and experimental modernism emerged in tandem, shared many actors, and participated and competed in the same print market for the same audiences.

If Santayana's 1911 essay served to name an inchoate literary "sensibility" that then led to various articulations of American nationalist literary projects, Marsh's first *Georgian Poetry* anthology, published in 1912, openly consolidated a national literary sensibility by its very title. "Georgian" was definitely English, distinguished only

from what had been "Edwardian" or "Victorian." Robert H. Ross describes how both "Left" and "Center" camps battled to decide who would best be able to represent real life in real language. The poets of the period rebelled against Humanism – responsible, wrote T. E. Hulme, for "the state of slush in which we have the misfortune to live" (80) – "Academism" (or formalism or traditionalism in the arts), and Victorianism. "Almost all the young Georgian rebels of whatever coterie – realists or Vorticists, Futurists or Imagists, Ezra Pound or Rupert Brooke, Richard Aldington or Lascelles Abercrombie – can be said in varying degrees to exemplify these tendencies" (Ross 22). The anthology's aims were quite clear: it was a collection meant to profit from a rising interest in poetry based mostly in the circulation of newspapers and little magazines, the same circulation and marketing that benefited the rise of what we now call experimental modernism. John Masefield's "The Everlasting Mercy" made financially solvent the *English Review*, where it was first printed (it occupied forty-four pages). This was, according to Ross, "the first book of verse since [Kipling's] *Barrack Room Ballads* to succeed in titillating the British public by poetry which managed to be at once ribald and respectable" (13). Not at all conventional or traditional by 1911 standards, the *English Review* blacked out the word "bloody" eleven times. Here is a typical scene (before Saul Kane, liar, cheat, and drunken carouser is saved):

I'd often heard religious ranters  
And put them down as windy canters,  
But this old mother made me see  
The harm I done by being me.  
Being both strong and given to sin  
I tracted weaker vessels in.

So back to bar to get more drink  
I didn't dare begin to think,  
And there were drinks and drunken singing,  
As though this life were dice for flinging;  
Dice to be flung, and nothing furdur,  
And Christ's blood just another murder. (70–71)

A long, narrative conversion poem in the style of Kipling (but with much more graphic bodily detail), Masefield's poem was so successful that it sparked Harold Monro and Edward Marsh to launch the anthology series.

Marsh's prefatory note declares:

Few readers have the leisure or the zeal to investigate each volume as it appears; and the process of recognition is often slow. This collection, drawn entirely from the publications of the past two years, may if it is fortunate help the lovers of poetry to realize that we are at the beginning of another great "Georgian period" which may take rank in due time with the several great poetic ages of the past.

Though *Rhythm* had published Holbrook Jackson's essay "A Plea for Revolt in Attitude" in 1911 and Lawrence Binyon's "The Return to Poetry" in 1912, it was Marsh's anthology that framed the idea of a renaissance memorably in national terms. "English poetry," Marsh declared, was "now once again putting on a new strength and beauty." Indeed, if we read "Georgian" as a representation of changing ideas of English national culture, it would make sense that the Kipling-like verses of Masefield would seem an apt representation of a past England – an England grappling with the threat of waning power.

Marsh published *Georgian Poetry* anthologies five times over the course of ten very tumultuous years, for England and for poetry. The first review of the series captures the spirit of the "novel force" of poetry in all its guises in 1912: "There is no escaping the fact that the spread of scientific knowledge and the enormous modern growth of interest in sociological and economic questions find a perceptible reflection in the new poetry" ("Georgian" 55). The unsigned review credits the poems with a knack for "scientific observation," and notes "one of the most marked technical developments of Georgian verse – the disappearance of the adjective" (55). What, to this reviewer, is scientific observation is to Edward Thomas merely "narrative or meditative verse." He writes, in 1913, "It shows much beauty, strength, and mystery, and some magic – much aspiration, less defiance, no revolt – and it brings out with great cleverness many sides of the modern love of the simple and primitive, as seen in children, peasants, savages, early men, animals, and Nature in general" (67). Edmund Gosse goes so far as to call the first 1911–12 collection "at once an anthology and a manifesto" (73), yet he cautions:

Many of these new poets, in their anxiety to be spontaneous, fluid, unfettered, are afraid to allow the essential character of their metre to be felt. There is in many of them an incessant shifting of the stress, which ends by tiring the ear or even producing a sense of weakness. No doubt there was a great temptation to avoid the exaggerated sonority of the late Victorians. But the young poets are some of them in danger of dislocating their verse in the act of striving to make it supple. (76–77)

The potential for weakness is dangerous: the poets should strive, but not too much. By 1916, Gosse's warnings were echoed by a number of reviewers, most notably Arthur Waugh, who reviewed *Georgian Poetry, 1911–1912* with *Georgian Poetry, 1913–1915* and Ezra Pound's *The Catholic Anthology, 1914–1915*. He writes that "English poetry has been approaching a condition of poetic liberty and license which threatens, not only to submerge old standards altogether, but, if persevered in to its logical limits, to hand over the sensitive art of verse to a general process of literary democratization" (143). Gosse presents Pound as a champion of the "cleverness" that marks the new Georgian poetics, and he cautions against it, feeling, perhaps, that the dangerous infusion of Yankee ingenuity would infect the steadfast English national meters. By 1917, when the third anthology is published, Edward Shanks asserts that "the new volume of *Georgian Poetry* makes something of a break in the continuity of the series; and it should



effectually dispel an idea, which is still prevalent in some quarters, that it is no more than the expression of a single school or group or even clique" (199). Nine new writers joined the third volume: W. J. Turner, J. C. Squire, Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg, Robert Nichols, Robert Graves, John Freeman, Maurice Barins, and Herbert Asquith. Though three of them (Graves, Sassoon, and Rosenberg) were soldiers, the third volume was not seen as competition for the hundreds of soldier poetry anthologies that had begun to appear by then. Yet it, and the two postwar Georgian anthologies, could not be read without comparison, on the one hand, to the soldier poetry boom, and, on the other, to the emergence of Pound's circle and its influence.

Indeed, by the time of the fourth volume's publication, the excess of war poetry anthologies and war poetry in the papers effaced any distinction that the "Georgian" poets may have had, so much so that a parody (*Gorgeous Poetry*, 1920) appeared – a sure sign that "Georgian" had become a genre unto itself, a dangerously escapist genre that looked up into the trees nostalgically when there was blood on the ground. Even Sassoon, who had appeared in the very fourth volume he was reviewing, and who Wilfred Owen felt had honored him with membership in the school of Georgians ("I am held peer by the Georgians," Owen exalted in 1917 [172]), mocked the preponderance of trees in the collection: "a cursory glance might lead one to suppose that this is a tree-anthology" (249). He asks:

Can any form of spontaneous ink-spilling be reckoned among proposed substitutes for the blood-shedding which has so recently provided our civilization with spiritual uplift? Can a plain fountain pen be mightier than a short magazine-loading Lee-Enfield rifle? I had not considered this problem until I was asked to write a signed review of *Georgian Poetry*. (249)

While Sassoon concludes, "it's not a bad book, on the whole" (251), his 1920 sense that poetry in general was not doing what it could or should be doing for "our civilization" is evident. Amy Lowell cinched the Georgian poets' demise with her review "Weary Verse": the poetry is "so dreadfully tired." She asks, "Is this the exhaustion of the war, or is it the debility of an old habit of mind deprived of the stimulus of a new inspiration?" (254). In American poetry, Lowell finds freshness and vitality. In Britain, by contrast,

the stale stuff is not merely stale, it is pathological. We know what these young men want to say; the strong spirits among them have told us: they want to say how deeply they love England, how much the English countryside (the most beautiful countryside in the world) means to them; they detest war, and long for the past which cannot come back. (256)

In the years between 1912 and 1922, England's sense of itself and of what kind of poetry would or should represent it was changing. The past idea of England that was already on the wane in 1912 becomes absurd by 1922, a moment in which it appears

that poetry cannot do anything to unify a nation's sense of itself, and perhaps should not try to. Lowell's turn to America, and a critical turn in general toward a "new" poetics, must be read in the context of a loss of faith in England as a unified national culture with a unified national literature, and of a new faith in an American culture and literature poised to take over the empire of letters.

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## The New Poetry

John Timberman Newcomb

In the decades after the Civil War, as life in the United States was shaped increasingly by the forces of urban-industrial modernity, the genteel custodians of the nation's literary culture began to treat poetry as a mode of escape, the antithesis and antidote to the accelerating pace and growing impersonality of everyday experience. Deploring the "unpoetic" times, they clung to rules of form and elevated standards of diction codified decades or even centuries earlier, and demanded portrayals of American life in nostalgic pastoral imagery, as if by excluding the voices and spaces of the city they could nullify the destabilizing effect of modernity itself. In this climate, as the six long-revered "Fireside poets" – William Cullen Bryant, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, James Russell Lowell, and John Greenleaf Whittier – died off with no plausible canonical successors, it seemed to many that all the great poems had been written (Newcomb, *Would Poetry Disappear?* 109–11). After 1890, the situation worsened into a serious crisis in which commentators wondered whether poetry in America was withering away as "the rickety dream-child of neurotic aestheticism" (Greenslet 52), unable to compete with mass-produced cultural commodities that left little room for contemplation or linguistic nuance. In a cultural economy dominated by dime novels, mass-circulation periodicals, million-selling popular songs, and reams of instantly forgettable light verse, it was generally assumed that literary poetry could never support itself, and that even one magazine devoted to it was an economic impossibility. Younger poets knew they were likely to see a volume of their verse only by paying for it themselves. Not surprisingly, the verse Americans produced between 1890 and 1910 is deeply shadowed by anxieties of belatedness and self-doubt.

As it turned out, however, these two decades of crisis were not American poetry's last whimpers, but prelude to its greatest achievements. Although with a century's