Modern Dogma and Fuzzy Genre in Fourteen-line Design: 

[mis]Signification, Subversion, and Americanism in 
the Sonnets of Edna St. Vincent Millay and E. E. Cummings

The sonneteers of the early twentieth century Modernist movement hold a curious position in the grand narrative of Western literary history. In an era whose purported credo was to “make it new”, and whose central figures condemned openly any hint of a slavish adherence to established literary principles—especially those principles concerning the arbitrary and stilted prescriptions of meter and rhyme typically associated with the English verse tradition—, Modernist sympathetic figures like Edna Saint Vincent Millay, Robert Frost, and E. E. Cummings chose to write at length in a sonnet form whose conventions—traditionally regulated by and loaded with connotations of formality, rigidity, pomposity, imperialism, and, interestingly, Britishness—stood in apparent, antagonistic contrast to the experimentalist Modern literary mentality. The paradox apparent in the popular American surging of the sonnet form during the peak of Modernism, however, is, like the blossoming of eco-centric Romanticism during the peak of Industrialism, puzzling, but ultimately reconcilable. It seems inappropriate that the sonnet, whose features connote formality and limit, should be able to survive to any substantial degree in an environment whose guiding voices were diametrically opposed to the sonnet’s apparently necessarily restrictive foundations—however, as vehicles which, once named Sonnets, worked to connote this rigidity, formality and Britishness, sonnets were useful to American Modernists as ironic literary tools which, packed with these connotations, could be used as instruments of subversion. That is, when Modernists used the sonnet as Modernists, they used it not as a device which merely communicates the poem’s content, but which also makes a comment about the conventional mode by which this content was framed. These Modern sonneteers worked to challenge the sonnet from within and, in doing so, “make it new” by using what was, by consequence of history and textbooks, apparently long ago “made old.”

According to reductive, formalist, literary handbook-ical thought, the sonnet form as a literary tool derives its utility from its brevity, its characteristic immediacy, and its capacity to crystallize a poetic moment; and it follows, according to this mentality, that it is primarily to this efficacy and precision, and not to its cultural reputation, that the sonnet owes its long life—that, like the Roman arch, its invention was inevitable, and that its historical popularity serves therefore merely as the consequence of its utility, and not as the ouroburo-cyclical, self-sustaining process (that is, popularity breeding further popularity) which keeps it alive.

Fundamentalist Formalist T. W. H. Crosland, in his prescriptive tome The English Sonnet (useful chiefly as a primary text which reveals by demonstration the stultifying character of extremist formalist prescriptivism) insists stuffily “[that the sonnet] is neither a convention, nor an arbitrary pedantically contrivance” (35); and even modern, critical approaches to the sonnet seem to valorize, in terms that essentialize and naturalize the value of the sonnet form, the “seemingly inexhaustible capacity of this brief form to express the thoughts and feelings of different men in different times” (White 1). Most curiously, Walzer, in his 1996 essay Natural Classicism and the Modernist Sonnet documents the attempts of some critics to naturalize the metrics of the sonnet as an inevitable construct of the neurological facts of the human brain, which, according to these critics, maintains a biologically insurmountable “three-second present tense for the human
auditory system,” which has shaped the development and preservation of the sonnet as a form which is not only culturally valuable, but which is built into the human evolutionary project (85).

A cursory contemporary-critical glance at these essentializing lines of thought, however, exposes the shaky and over-reaching assumptions on which they are founded: to say that there is something essentially and practically special about a fourteen-line poem (imbued thick with rather arbitrary aesthetic regulations) that allows it, unlike any other poetic form, to express satisfactorily ideas that no other form could adequately express is a naïve and optimistic stretch. Were the sonnet of such special, essential value, it would, for example, not have been so susceptible as it has been to the periods of abandonment and resurgence, fad and foible to which it has historically been vulnerable. That is, historical evidence suggests that whether an author wrote a sonnet or not—and the reason for choosing to write a sonnet—had more to do with whether sonnets were in vogue during his or her lifetime than with any transcendental merit which the sonnet for inherently maintains.

That’s not to say that the sonnet isn’t intrinsically a useful mode of poetics—and the curiously pervasive presence of the sonnet in early twentieth-century Modernist poetry does probably have something to do with its utility as a brief poetic form; however, because there are many brief poetic forms available to (or even inventable by) modern writers, the choice to write a sonnet must necessarily be rooted in something more than mere formal utility. That is, in writing a sonnet, a modern sonneteer is consciously evoking a rich, implication-loaded history of sonnet-ness (whether factual or historically constructed) which arrives conveniently, ready-loaded with associations and undertones that exist independent of the work’s textual content. That is, were it possible to create a special, hollow, theoretical sonnet absent of content, connotation, or even words, even this hollow hole-where-verse-should-be would, by nature of its sonnethood, be necessarily and irrevocably loaded with culturally constructed shades of nobility, precision, and formality. That is, to write a poem of fourteen lines, no matter its content, is in the western tradition, a choice which itself communicates ideas about the poet and poem, and which demands that the poem’s reader acknowledge the work not merely as an independent and standalone literary artifact, but rather as a sort of literary quotation which owes its existence to and demands an understanding of the grand histories and conventions of Occidental literature, serving either to embrace and exploit the tradition or, in mocking it, subvert it.

In the case of the sonnet in the Modernist American literary moment, the connotations therein evoked and the use to which these connotations are spent constitute a particularly interesting web of meaning which entangles deliberate subversions of/rejections of/reverences for Occidental literary convention that, in light of the historically British origin of the English-language sonnet, work to articulate something about the translation of conventional poetics onto the ‘American’ identity. That is, there is a taste in the sonnets of these American Modernists something like the flavor of a migratory, adoptive interception; of an assertion of America’s status as the new home of poetry written in the English language; of the revolutionary declaration of America as the rightful inheritor to British literature’s respectable but now-archaic literary crown. The sonnet, is, after all, the nomadic bird of the poetic spectrum, and has traditionally been linked to the current home of literature in the western tradition. It followed great literature from Italy, to France, to Britain—and it follows, according to pro-American metanarrative literary thought, then, that it should follow it again to America, and that, in claiming the sonnet as its own, America should claim also its spot from Britain in the story of Western literature. That is, in adopting and adapting the sonnet, Modernist American poets did something to speak of the American poetic consciousness and of the place of the American poet
in the grand narrative of western poetry as the inheritor of a sonnet form which had emigrated from Italy to northern Europe, from northern Europe to England, and, potentially, from England to America.

The tone and color of a sonnet did, during the Modernist period, seem to stink of Britishness and stultifying convention; and even today the sonnet has to it something of a tinge of lifeless, unnecessary custom—and the adoption and alteration of the then-Anglophilic form by American writers is tinged, then, with sensations of revolution and reinvention as related to the American identity. And that Edna St. Vincent Millay and E. E. Cummings—two of early twentieth-century America’s most prominent sonneteers, and generally, two of its most popular poets—chose, in a theory-heavy and didactic a time as the Modernist period, to write at such length in so academically condemned a form as the sonnet indicates that they had something in mind of subversion and experimentation when they wrote.

So the story goes, as related by the surprisingly well-populated school of critics whose focus is the Modernist sonnet (a school in which a dichotomy between Cummings and Millay is standard practice), these two sonneteers each in his or her own way worked to defy the entrenched, connoted sonnet tradition, and, in doing so, (whether deliberately or incidentally) made a statement about literary theory and about America’s place in the western literary tradition. Millay’s and Cummings’s sonneteering subversions were, the story goes, inverse and complementary to each other. Millay in her sonnets defied the purported ‘traditional’ subject matter of the sonnet (that is, its nobility, and its loftiness) while obeying with fair strictness its conventional aesthetic guidelines; and, Cummings, supposedly, worked to the inverse, deifying the sonnet’s traditional aesthetic sensibilities, while respecting, for the most part, its customarily high-minded/lovey-dovey thematic conventions. Though this dichotomy is founded on fundamentally misrepresented, mainstream assumptions about the history of the sonnet—and though its advocates must, further, in order to defend their dichotomy, make monolithic assumptions about the character of Cumming’s and Millay’s poetry, and in doing so must therefore subject their critical thesis to eminent deconstructibility—the dichotomy is generally accurate, and is useful as a reductive starting point in tracing the ways in which Millay and Cummings worked to reject, reinvent, and reinforce the Brit-born English language sonnet tradition, this time flavored distinctly American.

Before analyzing the machinery of what exactly it was that American Modernist sonneteers were subverting and embracing when they subverted and embraced the sonnet form, however, it is necessary first to describe and understand the connotation of The Sonnet, as it stood in the Modernist literary moment. Huang-Tiller in her dissertation The Power of the Meta-Genre: Cultural, Sexual, and Racial Politics of the American Modernist Sonnet quotes a passage from a textbook put to use in one of Cummings’s Harvard writing courses, the literary classifications of which Cumming’s must have held at least a passing familiarity. Raymond Alden, in this textbook English Verse Specimens Illustrating its Principles and History, says, of the sonnet, that “[i]t is suited, of course, only for the expression of dignified and careful thinking; and the difficulty of giving it unity and confining the context to the precise limit of fourteen lines has made perfect success in the form a rare attainment” (rfd. in Huang-Tiller 126). It seems appropriate that an eccentric like Cummings would have found a definition like this—and the comfy/cozy Longfellownian tradition which it represented—positively repellant.

This mode of high minded, prestigious sonnetspeak—which loads the form with eminent regard as if this prestige were naturally characteristic of the form—is by no means limited to this particular textbook, and is, as documentary evidence suggests, characteristic of the Modernist
period’s literary pedagogical methodology. In his 1917 book *The English Sonnet*, for example, Crosland provides a lengthy survey of the sonnet as it has appeared and survived in English letters; but, rather than work descriptively in order to reflect the form as it has actually existed throughout history, Crosland works as a constructivist, and at one point even outlines fifteen broad—and at times humorous—assertions about the sonnet. “1) That it belongs to essentially the highest poetry. [and] 2) That it is the corner-stone of English poetry” are the first of his mythologizing claims, and are no less absurd than his assertion “7) That all the finest poets have been either fine sonneteers or unconscious workers in the sonnet movement” (Crosland 35). These general and prestigious assertions, however, stand insignificant in comparison to Crosland’s twenty-one high-minded “rules” for sonnet composition, which include widely accepted sonnet standards like “15) There can be only one legitimate break or turn or pause in a sonnet, namely, that between the octet and sestet” (93) and “16) The subject matter of a sonnet must be emotional or reflective, or both” (93); but introduces to sonnet pomposity new, narrow, personal absurdities like “5) Words ending in ‘ty,’ ‘ly,’ and ‘cy’ must not be used as rhymes whether on octet or sestet” (89) and “17) . . . it must be . . . entirely free from . . . technical and scientific nomenclature, and names with unpoetic associations, such as ‘gramaphone,’ ‘telephone,’ and ‘cinematograph,’” (95), even going so far as to ban from the sonnet “compound words” and “too many lines beginning with ‘and’” (95). It was this stilted backdrop against which Millay and Cummings wrote.

It’s easy to see that, in the Modernist period, The Sonnet must have seemed like a sanctimonious literary relic which, like the Catholic church to Luther, must have appeared to the Modernists too packed with stultifying, arbitrary tradition and contrivance to allow for any literary innovation which didn’t necessitate a complete break from the form—and so Millay’s and Cumming’s choices to adopt the form merit analysis. What is particularly interesting about the choice of the Modernist sonneteer to write sonnets for the sake of The Sonnet’s socio-cultural connotations is that, in evoking the traditional implications of The Sonnet Tradition, a contemporary sonneteer is, in actuality, evoking connotations which are based on a basically *false, fallible, and contemporarily constructed* model of the history of the form. The sonnet as we know it, as we teach it, and as sonneteers Modernist and otherwise must themselves certainly have known it throughout recent literary history, is a noble device, packed dense with sensations of prestige and canonical, dogmatized high literature. The tradition of the ‘prestigious sonnet’, as the research of Dr. Gillian Huang-Tiller indicates, is not rooted in the sonnet’s ancient history, but is, rather, mostly an artificial projection of modern academics on a poetic form that, even so late as the nineteenth century, connoted a relatively cosmopolitan, lazily-defined, and historically folksy-vulgar tradition. It is important to examine this historically (mis)constructed backdrop in order to understand the Sonnet not as a form which necessitates certain essential qualities, but as a fluid device which can be manipulated in order to play with its connotation and meaning.

The sonnet was born in the poetry surrounding the thirteenth-century Italian emperor Frederick II, whose literary proto-Renaissance court was rooted in a noble but unlearned tradition of vernacular troubadours who came ultimately to fashion out of various Italian folk forms an apparently consistent composite poem of fourteen lines, of which thirty-five contemporary examples exist today (Spiller 16). According to Michael R. G. Spiller in his history *The Development of the Sonnet*, this early sonnet primarily reflected, as it does today, connotations of high love, literature, and noble love (from the perspective of gazing, masculine reality), and worked, from the beginning, in the strict structural framework though which we know the sonnet today; however, speckles in Spiller’s own history reveal the potential fault in
these assumptions, and Huang-Tiller’s thesis works in many ways to contradict this vision of a sonnet whose form was firm from the start. And even Spiller, who insists that the sonnet had a readable ‘Sonnet Character’ from its beginning, admits for example that one of the sonnet’s strengths was in its useful status as a hollow, unfixed poetic form and that

“[had] it involved . . . ideas of decorum of subject or lexis, then the sonnet might never have been extended to the world of the piazza and the market; existing, however, simply as a [pliable, fluid] form . . . it received a wider and wider range of material, until to every ‘high’ element there was a corresponding ‘low’ one somewhere in the sonnet repertoire” (26).

Spiller further insists that the sonnet reached later generations loaded with suggestions about meter and rhyme, but absent of any prescriptions regarding subject matter, arriving “almost as pure form, without and classical theory prescribing tone and content” (26); and on this point he and Huang-Tiller are in agreement: “the function of the sonnet,” according to the scholar, “originally fluid, had been formalized as a ‘genteel’ mirror to reflect the ‘privileged’ masculinity reality or unreality as well as love in abstraction by the turn of the twentieth century” (Huang-Tiller 6). That is, The Sonnet’s ‘traditional’ subject matter (that is, its nobility and prestige) is, in semiotic terms, a sign whose signifier reliably indicates nobility, loftiness, and strict legitimacy, but whose factual, historical, central signified is basically vacant. That is, the history of the sonnet, from which the form gleans its air of aristocratic legitimacy, has, by modern scholarship and reductive textbookery, according to Gillian Huang-Tiller’s thesis, been misrepresented and misconstrued to the point where it resembles its origins only by coattail association and by consequence of name.

But Huang-Tiller’s research indicates that even the apparently safe assertion that the sonnet was, at its thirteenth-century birth, subject to firm and fast rules of convention regarding its form (that is, its supposedly well-prescribed length, rhyme, and meter) is worth calling into question. Arguing that much of the way we think about the sonnet’s form was crystallized by the advent of modern editorial and typographical choices, Huang-Tiller uses as evidence the original manuscript of an early Italian sonnet which, lain out horizontally (in contrast to our vertical conception of the sonnet form) and divided into two columns, each of seven lines, seems to indicate that our notion of such fundamental elements of the Italian Sonnet as the turn, the sestet, and the octave might be coincidences of scansion, and illusions of modern analysis rather than the deliberate choice of seminal sonneteers (29).

The claim that the sonnet has its roots a relatively organic, folk poetic form does have credibility; but to stretch this history, and to insist that this folk tradition was attached to an environment which invited or necessitated regal or prestigious themes is to deny historical evidence and to attach to the sonnet a prestige which it may not originally have possessed. What The Sonnet connotes today, then, according to Gillian Huang-Tiller’s thesis, has little to do with these folk roots, or even with these early regal affiliations, and everything to do with the misrepresentations, either deliberate or accidental, of the sonnet’s mythos—and, in turn, everything to do with the fairly recent historical construct of the English sonnet. In determining exactly when and where the sonnet “progressed from a vernacular rhyme for expressing love and personal emotion . . . to a formal construct with a classical, rhetorical underpinning, alienated from its original subjects” (42), Huang-Tiller points to the early nineteenth century, over six hundred years after the sonnet’s invention; and, in fact, points to a single hand responsible for its valorization.
According to Huang-Tiller’s reading, the notion of the sonnet as a prestigious and noble poetic form was an idea manufactured almost single-handedly and prescriptively by editor Capel Loft in his 1813 sonnet anthology *Laura*. Tiller refers to Loft’s historical revision as “an ingenuous textual recreation of the genre, as well as an artificial attempt to imbue it with poetic prestige,” insisting that he brazenly—and in grandiose terms of ‘perfect poetry’ never before associated with the then-humble sonnet—framed the Sonnet as a crystallized form, essentially noble in its themes and origins, consequently instilling the Sonnet with something like a classical esteem, just by saying so (42).

A careful look at the history of the Sonnet reveals that, before the publication of this anthology, the form maintained a vernacular and lighthearted connotation. Chaucer didn’t use the form at all, and so Huang-Tiller postulates that the form demonstrably must not, by Chaucer’s time, have developed its modern prestige (26). Further, the work of English Renaissance poets, who used the word ‘sonnet’ variously and interchangeably with words like ‘ditty’—the irregular sonneting, for example, of figures like Donne (who labeled poems ‘sonnets’ which have no traceable traditional sonnet formality to them, and whose *Songs and Sonnets* contains exactly zero poems whose lengths are fourteen lines) and Shakespeare (whose sonnets were contemporarily “perceived[... formally,...] as quatorains” [Huang-Tiller 43])—speak to the fluidity and laxness of the sonnet form during the English Renaissance. And the very commonness of the sonnet form during its Elizabethan vogue—“how common and how easy [was] sonnet-writing for the would-be gentleman,” Spiller insists (123)—speaks to the unprivileged, over-available, and basically ordinary nature the form must have connoted by the end of its fad. The mutability of the sonnet form speaks to its capacity as not merely a limited device which can contain only specific themes, but as a tool which can contain (and has contained in its history) any number of themes—and so, it’s necessary, before looking at the subversive sonnets of Millay and Cummings to understand the sonnet as an unstable genre, in order to demystify the myth of the sonnet as a form naturally predisposed to encapsulate a poetic moment, or a form suited essentially and perfectly for the articulation of unrequited love. That is, this destabilization helps us to understand the sonnet as it is, and not as literary historical thought has constructed it: that is, it helps us see it as an essentially hollow device which holds only the connotations which history has attached to it, and which is not biologically inclined to any particular thematic leaning.

In spite of its reputation being partly the product of historical, revisionist (mis)construction the sonnet’s connotation as lifeless and aristocratic was, by the dawn of Modernism, nonetheless entrenched irrevocably into literary culture, and this (mis)construction impacted to a considerable degree the ways in which the poetry and reputations of Cummings and Millay were received and perceived in their era, and the eras which followed. The sonnet’s stultifying connotation lives on even today, and continues to influence our perception of these poets’ reputations, as evidenced by the back flap of *The Collected Poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, who précis seems to anticipate that the modern reader, informed by some kind of enlightened literary consciousness, should and will be repelled by the notion of a sonnet, as if any sonnet represented a dead and exhausted tradition regardless of its content, and insists, optimistically and apologetically that “Millay lost none of her vitality when she turned to sonnets...” (Norma Millay, back flap). And so The Sonnet as Millay and Cummings knew it—and even as educated twenty-first century readers still tend mockingly to perceive it—was rigid, regal, masculine, and rule-based. And it was these undertones with which Modernist sonneteers
approach and subverted the form of the sonnet—and, in particular, how these American sonneteers approached the sonnet as a distinctly, historically British device.

It would be a mistake to label Edna Saint Vincent Millay an ardent and intentional Americanist; and any effort to prove that she meant in her poetry deliberately to articulate something descriptive about The American Identity would require substantial critical misrepresentation. It would be imprudent, however, to ignore the impact that Millay, especially through her sonnets, had on the identity of 1920s American feminists and the impact she therefore had on forging the bits and pieces of a growing American literary and social identity—and so, though she seemed reluctant in her lifetime to attach herself to the organized feminist movement (or any sort of institution, really), Millay did nonetheless impact irrevocably the climate of the new, distinctly American feminist literary scene. Furthermore, it would be difficult to read many of Millay’s more amorous and brazenly sexual sonnets as anything but reactions to the tradition of Victorian British woman sonneteers like Elizabeth Barrette Browning who, though speaking through the traditional /I/ of the sonnet form, did little to announce or celebrate the perspective of the woman, opting instead passively to reflect, from the prostrate woman’s perspective, the implicitly indisputable fact of the Petrarchan sonnet’s characteristic masculine gaze.

In order to understand intimately the meaning of Millay’s sonneteering, it is important to look critically at the lady-sonneteer cultural context against which Millay was self-consciously working. Walzer notes that many of Millay’s sonnets constituted a matter of topicality which was, at the time of composition, “without precedent in the history of the sonnet tradition”—that is, the theme of the “sexually liberated woman, claiming a similar freedom and power that male personae have claimed for hundreds of years in the sonnet tradition . . . .” (88). The received history of the sonnet is, in truth, a connoted history tainted permanently with the interests and perspective of the male gaze, which is, in the western sonnet tradition, employed more often than not with the objective of paralyzing and objectifying the type figure of the distant, voiceless, unrequiting female love interest. And though Spiller notes that there are examples even in the very beginning of the sonnet’s history of sonnets written from the perspective of a woman (15), the Sonnet as Edna Saint Vincent Millay approached and inverted/subverted it was a genre rooted in overt, covert, penetrating chauvinism. The very notion of the Petrarchan conceit is one which reflects and perpetuates an unavoidably macho mentality—and even the vocabulary of the criticism surrounding Petrarchan sonnet sequences has served to crystallize the chauvinism of the sonnet form, with terminology like Blazon legitimizing with formality and nomenclature the petrifying and objectifying quality of the masculine sonneteer’s pen. This masculine-oriented sonnet tradition, then, works as a vehicle for Millay, along with other feminist sonneters to work within a patriarchal literary construct in order to defy, subvert, and expose it. As Huang-Tiller indicates, “[as] the sonnet [became] a form able to promulgate the idea of manliness, subverting the expectation of the genre from within [became] an efficient weapon for modernist women sonneteers to revolt against the idea of woman as a masquerade for men” (188)

Most of Millay’s sonnets follow closely, in most ways, the conventions of the sonnet tradition: in basically formal, fourteen-line, iambic stanzas, these sonnets relate—like the sonnet sequences of Wyatt, Surrey, and Shakespeare—the history of the speaker’s personal, romantic affairs with a small cast of characters whose identities can be traced through hints and association dropped, both within and without (in Millay’s case, in her letters) the text. This basic formal conventionalism makes very apparent the unconventional nature of Millay’s sonnets’ subject matter, and also draws attention to the subversion of the Anglo-European vision of
heterosexual love which dominated (and dominates still) the cultural and social environment of the western experience. Even the female sonneteers of the Victorian era, who ought to have given voice to the woman’s perspective in their work, instead helped only to preserve and make reverent the tradition of the masculine gaze, and to project on their own reality the construct of sonnetlove as it had been imagined through a western, chauvinistic tradition.

The difference between sonnets like Elizabeth Barret Browning’s “How do I love thee” (White 107)—which valorizes her masculine subject to the point of self-deprecation, accepting implicitly and without question her role as object—and Millay’s “If I should learn, in some quite casual way”, in which the poet casts as ironic analysis of the masculine gaze, wherein the unrequiting/indifferent/masking female speaker responds to the news of her lover’s death with merely “careful [dis]interest”, is clear and significant (Millay 565). The indifferent, sexually progressive, liberated feminine voice permeates Millay’s sonnet work, and most any of her love sonnets, picked at random, provides a helpful glimpse into Millay’s malaise for, and subsequent indifference toward, sonnetlove’s traditionally masculine gaze: verses like “I shall forget you presently, my dear//So make the most of this, your little day . . . Ere I forget, or die, or move away. . . . By and by//I shall forget you” (571), and “Only until this cigarette is ended . . . I will permit my memory to recall the vision of you . . . . Yours is a face of which I can forget” (575) are written strictly within the metrical and rhythmic form of the Italian, [Petrarchan/Patriarchal] sonnet in order to subvert from within one of the culturally elite vehicles of masculinism. What draws a critical, antagonistic distance between Millay’s sonnets, then, and those of her lady-sonneteer predecessors is her uniquely and deliberately feminine perspective on love, which sharply antagonizes the sonnet tradition ruled overwhelmingly by the directive of the paralyzing masculine gaze—and which, breaking with this very Anglo-European tradition of phallocentric, masculinist desire, consciously embraces and contributes to the identity of the “new woman” of sexually progressive 1920s America.

Though Millay corresponded and associated (sometimes amorously) with politically vocal radical feminists, she never actively pursued her status as one of the movement’s voices, save for as a spiritual sympathizer and adopted poster child, and the criticism surrounding her position in 1920s feminism refers to her role only peripherally and indirectly, as if it were something the poet tolerated gracefully but unenthusiastically. Jean Gould in her essay “Edna Saint Vincent Millay—Saint of the Modern Sonnet”, for example, indicates, in tones which reflect some sort of pessimism, that Millay “never completely lived down” her reputation as the official poetic voice of the roaring twenties “new woman” (135). Millay never attached herself formally to the organized community of American Modernist feminists, and seldom worked deliberately to mince an organized feminist politics into her poetry. What’s more, in her youth, Millay was downright hostile toward the feminist movement, and just before entering Vassar College, she snidely insisted, in a letter dated January 12 1913, “I am hoping that college will help me;--but if I should come back a suffragette instead of a poet wouldn’t it be dreadful?” (Letters of Edna St. Vincent Millay 31).

As far as her will toward the contribution to sensations of Americanism is concerned, Millay, despite her popular reputation as a feminist, acted in her lifetime more deliberately to a goal of political, martial activism than social, feminist activism, and produced, during the opening chords of World War Two her volume of poetry Make Bright the Arrows, which consisted, by her own modest admission, almost exclusively of shallow ‘propaganda poetry’. Though Millay speaks little in her private letters about questions of women’s rights—her poems speak for themselves regarding that issue, both in their content and in their other, more subtle
subversions—the poet does address in several letters the notion of poetry as a vehicle for political (that is, traditionally, militaristically, propagandistically political) messages, and gives some insight to her thoughts on the patent Ally-allied war propaganda which she produced at the dawn of World War two, when she, like the intellectuals who surrounded her, became suddenly and loudly engaged in the theatre of international affairs. In a letter dated January 2nd 1941, speaking of a volume of her patriotic poetry awaiting publication, Millay champions (with some due, modest smarminess) the notion of the sacrificial, superficial Poet of Politics:

“And though I have no sons caught in the war, if we are caught in it, I have one thing to give in the service of my country,—my reputation as a poet. How many more books of propaganda poetry containing as much bad verse as this one does, that reputation can withstand without falling under the weight of it and without becoming irretrievable lost, I do not know—probably not more than one. But I have enlisted for the duration” (312).

Along with these politically concentrated poems are, in Millay’s organ, several non-propagandistic, politically-motivated, properly America-centric poems which work widely to demonstrate Millay’s idea of an American identity, without necessarily working intentionally toward creating one. Though Millay’s sonnet work involves none of her ostensibly and nominally propagandistic nationalist verse, others of her sonnets work to pronounce cornerstones of the American political experience, especially as it pertains to mankind as a warring animal. And it makes sense for somebody so interested in political, American affairs as was Millay to write in the sonnet form, and though she seldom spoke of such contemporary ideas as ‘helping to fashion an American identity,’ Millay’s choice of translating American political themes into the frame of the Anglophilic sonnet constitutes something of a figurative reinvention of the sonnet as a device suited to Americanness.

Among these poems (including longer lyric works dedicated to the notion of man as a savage, self-destructive, apocalyptic force) are two sonnet sequences, one of which briefly memorializes the polemic executions of anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti and announces with ironical detachment the death of “Sweet Justice”; the other, relates concisely, in high-minded philosophical language the history of planet Earth, with a critical eye toward humankind as a brief and apocalypse-harbinging warmonger. Ironically, however, because these poems articulate a distaste for the popular characteristics of contemporary American identity (its marginalizing, its scapegoating and its warhawking), they reveal a disjointedness between Millay and mainstream American society, though it is also these poems in which Millay works most clearly to communicate ideas about Americanism and so works most clearly to identify, through deliberate (mis)use of the Sonnet, an American identity, though she doesn’t herself seem to identify with it as anything but a peripheral observer. Millay is even careful to put a snide, elitist distance in a letter dated December 3rd, 1940, between herself and her effusive war volume Make Bright the Arrows, calling it “acres of bad poetry”, and, in doing so, effectively distances herself from the very instruments of nationalism (310). Appropriately, her Collected Poems contains only a total of four selections from the volume.

The non-propagandistic sonnet sequence Epitaph for the Race of Man, depicts from the perspective of a wide, cosmic observer the full course of the history of “Earth, unhappy planet born to die” (704). Published in part in the year 1928, the sonnet sequence reflects the decade of the post World War I environment, and so, in context, articulates, like much of the era’s poetry, something about the folly of humankind in creating and participating in self-destructive acts of global terror. The tone of the sequence is apocalyptic, and speaks to the animalistic, simple
nature of humankind, employing constantly the a series of primordial images and themes: “Man,” Millay’s speaker insists, in spite of his machinery, his science, and his brain “...Made but a simple sound...: the patient beating of the animal heart” (704). What makes Millay’s message clearly political (though only generally, and not necessarily specifically so), however, is her various apocalyptic assertion that, in her imagining of human history, the world will end senselessly in war: ends one of the sonnets, “You shall achieve destruction where you stand//In intimate conflict, at your brother’s hand” (715).

What makes this particular sequence interesting as a form which utilizes toward connotative ends the loaded undertones of The Sonnet, though, is the impersonal, distanced perspective from which the narrative is spoken, and the contrast which is drawn between this impersonal speaker and the conventionally intimate and human speaker of the traditional sonnet, English or otherwise. To wit, the sonnet is a historically personal form, which employs, conventionally, a personal /I/ pronoun and tells small stories about the speaker’s own personal experience. And to tell this cosmic story—which must, by narrative necessity, come from the perspective of something otherworldly, timeless, and super-human—the speaker must himself be impersonal and unengaged with human affairs. The Sonnet’s traditional form, argues Spiller, works “as a forensic instrument... for pleading, arguing, asserting in a voice... of worldly experience”; but the voice of this sequence is anything but worldly, and though there exists a personal /I/ throughout, this /I/ is removed from the momentary, temporal constraints of concise, delicate mortality which typically characterize a sonnet’s impact (17). Thus, the traditional perspectival form of the Sonnet is, by this sequence, inverted for a subversive and pregnant effect: though written into a sonnet form which traditionally works from the inside out, from a speaker speaking from the inside of a personal problem regarding love, faith, or emotion in order to resolve that personal problem, the speaker of this sequence, to the contrary, speaks impersonally and prophetically, with no sense of sonnet-style resolution, from the outside looking in. Also violated in this sequence is the notion of the Sonnet as a poetic form which demands wit and communicates concisely a unified poetic moment: the sequence’s narrative stretches broadly and lazily over a geologically mammoth span of time which predates and outlasts by millennia the full course of the rise and fall of humankind.

The subversive message of this sequence can be read in any number of ways—for example, as a more apocalyptic articulation of the hackneyed Petrarchan conceit of the capacity of verse to outlast all things—but most clearly it articulates a sense of aversion to nationality (and, subsequently, the wars whose necessary predicates are nationality), a theme which resonates more clearly in much of Millay’s more discursive and free-form verse, such as, for example “Not For a Nation”, which describes clearly Millay’s anti-nationalistic stance, and which therefore suggests the incidental nature of whatever her poetry did to help galvanize any sense of American national identity (which makes appropriate the humility Millay adopted when speaking of her so-called propaganda poems, whose utilitarian, wartime purpose was necessarily just that). That is, Millay articulated through her poetry a sense of cosmopolitanism which defied the character of any particular “nationalism” communicated through poetry; but which, in its anti-Imperialistic themes, constituted something like a distinctly American voice. That is, Millay’s is a voice made American through its aversion to assert its nationality—American not necessarily in opposition to Britishness, but American in opposition to anything but universal cosmopolitanism (and so, only by necessity in opposition to Britishness, whose imperial tradition and elitist reputation were built on the notions of exclusivity and nationalistic fervor, and so whose foundations necessarily contradicted Millay’s bohemian, Greenwich Village
cosmopolitanism); and feminist not necessarily in opposition to masculine-ism, but in opposition to anything but gender equality (and so, only by necessity in opposition to masculine-ism, whose central tenant is the rule of patriarchal privilege and gender binary).

Cummings’s contribution to American identity, as articulated through his subversion of the English sonnet, speaks of two of Cummings’s distinctly American themes. Firstly, and most palpably Americanistic are Cummings’s overt satirical stabbings at patriotic American rhetoric and conformist, exclusive American culture. And secondly, but more central to Cummings’s theory of literature, he hypothesized, like Whitman, that a poetry of America which represented reality more clearly and more organically than traditional English verse would be more appropriate and more possible in a nation whose foundations weren’t so bound as Britain’s were to the clumsy and stultifying strata of cultural convention, and so in writing and subsequently subverting, stretching, and reinventing the sonnet genre, Cummings was looking to do better what convention and fear of innovation had kept the Anglo-European sonneteers from doing right all along—that is, “[Cummings’s] aim,” insists Marks, “was to see how untraditional he could behave with a traditional form” (135).

And so, if Cummings relied on traditional sonnet subject matter in his sonnets—as many critics accuse him of doing—it was not because he refused to innovate, but, rather, because he felt as if those who had worked in the sonnet tradition before him and had attempted similarly to represent the notion of ‘love’ had failed to innovate enough. And, in failing to innovate, these sonneteers had written in a way which misrepresented the subject of love, and which subsequently constructed, through conformity and slavish reliance on convention, a false (un)love which misled the reader, flooded western culture with unrealities, and obfuscated, with prescribed structure and aesthetic rigidity, the sensations of love which were at the poetry’s heart. That is, according to Huang-Tiller, Cummings felt that

“the insistence of rigid laws and rules for the amorous form and discrimination of the ‘proper’ form from the ‘improper’ only constituted sonnet ‘unreality’ that subordinates love to form and displaces the reality or actuality of love from the amorous form itself” (116).

There is, in modern Cummings criticism, a curious proclivity to regard the poet—in spite of (and, likely, in an elitist reaction against) his pedestrian, public school reputation as a wild innovator—as something like conventional, and there exists the constant implication that E. E. Cummings’s work reveals his status as a shallow linguistic tinkerer, as if his verse were nothing more than the product of a typographical prankster, and his innovations little more than masks which obfuscate an otherwise patently conventional brand of verse. For example, his Modernist contemporaries, notes Huang-Tiller, “generally recognized Cumming’s experimentalism, but considered his subject matter (love, spring, death) as adolescent, sentimental, conventional, and romantic for a lack of tragic vision” (119).

Even the Norton Anthology headnote for Cummings indulges in this reactionary behavior, insisting that he “was less ambitious in his attempts to reshape poetry than Stein, Eliot, Pound, Stevens, or Williams” (1623). Even Walzer, who regards Cummings as an eminent innovator, is careful to refer to the “highly traditional and conventional” nature of Cummings subject matter, while applauding the “highly original aspects” which are the exceptions to Cummins’s generally conventional scheme (86). The result is that Cummings criticism tends to work as the inverse of most modern literary criticism: that is, rather than giving the poet the common literary critical privilege of pinpointing his petty innovations cast onto the backdrop of wide conventionalism and then celebrating the poet as an innovator, Cummings’s detractors have
the curious habit of pinpointing Cummings’s petty conventionalisms as cast onto his wider backdrop of innovation, and condemning the poet as a conventional. An objective look at Cummings’s sonnets, however, reveals plainly his deserved popular reputation as innovator of sonnet aesthetics/thematics, and his observed critical position as deliberate subversive to the British sonnet and intentional articulator of a unique, newly American sense of perspective.

Cummings, in fact, breaks in almost every way with the conventions of the English Sonnet. Aesthetically, thematically, and even visually (that is, in its typography), Cummings’s sonnets often work like riddles, inviting the reader, whose expectation of a sonnet should be radically antagonized by the appearance and thematic undertones of Cummings’s sonnets, to look closely and to discover what parts of this ink-printed-on-the-page legitimizes the label “Sonnet”. Metrically, Cummings was even from his sonnet-adolescence an innovator. Sterner, whose classic dissertation The Sonnet in American Literature provides an exhaustive survey of the form throughout American culture, charts in one of his appendices, on an empirical-looking grid, a list of all American poets who used the sonnet form, with notes as to how many of each type (English, Italian, Compromise, or Other); Cummings, his chart reveals, who had produced only seventeen sonnets as of this time, had written a majority seven of his seventeen in invented “Other” forms (124).

In those sonnets wherein Cummings breaks visually, metrically and thematically with the sonnets that preceded his own, Cummings performs the bulk of his poetic-subversive work. And it is in his love sonneteering where Cummings breaks most patently and visually with the conventions of the Sonnet, while still following, with interesting and pregnant selectivity, the rules of the form. In “[kitty’. Sixteen,5‘1’],white,prostitute”, for example, the reader is presented with a set of stanzas which in no way resembles a sonnet visually, but which follows, with some exceptions (the thirteen syllable line near the end, for example, throws the meter out of whack) the general conventions of sonnet poetry. The “love” reflected in the poem is an unconventional love which works in contrast to the (un)Reality of those unrequited, idealized loves previously reflected in conventional sonnet tradition. But the rules which Cummings chooses to follow, and those which he chooses to break, lend meaning to the work which it would not have achieved without its figuratively “quoting” the sonnet genre, and reveal the parts of conventionalized (un)Real love which persist in lived as well as in poetic reality.

Cummings, for example, in “kitty” obediently evokes the rule of fourteen lines and, further, employs the sonnet form’s characteristically optimistic ring in its final lines wherethrough a conflict feels resolved. But, most significantly, he even indulges in the chauvinistic poetic sonnet tradition of the blazon, describing without reciprocation or self-analysis, and that he chooses to maintain this element of the sonnet tradition, while dismissing other more essential sonnet characteristics (vertical form, unbroken lines, consistent rhyme scheme) implies something sinister about the nature of gendered relationships in purportedly egalitarian American society. And, although the final lines indicate something of a intimate and classless connectedness implicit in the speaker’s and the subject’s shared humanity and subjectedness to the human condition, the narrative is still expressed singly, through the judgmental (if sympathetic) masculine perspective, and so, in spite of the poem’s apt analysis of the unconventional and seldom-analyzed relationship between a man and a young prostitute, the conventions of gender relations hold strong in the poem, and speak in conjunction with the ‘quotation’ of the stultifying sonnet form, potentially, to a mode of description and (un)love which reflects in artificially fixed and masculine terms any relationship between a man and a woman.
Among the themes which Cummings explored in his sonneteering, the themes of patriotism and conformity in American society hold a suggestive presence which—though they are outnumbered overwhelmingly in the Cummings sonnet canon by his love poetry—insinuates something compelling about Cummings’s ideas about American literature. Cummings concerned himself sincerely with the idea of a “new relationship” between the reader and his poet (Marks 135); however, Cummings composed at length in a sonnet form which he felt was the product of a stultifying, Longfellownian tradition which created an artificial divide between the poem and its audience (Huang-Tiller 126). The division of his sonnets into sections headed “Realities” “Unrealities” and Actualities” reveals something wry and ironic about the way Cummings regarded the sonnet as a tool for communicating reality—and the implication is that, in the regard, the sonnet has as yet been misused and over-rigidified to the point where any particular sonnet could satirically be codified, quantified, and categorized by its relevance to Ultimate Reality. The first sonnet of Cummings’s first collection of sonnets (“Sonnets—Realities”, from the collection Chimneys) lends some insight into his aesthetic dilemma, and presents us with a sonnet which looks and feels like a normal sonnet, complete with (unconventional but palpable) rhymes and a palpable, consistent metrical scheme. In “the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls” Cummings exhibits only very little of his typographical eccentricity, and fashions a rather conventional sonnet which, appropriately, analyzes in depth the notion of conventionalism in American culture.

That Cummings chose to frame his polemic/patriotic observations in a sonnet form which reeked distinctly of lingering Britishness, as in “the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls,” performs at least two tasks: it primarily adopts and reinvents the sonnet as a voice of a new American poetics, something following in the tradition of Whitman, who decried tradition and demanded a poetry which was engaged basically organically with the American soil; and, secondarily, it posits the speaker as an outsider observing American culture from the legitimate, lofty British window of the sonnet form, “a traditional structure which, beyond all others, immediately announces, ‘Reader, you are about to read a poem’” (Marks 135). That is, if American poetics are experimental and transparent, and Cummings wrote in the sonnet form (sometimes with strict adherence to the supposedly prescribed principles of sonnetmaking), he did so, perhaps, in order to create a British mask behind which his deliberately (un)American poetics could be legitimized; and, ironically, to effectively communicate condemningly something about the lingering, imperial, conformist Britishness intellectualism present in American culture, as if the only way properly to communicate American conservatism were to frame it in a conventionalized form and, in doing so, work to lull the reader into comprehension.

The sonnets of Edna St. Vincent Millay and E. E. Cummings work, each by inverse subversions regarding, respectively, subject matter and aesthetic sensibility, simultaneously to identify with the British sonnet tradition, and, in identifying with the tradition but palpably subverting its conventions, to work to contradict the tenants which are connotatively central to British sonneteering. In doing so, these sonneteers worked in opposition to and in the embrace of Modernist poetic dogma in order to assert, deliberately or not, the dawn of an American literary theoretical and aesthetic consciousness, and to democratize the sonnet as a form available to any mode of formal experimentation, and any variety of subject matter.
Works Cited


