SIMONE KNEWITZ

Modernist Authenticities

The Material Body and the Poetics of Amy Lowell and William Carlos Williams

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Abbreviations

CP I	William Carlos Williams. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams.* Vol. I, 1909–1939. Ed. A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan. New York: New Directions, 1986.
CP II	William Carlos Williams. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*. Vol. II, 1939–1962. Ed. A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan. New York: New Directions, 1988.
CPW	Amy Lowell. *The Complete Poetical Works of Amy Lowell.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1955.
DS	William Carlos Williams. *The Doctor Stories.* Comp. Robert Coles. New York: New Directions, 1984.
KH	William Carlos Williams. *Kora in Hell: Improvisations.* 1920. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1957.
SE	William Carlos Williams. *Selected Essays*. New York: New Directions, 1969.

Introduction

In 1922, Amy Lowell first published "The Sisters," a dramatic monologue written in the persona of a woman poet. Invoking a female literary tradition, the text's speaker stages an imaginary encounter with three of her predecessors, Sappho, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Emily Dickinson. Though Lowell calls upon the three poets as "older sisters" who are part of her "strange, isolated little family" (CPW 461, 459), they simultaneously appear as ghosts that haunt her. At the end of the poem, the speaker hastens to send her visitors out into the night: "Put on your cloaks, my dears, the motor's waiting" (CPW 461). Reflecting on the role of the woman poet in literary history, the poem lends itself to interpretations from a feminist perspective and has frequently been discussed that way (see, e.g., Kolodny, C. Walker, Erkkila). Yet far more interesting is the literary aesthetics Lowell's text advances by establishing the physical body as a determinant of truthful and authentic expression while at the same time ironically undercutting these claims to truth.

"The Sisters" participates in a modernist discourse on the Victorian repression of sexuality, which the poem personifies in the figure of Queen Victoria herself. Lowell castigates and satirizes the "bat-eyed, narrow-minded Queen[]" (CPW 460) throughout, blaming her (and Martin Luther and the Church Fathers) for the cultural repression of the body. But despite the fact that the poem is written as an accusation, its tone is surprisingly light-hearted and playful:[1]

> Taking us by and large, we're a queer lot
> We women who write poetry. And when you think
> How few of us there've been, it's queerer still.
> I wonder what it is that makes us do it,
> Singles us out to scribble down, man-wise,
> The fragments of ourselves. Why are we
> Already mother-creatures, double-bearing,
> With matrices in body and in brain?
> I rather think that there is just the reason
> We are so sparse a kind of human being;
> The strength of forty thousand Atlases
> Is needed for our every-day concerns. (CPW 459)

[1] On this aspect, compare also John Marsh's very convincing reading of the poem; Marsh characterizes its tone as "playful chattiness."

With the term "queer" appearing twice within the first three lines, the perceived oddity of female poets resonates with sexual deviance—'queer' was just beginning to be used in the sexual sense in the early 1920s (Galvin 26). Throughout the passage, Lowell conceives of the writing of poetry and poetic creativity as a physical event, as an act of "scribbl[ing] down […] / The fragments of ourselves." Most explicitly, however, Lowell describes writing poetry as a physical phenomenon by taking up a conventional trope of childbirth,[2] arguing that female poets possess "matrices in body and in brain." In "The Sisters," Lowell contrasts "body" and "brain," not "body" and "mind." She not only denies a hierarchy between the physical and the mental but actually reduces the latter to the former. Poets, in this conception, produce literature much in the same way that a woman bears a child. The idea of a matrix, a Platonic notion, presupposes an interior pattern that is materially reproduced in the product. The last lines quoted above settle on the notion that the female biological disposition to motherhood is responsible for the scarcity of women poets. In the context of the poem's forceful accusation of Victorianism this biological explanation however appears contradictory or at least blatantly ironic.

Reading "The Sisters" with Foucault, Lowell might be found guilty of falling into the trap of the "repressive hypothesis" (*The Will* 16): In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault suggested that the modern idea that society needs to liberate its subjects from the nineteenth-century repression of sexuality in fact served to regulate bodies and subjects in modernity. Repression, Foucault writes, needs to be understood not as censorship on the talk about sexuality but rather as an incitement to discourse. Instead of affirming the non-existence of the illegitimate and making it unspeakable, then, repression produces a discourse on that which it ostensibly seeks to repress (*The Will* 35).

Reminiscent of the discourse subject to Foucault's critique, Lowell presents the Victorian era as a climate saturated with "stiff conventions," suffocating women aspiring to write poetry. Having paid her respects to Sappho, the speaker imagines a visit to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who appears as a victim of this dark age, "[s]tretched out upon a sofa, reading Greek" (CPW 459) and nostalgically longing for a time when women were uninhibited to experience physical love and write about it, too. Limited to mere intellectual stimulation, she takes refuge in sickness. Barrett Browning's problem is her "over-topping brain" (CPW 459), her attempt to compensate the lack of physical experience with mental activity. This, Lowell suggests, must lead to self-poisoning because a "poet is flesh and

[2] On the poetic trope of childbirth, see Friedman, "Creativity."

blood as well as brain." The speaker narrates the story of Elizabeth Barrett, who was afflicted with neurasthenia in her youth, recovered, and married Robert Browning, who then went on to "fertilize[]" (CPW 460) her poetry. Explaining Barrett Browning's illness as physiological, Lowell pictures it as a biological chain-reaction. Words "breed a poisonous miasma" (CPW 459) in inexperienced brains, the term "miasma" deriving from a theory of contagion rooted in antiquity.

One might thus argue that Lowell's text, proposing the liberation of the body from Victorian constraints and initiating a discourse on sexuality, in fact participates in the regulation of modern subjects. Yet such a reading would be a simplification. For one thing, the poem also records Lowell's ambivalences with respect to bodily liberation, especially through its absences. Despite the anti-Victorian rhetoric of "The Sisters," Lowell was very uncomfortable with many of her contemporaries' attempts to incorporate physical passion and sexuality in their writings. Lowell objected specifically to some women poets, for instance Mina Loy and Jeanne D'Orge, because she deemed their poetry pornographic. James Joyce's eroticisms she found "as disagreeable as putrefied meat" (Letter to Bryher, March 20, 1922). To Margaret Anderson she once wrote that "love on the purely mental side is apt to be as dry and brittle as a withered leaf; but love on the purely physical side is as unpleasant as raw beef steak." Moreover, it seems particularly ironic that Lowell would choose the form of a dramatic monologue—associated with Victorianism and especially the poetry of Robert Browning—to voice her criticism of the era. And while she reproaches Barrett Browning for her alleged reluctance "to admit newfangled modes of writing" (CPW 460), Lowell crafts her poem in traditional iambic pentameters. The text's playful images and satiric rendering of historical figures suggest that one should not take its statements at face value, a point I will come back to later. "The Sisters" presents us with a complex negotiation of the physical and its meaning for poetry. Lowell grounds her aesthetics in the body but does so in a rather ironic fashion, undercutting all claims to essentialism.

I open this study with "The Sisters" as one example of what I have come to understand as modernism's poetics of the material body. Like Lowell in "The Sisters," I will show throughout this book, many modernist poets engaged physicality and the body in their poetry. The somatic is certainly crucial in William Carlos Williams's writing and in his model of a "poetics of contact" (Kinnahan). But it is also fundamental to many other modernists, such as Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, or H.D. Interestingly, modernist poets often claimed the body as a source of authenticity at the very same time they strove to escape it. Pound, for instance, proposed a paradigm of poetic impersonality while simultaneously perpetuating a biological concept of creativity. In his postscript to the translation of

Remy de Gourmont's *Physique de l'amour*, he suggests that creativity is the giving of form, which he sees ideally performed by the spermatozoid: "the power of the spermatozoid is precisely the power of exteriorizing a form." Pound presumes clear gender demarcations; the invention of new forms figures as the male principle. In contrast, he associates chaos and formlessness with the female principle and characterizes woman as "the accumulation of hereditary aptitudes" (207). Jean Toomer, in his youth an avid reader of Bernarr Macfadden's *Physical Culture* magazine (Whalan, *Race* 177), in his writings projects the body as a site of racial oppression as well as the production of individual subjectivity.

This book argues that references to the body are constitutive of both modernist poetry and modern culture. Focusing on the poetry of Amy Lowell, William Carlos Williams, as well as other early twentieth-century writers, it explores how the body is negotiated, regulated, and fashioned during the modernist era. Following Tim Armstrong's claim that modernism operates on bodily metaphors (*Modernism, Technology* 7), the question arises: What urges these authors to imbue the body with so much significance? As I will discuss in more detail as the study proceeds, I suggest that for the modernists the body serves as a projection screen for their desires for authenticity—while it also emerges as a locus of anxiety.

William Carlos Williams was certainly less ambivalent than Lowell with respect to the joys of the body. At the beginning of his autobiography, he states: "I am extremely sexual in my desires. I carry them everywhere and at all times. I think that from that arises the drive which empowers us all. Given that drive, a man does with it what his mind directs. In the manner in which he directs that power lies his secret" (xi). And in answering a questionnaire sent by *The Little Review* in 1929, he responded to the last question, "Why do you go on living?": "Because I have an enjoyable body for my pleasure" (88). Williams, like Lowell, seeks authenticity in the body. Throughout his life, he stylized himself as someone who relates to the world somatically, not merely intellectually. For Williams, as Jacqueline Ollier has pointed out, the body "is first an object and a source of delight, then a privileged means of communication and knowledge" (297). In the manuscript of his *Autobiography* he states: "I wanted to have as exactly as possible every sensual experience that might come to me. Nothing between my senses and their object, with utmost exactness to see, hear, smell, and touch" (qtd. in Ollier 297).

Accordingly, in Williams's poetry, bodily tropes abound. In the 1917 poem "Smell!" he addresses his nose: "Must you taste everything? Must you know everything? / Must you have a part in everything" (CP I 92)? Subsequently, in his famous poem "The Wildflower" from the volume *Spring and All* (1923), Williams metaphorically links the black-eyed su-

san, a common wildflower, with a "dark woman" (CP I 236), associating both with primal qualities and with a pre-cultural, savage, dark internal core. And in "To Elsie" from the same volume he imagines the disfigured body of a household servant, "some Elsie," "expressing with broken // brain the truth about us—" (CP I 218). Elsie's body stands in for a perceived degeneration of modern America all the while Williams invokes her as figure of authenticity, the representative of a more truthful, less alienated culture. This anxiety about the loss of authenticity in modernity is central for my discussion in this study.

Modernism and the Quest for Authenticity

Modernist Authenticities challenges current understandings of modernism by investigating modernist poetry's affinities with surfaces, bodily performances, and materiality. Analyzing the poetry of Lowell, Williams, and, in the concluding chapter, Toomer in the context of discourses on the material body and the physical world, I claim that reading these texts through the prism of the body helps us recontextualize our idea of modernism itself. Focusing on how these authors invoke the body may give us a new angle on the modernist project and allow us to turn away from issues of subjectivity and identity, which have dominated the discussion of modernist literature in the last decades. Even though I place an emphasis on the writings of these three authors, I do not suggest that they are especially privileged with respect to somatic discourses, but in fact that they are representative of modernist poetry. To underline this, my study will also discuss selected texts by Pound, Eliot, H.D., Gertrude Stein, and Robert Frost.

While I do not propose that Lowell, Williams, and Toomer are suited for an analysis in the context of somatic discourses in a special way, my choice is not arbitrary, either. Their specific subject positions and their critical reception are significantly intertwined with these discourses. As a physician, Williams was in daily contact with physical bodies, as well as with the (medical) discourses surrounding them. The epistemological question of the relation between self and world is at the center of his poetry. Lowell, as Melissa Bradshaw has most aptly shown, has been literally subjected to her body, being reduced to her obesity by literary critics displacing the attention from the poetry to the poet ("Remembering"). Toomer, despite his own uneasiness about being associated with a black tradition and his efforts to blur the boundaries between black and white, has consistently been placed in an African-American tradition on account of his racial heritage.

As many critics have noted, modernism is a concept that is notoriously hard to define because it involves a multitude of contradictory aspects. The canon of modernism has been subject to countless revisions and redefinitions ever since the term first came into use. In this light, my project does not claim to present a more adequate narrative of modernism than the ones proposed in earlier studies.[3] As Geoff Gilbert argues, the "search for a solid and material starting point is doomed to failure: the only history that 'modernism' has is an institutional history" (xiii). Similarly, Susan Stanford Friedman has suggested that histories of modernism need to be considered narratives which by necessity are determined by political assumptions and implications, whether openly acknowledged or not ("Definitional Excursions" 509). Thus, narratives of modernism—as of all literary epochs—cannot help but exclude, regardless of how much they strive to be inclusive.[4] I am taking up Friedman's claim that the terms 'modern,' 'modernity,' and 'modernism' possess meanings which are oppositional in structure and associated with aspirations to novelty, disruption, and rebellion as well as with tradition, order, and categorization ("Definitional Excursions" 510). Rather than giving a clear-cut definition of the terms, my study attempts to embrace these contradictory meanings and make them productive.

Whether tacitly acknowledged or not, the notion of authenticity has been one defining idea within modernism and its reception history from its inception. As Vincent Sherry suggests, "the concept of the 'authentic' has functioned irresistibly—sometimes naively, sometimes preemptively, sometimes ironically—in a good deal of writings associated with modernism" (481). The literary history of modernism has been characterized by evaluations of texts' and authors' authenticity, often without an examination of the concept itself. This can not least be seen in the relationship

[3] A discussion or even an overview of narratives of modernism is beyond the scope of this introduction; therefore, I limit myself to the works immediately relevant for this study. For recent surveys, see for instance Mao and Walkowitz, *Bad Modernisms* and "The New Modernist Studies." Tim Armstrong offers an excellent introduction to modernism in *Modernism: A Cultural History*.

[4] Many critics now attempt to avoid thematic and formal definitions of modernism and instead delineate it as a historical period or refrain from defining it altogether (see, e.g., Goldman xv). In my view, this solution misses its mark. Not only, as Peter Childs points out, does everything written in the period then become modernist (18), but the question where to draw the line to earlier and later periods becomes completely arbitrary if there are no generic features to rely on. In order to demarcate the period one needs to rely on implicit assumptions of generic traits of modernism, if only because one follows some conventional time frame established by earlier critics. In that case, one will necessarily at least implicitly perpetuate a specific view of modernism.

critics have established between modernist art and mass culture. In this respect, Walter Benjamin's 1936 analysis of the artwork's loss of authenticity or "aura" in the age of mechanical reproduction technologies has long been part of the critical canon. While Benjamin characterizes the influence of these technologies as emancipating and altering the role of art toward a political function (224), Theodor W. Adorno[5] as well as the New Critics made a sharp distinction between (authentic) high art and (derivative) popular culture. Authenticity here served as a normative concept, advancing an understanding that art, in order to be authentic, must remove itself from everyday popular culture.

Recent scholarship on modernism has challenged such binarisms. Since the 1960s and 70s, the "great divide" (Huyssen) between high art as a more authentic form of expression and mass culture has been under substantial attack—and, with it, the modernist canon. But while the range of objects for modernist studies has expanded significantly, it yet seems that in the selection of these new voices the idea of authenticity has still played an unacknowledged role, privileging some authors while neglecting others. In her discussion of the concept, Ana María Sánchez-Arce emphasizes that the term's meaning "has varied historically and continues to fluctuate." If in the Middle Ages "authentic" referred to "that which has been approved by political or religious leaders" (139), our current conventional understanding has its roots in a more individualistic definition of authenticity deriving from the Romantic period. In this understanding, authenticity is related to the search for an essential, inner core—the real and truthful self—and notions of originality and identity (Guignon 51).

Such essentialist ideas of identity, originality, and authenticity have been shattered by poststructuralist theories, perhaps most prominently by the works of Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler, and Jean Baudrillard.[6] As

[5] In his postwar work on the 'culture industry,' Adorno describes the standardized products of mass culture as derivative in principle (see, e.g., *The Culture Industry* 58). Though he does not juxtapose poetry explicitly with popular culture in the essay "On Lyric Poetry and Society," Adorno here attributes "unrestrained individuation" (38) to the lyric, hence positing poetry as an art form that aims at authenticity.

[6] The poststructuralism of Baudrillard, Derrida, Butler, and others rests on the assumption that one cannot meaningfully distinguish between textual representation and an extra-linguistic reality, as meaning is produced through the difference between signifiers: "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte" (Derrida 158). Thus for Baudrillard, reality is always already a representation and a simulation (19-27). Butler's theory of performativity stresses that identities and essences are produced as "*stylized repetitions of acts*" and instated in time rather than a given, stable apriori (*Gender*

Wolfgang Funk and Lucia Krämer note, contemporary theory assumes that unmediated access to an essential core is impossible. If at all, authenticity can only be located in the processes of mediation and the materiality of the signifiers themselves. Authenticity thus exists only as "authenticity effects" (10). Within the field of modernist studies, the concept of authenticity has therefore also increasingly come under scrutiny. As Debra Cohen and Kevin Dettmar point out, critics today tend to "reject[] the notion of an intrinsic authenticity located either historically or spatially." Instead, they regard authenticity as "a transactional process" or a "simulacrum" and characterize modernist authenticity as "bootstrapping authenticity" (478-79). In that sense, authenticity does not derive from the essence of an object or the interiority of the self but is produced as an effect of discourse.

As I speak of Williams's, Lowell's, and other modernists' claims about the body as a locus of authenticity, I thus need to distinguish their positions from my own. Approaching their work from a perspective informed by poststructuralist arguments, I do not propose that poetry evoking the body can be more authentic than other poetry. Body and text, as both Armstrong and Jean-Luc Nancy emphasize, are incommensurable. If the "body is what cannot be read in writing" (Nancy 24), the gap between text and body must always remain unresolved. From this point of view, authenticity can always only be achieved as a performative effect. Therefore, the task of my work is to historicize modernist claims to and negotiations of authenticity rather than to postulate more authentic forms of writing. This book, then, seeks to explore the importance of the concept of authenticity for the works of modernist authors. A second aim of my study is to ask how a conception of authenticity as performative impacts on our understanding of the modernist canon. If authenticity plays such a crucial role for modernist poetry, how does a revised sense of the concept change our understanding of the period and its poetics?

As I will argue throughout this study, two notions of authenticity, an intrinsic and a performative one, coexist and intersect within modernism and modern culture. This can not least be seen in the example given above, Lowell's "The Sisters," in which Lowell describes a poetics grounded in the body as more authentic than other forms, while at the same time undercutting these claims. In Williams's case, one may detect an obsession with the authentic in his theory of the autonomous artwork, which is not a representation of an external reality but reality itself. Recognizing that the material world is not directly accessible but always me-

Trouble 179). According to these theories, authenticity, understood as an essential identity or a truthful representation, is therefore a myth, or an illusion.

diated through language, he turns to the materiality of the medium itself. This fluctuation between two moments of authenticity is central to modernism and modern culture itself.

Understanding Poems as Social Acts

Modernist Authenticities approaches poetry from cultural and formal perspectives. A number of scholars have recently pointed out that the study of poetry is notably absent in cultural studies. Astrid Franke for instance comments that within American studies, "there is a reigning assumption that prose writings and popular culture offer privileged access to cultural issues and 'the social'" (149; see also Harrington 159-86). Cultural studies, especially in the US, have been concerned primarily with content-based approaches to literature and with categories of identity and difference, such as race, sex, gender, ethnicity, and, to much lesser extent, class. In that sense, analyses have often neglected to consider the literariness of literary texts, i.e., their specific form. Conversely, as Rachel Blau DuPlessis suggests,

> [r]eading poetry over the past fifty-plus years of literary studies in the US was so thoroughly an activity mandated by the formalist elegances of New Criticism that contemporary context-oriented moves, however synoptic and brilliant, are decidedly wary of the texture and the nature of poems and are much more comfortable with narrative. (9)

E. Warwick Slinn, in his analysis of the phenomenon, comes to the conclusion that poetry's marginalization is due to several specific biases of critics who believe that

> poetry as a highly organized form of language is too self-enclosed in its formalized processes to relate directly to social practices; poetry as a predominantly bourgeois production is ideologically tainted; and lyric poetry as the privileged literary paradigm of New Critical aesthetics is associated with their now suspect claims of homogenous unity and transhistorical essentialism. In short, the formalist demands of poetry would seem too pronounced to satisfy desire for a broader based social and cultural criticism. ("Poetry and Culture" 57)

The problem with poetry, according to the critics Slinn refers to, is that it is too self-referential and too much concerned with form in order to be of great use in analyzing culture. In a sense, a similar position is also shared by prolific poetry scholar Marjorie Perloff, whose recent publications show a certain resentment with respect to cultural and interdisciplinary approaches and a mission statement to "put the literature back into liter-

ary studies" ("In Defense").[7] Thus critics writing on poetry tend to foreground formal analysis, often refusing to enter an interdisciplinary discourse.

Cultural critics, in turn, have neglected to look at the ways in which form is also ideological and semanticized in a given cultural context (Franke 150). Acknowledging this is not only important in order to reintroduce poetry into the study of literature and culture but also to give greater consideration to the literariness of literary texts. As Franke suggests, "[i]t would be fruitful to ask what poetry can bring to the foreground that may be neglected in narratives" (150). Poetry, with its self-consciousness about form may be regarded as a special case of a literary text, in which a feature present in all kinds of texts is particularly emphasized. At the same time, however, it is also possible that poetry may voice social and political comments through its forms in different ways than narratives do.

My method in this study is thus a hybrid one: On the one hand I rely on the close reading of poetic forms, on the other hand I relate the poems to other cultural discourses. I understand these endeavors as two sides of the same coin, namely as an investigation of cultural forms. In this desire to recognize how aesthetic forms acquire cultural meaning, how they can be read semantically, I follow the lead of other scholars who have chosen similar approaches, like Rachel Blau DuPlessis in her study *Genders, Races, and Religious Cultures in Modern American Poetry, 1908–1934*. Applying a method she calls "social philology" (1), DuPlessis analyzes how modernist poems construct modern subjectivities. Her approach, as I understand it, is however rather narrow in its focus. She holds that "[p]oetry is the repository and expression of subjectivity, a site where the materials of social subjectivity are absorbed and articulated, where pronouns, personae, speaking positions are produced" (4). By reducing poetry to the expression of subjectivity, DuPlessis implicitly identifies poetry and lyric, instead of considering the latter as a subgenre of the first. The reason for her choice of this perspective is that the lyric, in her view, has historically been the genre most strongly constructed as oppositional to social discourse, as "a bastion of transcendence and the aesthetic, privi-

[7] Perloff is actually not speaking merely about the study of poetry but of literature in general. In her 2006 presidential address to the Modern Language Association, Perloff lamented the demise of literary studies: She claimed that the trend toward interdisciplinarity with its, in her view, promise of larger practical relevance (in comparison to mere aesthetic contemplation of art) threatens to eclipse literary studies. While I agree with Perloff's emphasis on formal and literary aspects, I find the binary she establishes problematic—interdisciplinary approaches need not necessarily be pursued at the expense of the literary.

leged expression of timeless, universal emotions, set apart by specific conventions in its language, and, in its versions of Romantic subjectivity, by non-participation in, non-compliance with historical debate" (8). DuPlessis's focus on the construction of speaking positions does not allow for a discussion of poetry in very specific cultural contexts apart from rather general identity categories, as I propose to do here. And while DuPlessis's analytical tool may be employed for the discussion of other poetic genres, it tells us little about the different cultural functions these texts might have.

Considering poetry as one of multiple non-hierarchical cultural discourses, a new historicist approach seems to provide a good starting point. New historicism deals with "the historicity of texts and the textuality of history" (Montrose 20), following the insight that our access to the past is always mediated by texts; simultaneously, every text is also determined by the historical conditions of its production. Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montrose have emphasized that the interests and analytical techniques of new historicism "are at one historicist and formalist; implicit in its project […] is a conviction that formal and historical concerns are not opposed but rather inseparable" (Montrose 17; see also Greenblatt 226-27). While these views inform the methods of my study, I also need to go beyond some of these central assumptions. I find the reading of culture as text potentially limiting, especially in the view of the increasing impact of new media beginning in the nineteenth century. It also puts limits on the possibility of accounting for the expression of agency. And while new historicism is interested in literary processes and the cultural functions of different genres of text, the emphasis on a synchronic approach seems to pose a problem which becomes most evident in the study of poetry: As a highly self-referential discourse, poems are strongly determined by their relationship to other, and older, poetry.

These limitations might be addressed by reading poems not as discourse but as social acts, as Slinn has proposed in his study *Victorian Poetry as Cultural Critique* (2003). Analyzing the perfomative language of a number of Victorian poems, he shows "how poetry may enact a cultural critique through its self-conscious formalism, its foregrounding of just those language acts that many of the literary scholars most sympathetic to cultural critique have seemed least to take into account" (1).[8] Slinn adapts J. L. Austin's concept of the performative, arguing that poems work in similar ways as performative utterances do because both shape reality

[8] Slinn is not the only scholar working in the field of Victorianism who uses performativity as a critical approach. See for instance the recent essays by A. Hartman and Attridge.

and enter social discourse by privileging self-reference and by reiterating conventions ("Poetry and Culture" 66). His focus on "cultural critique" makes sense for Victorian poetry, which is often portrayed as formally non-inventive and compliant with social discourses. Slinn thus shows that formal conservatism may not be the same as political conformity and, in turn, that formal experimentalism is not necessarily congruent with subversion.

Within American studies, the concept of performativity has been most prominently applied in the realm of gender analysis, especially in the work of Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. In this context, performativity has served to question categories of identity and essence, and to propose that the ostensibly natural is constituted in discourse (Parker and Sedgwick 2). According to this view, "[d]iscourses do not reflect, or reflect upon, reality, they actively constitute it in particular (and specifiable) ways" (McGann 20). Understood as performative, poetry may be conceived as a social activity, as an agenting form (McGann 245). "Poems," Jerome McGann argues, "should not be conceived as representations; they are *acts* of representation." As social acts, poems are "best understood within the nexus of [their] many interesting histories: political and social histories, of course, but also the histories of productive institutions, ecclesiastical histories, the histories of scholarship and education, even the history of ideas" (246). Reading poetry as a cultural form operating according to a theory of performativity reflects a theoretical shift from an understanding of culture as text, as proposed by structuralism/deconstruction and new historicism, to one of performance (A. Hartman 482).[9]

In which sense, then, can we read modernist poems as performative, as constituting acts of representation? I will discuss this question in more detail throughout this study, but we can see performativity at work already in my earlier example, Lowell's "The Sisters," which negotiates cultural regulations of female creativity and female bodies. While "The Sisters" seems to advocate the liberation of suppressed bodies, I argue that the text performatively resists liberatory discourses as well. A reading of "The Sisters" as performative does not take the Foucauldian claims about bodily liberation at face value but rather considers how the poem enacts its critique of Victorianism. We may note the irony inherent in the fact that the poem employs the most Victorian of all verse forms, the dramatic monologue, and the most traditional meter in English poetry,

[9] See also Fischer-Lichte, who emphasizes that the semiotic and the performative are not oppositional but related to each other. Both are needed to describe cultural phenomena and processes (20).