

## *Introduction*

### “Distortion” or “Unexamined Factor”?

**I**n 1929, as Virginia Woolf prepared the lectures that would become her transforming book *A Room of One's Own*, she published an essay in the *Forum* titled “Women and Fiction.” There Woolf writes that “it is in poetry that women’s fiction is still weakest,” and predicts that women will soon look beyond

personal and political relationships to the wider questions which the poet tries to solve—of our destiny and the meaning of life. The basis of the poetic attitude is of course largely founded upon material things. It depends upon leisure, and a little money, and the chance which money and leisure give to observe impersonally and dispassionately. With money and leisure at their service, women will . . . write fewer novels, but better novels; and not novels only, but poetry and criticism and history. But in this, to be sure, one is looking ahead to that golden, that perhaps fabulous, age when women will have what has so long been denied them—leisure, and money, and a room to themselves. (84)

Woolf knew that writing required not merely pen and paper, but time to reflect and dream, freedom from intense deprivation, and the encouragement of a community of peers. It’s impossible

for me to read this paragraph without thinking of Jack London's *Martin Eden*, published twenty years before. The penniless young Eden writes his finest work at his sister's kitchen table, surrounded by family bustle and the anxieties of near-poverty, until his hard-working brother-in-law becomes impatient of the layabout's doodling and insists that he leave their house. Eden eventually becomes a successful novelist and can afford a mansion of his own. But he has been disappointed by the cynicism of publishing, the arrogance of the rich, the scorn and abuse endured when he was poor and unknown, the fawning and dissembling he encounters as celebrity. The prosperous Eden sinks into a depression that saps his will to write, and anticipating the tragic end of Hart Crane, he slips from the cabin of his ocean liner to disappear overboard.

There is no doubt but that London's hero had a huge working-class chip on his shoulder, which is why he must have appealed to Vladimir Mayakovsky. *Martin Eden* was one of Mayakovsky's favorite books. Unfortunately, no print of the Russian film version of the book, in which the poet played the title role, has survived. I doubt that you could see the movie in London in 1929. But did Woolf know of Mayakovsky and Jack London when she wrote, in "Women and Fiction," the following?

In *Middlemarch* and *Jane Eyre* we are conscious not merely of the writer's character, as we are conscious of the character of Charles Dickens, but we are conscious of a woman's presence, of someone resenting the treatment of her sex and pleading for its rights. This brings into women's writing an element entirely absent from a man's, unless indeed he happens to be a working man or a negro, or who for some reason is conscious of a disability. It introduces a distortion and is frequently the cause of weakness. The desire to plead some personal cause or to make a character the mouthpiece of some personal discontent and

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grievance always has a distressing effect, as if the point at which the reader's attention is directed were suddenly two-fold instead of single. (79–80)

Less than a century later, Woolf's position seems quaint. The twofold attention that she, in an echo of W. E. B. DuBois's "double-consciousness," laments as "distressing," appears nostalgically simple when compared to the multiplicities of self suggested by *The Invisible Man*, Robert Duncan's "The Self in Post-modern Poetry," or even Woolf's *Orlando*. The unity of character she applauds in the novels of the English masters strikes us as insensitive to its imperial, racial, gender, and class privileges. Besides religious fundamentalists, who now pretends to a single, undistorted view of reality? Tillie Olsen, an ardent admirer of Woolf, wrote in *Silences*, "No one has as yet written *A Room of One's Own* for writers other than women, still marginal in literature. Nor do any bibliographies exist for writers whose origins and circumstances are marginal. Class remains the greatest unexamined factor" (146).

Some things have improved since Woolf's essay, particularly for women with comfortable incomes who write poems, but also for men and women writers of color and from the lower class. Many things remain the same. Take Jed Rasula's *The American Poetry Wax Museum*, published in 1996 by the National Council of Teachers of English. Rasula claims that "the poetry world is now configured by four zones" (440). When he speaks of "the poetry world," he is really talking about the poetry scene in the United States, which he delineates into (1) the Associated Writing Programs; (2) the New Formalism; (3) language poetry, and (4) "various coalitions of interest-oriented or community-based poets" (440). This fourth (and, one would assume from the book, least significant) sector Rasula links to the "sixties countercul-

ture,” stressing the prominence of the black arts and women’s movements. According to Rasula, while the identities of this last group of writers “have complex and nuanced theoretical significance, their writing has been nurtured in a nontheoretical and even anti-intellectual environment” (443). Thus even in Rasula’s progressive criticism, women and poets of color continue to be stigmatized as “interest-oriented or community-based,” perpetuating Woolf’s distortion that artists from the dominant classes are not. But Rasula also perpetuates the myth that women and poets of color are largely anti-intellectuals, whose refusal to embrace the dominant poetic theories implies a lack of understanding or nuance in their writing. Pertinent to this book, Rasula dispenses entirely with the third arm of Woolf’s analysis, that having to do with class.

Of course it’s possible in the fluid class structure of the United States for a child of the working class to ascend the social ladder, to attend an elite university, and even to become a member of the AWP, New Formalist, or language “zones.” Then, like Bill Clinton’s, their careers will serve as reminders that no one in this country need bear forever the stigma of the “interest-oriented” or “community-based.” Entry into the managerial class is now open on a limited basis even to women and people of color. So are considerations of class irrelevant to contemporary poetry, as a reading of Rasula might imply? Is a writer from the working class doomed to the resentments and distortions mentioned by Woolf? Can we see those “distortions” as something other than disability? While it’s clear that most working-class Americans have a highly refined and discriminating sense of class distinctions (until recently my stepfather considered people who buy beer in bottles, instead of cans, as hoity-toity), why would we, well past the turn of the millennium, call attention to class at all, particularly as it manifests in an activity such as poetry that is by many considered marginal itself?

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A couple of years ago, I sat on a panel at the St. Mark's Poetry Project discussing the workings of class in contemporary American poetry. The panel was overweighted with poets from working-class backgrounds. But then it is they, and not members of the upper classes, who are most eager to discuss the subject. I reluctantly accepted the invitation to address a subject I had thought about much, but not without worrying that I was being put back into an old box. The audience was more various in origin, but generally responded in two ways. Many took the occasion to stand up and declare themselves more working class than thou. When someone mentioned the name of a poet not in attendance, a panelist derided his working-class credentials: "Sure, he grew up in a working-class neighborhood, but his family owned the bar!" Others generally dismissed class differences as foreign to poetry, and praised instead the classless society that they had joined when they became poets.

Later, over drinks, some friends confided that they were disturbed by the us-versus-them tendency of the speakers. But to me the panel resembled a working-class family reunion: free-flowing laughter, voices on the edge of tears, sudden outbursts and angry recriminations, intermittent solidarity, vehement unreason, anecdotes freighted with self-pity—and beneath all, the bond of class loyalties. It was not pretty, but generated enough electricity to light a small town.

To speak about class in the United States, we must invent a way to do it that distinguishes our fluid situation from rigid European structures, but does not ignore that the most successful democratic movements in this country in the last fifty years (civil rights, feminism, gay and lesbian liberation) opened the managerial class and helped reduce discrimination within it, but failed to minimize the expanding gap between classes that has produced the most alarming, and burgeoning, symbol of class strife in America—the gated community.

In a television documentary, Henry Louis Gates Jr., William Julius Wilson, and Cornel West—all at the time members of Harvard University’s African-American Studies Department—agreed that the gap between classes in the United States may now be greater than that between “races.” As basketball star Charles Barkley reportedly replied when members of his family criticized him for supporting the Republican Party, “They don’t understand that I’m rich now.”

I have been fortunate to find many friends and acquaintances willing to talk about the intersection of class and poetry, both in person and through the library. To their queries about this book, I seldom had answers, only an admission that the vocabulary I lacked suggested territory for investigation. Robert Duncan found in Whitman “the informing principle at work in ideas of democracy, of faring forth where no lines are to be drawn between classes or occupations, between kinds of intelligence, between private and public, but daring the multitude of lives to be lived and seeking in each life its own individual potentialities” (*Fictive Certainties*, 203). That proposal was refined one rainy Vermont morning as I was speaking with Pat and Ron Padgett about the poet Ted Berrigan. Ron said that Ted and he

didn’t write poems honoring the dignity of the working man or the troubles of the working class. However, there are lots of things about our poetry that were formed by the class we came from. The very fact that Ted and I became poets and especially the kind of poets we became, that is, not traditional poets—we didn’t write “The Cremation of Sam McGee”—ejected us from our class. So it’s very interesting to have grown up in a certain class and still feel in many ways that it made you who you are, and yet know that you can never really be a part of it again because of your interest in art and writing. It’s really weird. And one’s writing continues to be influenced by—not only by the origins, but by the knowledge of the distance between you and

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your origins. So it's not only the presence of the class, it's the absence of the class at the same time.

This book might have addressed the connection articulated by Marcia Nardi between “being stuck at the ribbon counter at Woolworth’s for eight hours a day at the minimum hourly wage, and my inability to function as a poet!” But I’m a poet, not a sociologist. Instead of writing about poems that didn’t get written, I write about a few that did. Though it’s possible to read these poems without contemplating the complexities of social class, I hope something is gained by reading them within this context.