UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI

Date:________________________

I, ____,
hereby submit this work as part of the requirements for the degree of:

____

in:

____

It is entitled:

____

____

____

____

This work and its defense approved by:

Chair: _______________________________

____

____

____

____

DESERTS AT NIGHT

A dissertation submitted to the

Division of Research and Advanced Studies
Of the University of Cincinnati

In partial fulfillment of the
requirement for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Arts and Sciences

Department of English and Comparative Literature

2005

By

Hollynd Feldman Karapetkova

ABSTRACT

This dissertation includes a creative section with a selection of original poetry, along with a critical section that focuses on the work of Anne Spencer, one of the most important female poets of the Harlem Renaissance. Spencer's poems appeared in the major anthologies and journals of the period, and she was a close friend to writers like James Weldon Johnson and Langston Hughes. Like many of the poets working in the Harlem Renaissance, she chose to employ rather than overturn existing and recognizable poetic structures, and she clearly saw herself as writing within a white male tradition. She proclaimed Robert Browning her favorite poet, and she wrote herself comfortably into the company of white men: "Chatterton, Shelley, Keats and I— / Ah, how poets sing and die!" Some critics explain this seeming contradiction as a separation of her art and her life and view her poetry as an escape from the more controversial political concerns that occupied her existence. Yet, her poetry constantly brings into play her own voice and concerns as a black woman. This essay reads Spencer within the white male context in which she herself envisioned her work, examining several of Spencer's poems alongside the poems of her beloved Browning and her contemporaries T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats. In placing her within the white male canon, I do not mean to suggest that Spencer denied her blackness or womanhood, for I believe she managed with incredible skill the mutually exclusive terms of black, woman, and poet, marking through the white tradition every time she picked up the pen. Rather, I hope to show how poets writing out of the same tradition, using similar forms and poetic conventions, produced very different results. Such differences can shed light not only on Spencer's artistic choices but upon the works of these white men as well.

Acknowledgements

Grateful acknowledgement is made to the publications in which the following poems first appeared:

Artspike: "The Aftermath," "While Walking to the Orphanage," and "Relativity"
Calyx: A Journal of Literature by Women: "A Love Poem"
The Crab Orchard Review: "For My American Lover, Upon My Leaving"
The Edge City Review: "Grandfather and Dog," "Entropy," and "Family Secrets (as "Concentration")
The Formalist: "Parts of Speech"
The GSU Review: "The One That Got Away," "A Confession," and "What Remains"
The River King: "Space"

"Parts of Speech" also appeared in *Sonnets: 150 Contemporary Sonnets*, edited by William Baer (University of Evansville Press, 2005)
"A Confession" also appeared in translation in *Literaturen Vestnik* (Sofia, Bulgaria)

I would like to thank the members of my committee, Don Bogen, John Drury, and James Cummins, for all of their help in preparing this manuscript.

I would also like to thank the Charles Phelps Taft Memorial Fund for the grant that helped me to complete this manuscript.

For Peter

Contents

I

Once Upon a Time in the West 2
Hunger 4
Love and the National Defense 5
The End of the Show 6
A Fairy Tale 7
Leaving London 9
What Remains 10
Space 11
Lessons in Kindness 12
Trying to Fall Asleep 13

II

There Is No Sun in That Country 16
The Aftermath 18
Banitza 20
Family Secrets 22
A Personal History 23
While Walking to the Orphanage at Shiroka Luka, Bulgaria 24
Moments of Clarity 25
Warsaw in April 27
Democracy Comes to the Black Sea 28
For My American Lover, Upon My Leaving 29

III

Portrait: Girl at 19 31
The Birth of Consciousness 33
What I Remember About Death 34
Grandfather and Dog 36
The One That Got Away 37
Letter in Response to a Friend's Suicide Note 39
A Confession 41
Spring in St. Andrews 42
Portrait: Woman, Raindrops, Buildings 43

IV

The Synesthete 46
Parts of Speech 48
Dinner with Foreigners 49
The Cult of True Womanhood 51
After We Called It Quits 52
A Love Poem 53
Street Dogs 55
Things My Dog Sees 56
We Could Not Bear 57
Deserts at Night 59

V

"Chatterton, Shelley, Keats and I": Reading Anne Spencer
in the White Literary Tradition 61

I.

Once Upon a Time in the West

When you disappeared, I quit the telemarketing firm
to pursue your trail full-time, scanning the highway
for signs of where your lips and hands had gone,
retracing our last road trip, the hot unvegetated drive
across Texas from Houston to El Paso,
the trip that holds the fingernail clippings
you slipped out the window, the sweat sucked
from your pores in the air around Luling and Comfort—

the Love's Truck Stop an hour out of San Antonio
where the car overheated and we spent the night
with pink hot dogs and watery lemonade;
the Mexican dive near Fort Stockton
where we had lunch, beer and burritos.
The cute Puerto Rican waitress
(I learned on my fifth trip through town)
finished school and went to work for a law firm.
But otherwise it's the same, each taco echoing
the shape of your half smile, mouth full of food.

Always I sense that I am closing in, that you are just
a few miles ahead, at the next gas station, beyond
the rock formation rising on the horizon—
when I turn on the car, the soundtrack you left behind,
the weird harmonica repeating itself, a sign
for the wronged man, the hero who gets his revenge:
one bad guy's death to take back

a brother swinging from a rope, decades of guilt.
You are the almost satisfied hero riding off straight
across the desert, not stopping to look back.
I am the audience left in the dark theater,
teeth slightly parted in longing with no way
to call you back, to tell you it is not enough.
I will push the repeat button until my thumb goes numb.
I will hear that song again.

Hunger

On my hungry days, I sleep with men
for meals: I always stay the night.

In the morning, after he leaves for work,
my routine prowl through kitchen cabinets

and refrigerators for something pleasurable
but not too obvious, something he'll not

miss when he comes home: toast with jelly
smeared across its hard surface, noodles dripping

with melted butter, a slice of ham or turkey
salty on my tongue, olives, round and cold,

a glass of juice thick with pulp (I always
wash the glass out carefully, put it back

in its exact spot). Never eggs or avocadoes.
Never things that might be counted.

Once I went out with a man who kept
smoked salmon and brie in his fridge,

the pink tender flesh of the fish, the soft
rich cheese giving between my lips—

too good to pass up; I finished them off.
But I'll never see him again. I'm not that kind of girl.

Love and the National Defense

If love were a dirty bomb, you could set
it off in Washington and it would spread
into the suburbs unseen, contaminate
the air and water. People would breathe it, feed

on it unknowingly and slowly love
would infiltrate their lungs, make their fingers burn.
In a week, you'd see them start to pair up, leave
the office early for lunch and not return;

even the evangelists are born again—
this time to love—they grab the nearest nun,
and scientists are too involved to look
for cures, not that anyone cares. *Attack*

on US, the foreign press reports
with real concern, seeing the SUVs
abandoned on the interstates, the airports
unguarded, army generals on their knees.

Don't they know that love is always like that,
tearing you out of the spaces you once thought
meant something, making you forget each
last defense, the guns rusting along the beach.

The End of the Show

At the circus when I was seven
I could not take my eyes
from the pink tutued acrobats
in sequined shoes and the muscular men
dressed like princes or penguins
with white bibs and bow ties, spinning
dangerously from bar to bar.

Surely, this was love—
swooping through scary heights, letting go,
your stomach lurching like an injured bird,
your breath gone, everything stopped.
Then the hands grabbing hold of yours, firm
as the new baseball glove that meant
you'd never miss another fly ball,
and the hard pulse of your heart starting up again.

When it was over, they flipped down
softly into the safety net, tutus and bibs still
perfectly in place and the applause
drowning out my startled breath.
There was never any death involved,
only the illusion of a fall—the blood-red
lips and cheeks flushed not with fear but make-up.

I should have put two and two together.
But years later I was still amazed
as you stood in the doorway telling me

it wasn't love, you had only wanted
warmth in the bed during the winter months,
landing prettily in your soft net
and I, with the house lights down
left scraping my heart off the cold
dirty cement of the arena floor.

A Fairy Tale

What girl could resist the need to believe
Plato's lost halves reunited
in that "he makes me feel complete"
all the glassy-eyed brides ooze
on *A Wedding Story*?
I'd dream about you over breakfast,
and glow when you sent me mums at work.

Soon, I'd plastered myself
into domestic paradise;
you finished the dishes after chicken Florentine
while I ran to pick up milk or drop off
the rented movie from the night before.
Saturdays, we trimmed
hedges and pulled up weeds,
our faces smudged with soil
later scrubbed pink
and smiling at dinner parties.

I even began to iron shirts for you,
pressing hot metal hard
against the starched and flattened fabric,
moving carefully between buttons,
reinforcing creases,
passing over and over
burning like the days
into our flesh.

Leaving London

Looking back as from an airplane window overhead
where you contracted to the dot of an ink splot,
I felt I had drawn you to completion—
a picturesque Neoclassical pasture
with each cow, each branch perfectly in place
and evening granting its faint flush of reassurance.
The space between us was absolute.

But when I found the small slip of yellow paper
hidden between the novel and the bottle of water,
scrawled upon in slanting black figures (still warm,
I thought, from the touch of your hand)
the distance between us collapsed into splinters,
spun about like so many curls and fragments,
Van Gogh's grass, Picasso's splintered faces,
wild with your absence. And there was no landscape
I would not cross, no canvas large enough for my desire.

What Remains

The first day brought a sort of amazement
with the fact of missing anything so much—
an empty and unfathomable rent
where I had felt the suture of your touch.
On the second day an anger rose to fill
the gulf you left behind—first the greater
part toward you, fate, Cupid—the imbecile—
but my own guilt crept toward me like a traitor.
The third clutched firm to fantasy, belief
that you'd return, and life pick up where it was
before. I floated hours—uncaught thief
of time—we'd talk, you'd dry my tears. But a pause
fell heavy on the fourth: you would not care.
And then my heart caved in. And then despair.

Space

My aunt can see the future in the stars:
she described in detail the scene of her husband’s death
long before he was struck by the car in Guadalajara.
She told me that you and I are lovers from a past life,
bound forever, irrevocably, a promise firmer than death.

But all of this we know.

What we still do not know, and what fascinates me,
is what the light passes through
as it moves for decades toward our eyes,
what happens in the distance between the vision and the future,
that moment in my uncle’s mind as he lost his breath
and his eyes rolled slowly upward.
And what happens between the words *I* and *love*—
do your lips pause, shiver in the silence?

Lessons in Kindness

There were just a few at first, colorful—
I let them stay. But in a week the whole
house swarmed with ladybugs, sunning at windows,
prancing across the bath tub. When I saw
one piss on my toothbrush, I lost my cool,
began to slaughter them by the handful.

And when the sweet Romanian girl I'd met
the year before in Frankfurt, suddenly wrote,
her brother dying, I sent the cash she said
they'd need to operate. I even prayed.
But when she wrote me back—"We need more. Him
die soon"—well, I wasn't quite *that* dumb.

By the time you came along I'd figured out
how not to sound too interested. I let
you carry on with all your unexpected
acts of kindness—picking up my jacket
from the cleaners, keeping the soap I love
in your bath (though it made you break out in hives)—

while I'd show up late for dinner—or forget.
You waited at the bar three hours one night;
it was December; you couldn't start your car
and, of course, I wasn't home. You weren't sore,
"You should've called," you told me on the phone.
But I was stunned; you never called again.

Trying to Fall Asleep

I hear your heavy breath, know I've lost you
to the deep calm where I long to fall;
it's so easy for you—you grew

up, crammed with two other families, in a too small
flat, slept with your brother in the kitchen—
you heard the whole house breathe, its thin walls

meant you would never be alone.
But I had my own spacious room, at the other end
of the house from where my parents slept. Alone,

in the dark, I faced my dreams: not the kind
where you go to school naked and everyone stares,
but worse—the one where I'm walking around

my neighborhood at dusk. All the cars
are in the driveways, but the streets are quiet
and no lights are on. I beat on doors,

windows, but no one answers; they stay shut.
Then, my own home, still as death.
I open up our two-car garage and find it

piled to the roof with skulls. I can't breathe
and then it hits me; I know—
I'm the last one left alive on earth.

Slowly, as the nights went by, I grew
to like the empty streets where I could
walk undisturbed, let my thoughts flow

in massive strokes, filling up the void.
So now, the closeness of your breath comes
as surprise, another self, a crowd

inhabiting the planet, not welcome
fellowship, but an invasion, a crude
betrayal of all I’ve known, all I have become.

II.

There Is No Sun In That Country

They had built so many buildings—
we could only imagine
how beautiful it must have been before,
because they had built so many buildings.

At first it seemed even their livestock
were different from ours,
then I saw the cows are basically the same
though their sheep have long tails.

Otherwise, things are different.
We would never kill women and children
where I come from, but the bombs there
were landing all over, who could tell,
they were hitting women and even babies.

Give us food to feed our children,
Land safe for them to walk and live,
Land with no boundaries
Where we can live freely.

I want to tell you that when I came
back all my cows were dead.
Not a single goat was living.
The village was deserted.

Still, I came back to where I belong,
richer than before, at least,

but the money didn’t change me.
I cannot lose my traditions
and no one who dares call himself
a man is afraid of the knife.

Look how men are made.
Look how simple it is.
Look how men are made.
They don’t even feel the pain.

As for the rest, I cannot judge:
a man dreaming of a vulture
cannot be sure he is not a vulture
dreaming this human life.

The Aftermath

I. Villager

My daughter's brains were strung from two trees.
They doused my wife in gasoline and lit it
with a match, then lined us up on our knees
against a wall. The bullets missed, but I hit

the ground with the others—about twenty—
and waited for the soldiers to search the pile
of us for money. Fortunately there was plenty
of blood to spare—I had to play dead awhile.

II. Soldier

At home, they lectured us about courage.
But after some guys jeered me on to rape
a girl about my younger sister's age
I gave in, chose friendship and escape

in bad vodka. After that, the war came
easy. Severed limbs, screams; I felt no fault,
stayed drunk, and they became a blur, the same
as the ants whose hills I used to fill with salt.

III. Mother

My son’s letters were so calm that it all
seemed more like a dream: the zinc box whose seal
I wasn’t allowed to open, the small
tombstone, whose inscription couldn’t reveal

how or even where he died. I found out
later the coffins often contained wrong
bodies, or none at all. At night I think about
the boy in my son’s grave; his eyes belong

to another mother, but grow less strange
with each burrowing worm, each season’s change.

Banitza

When the daughter returned
from the camp at Belene,
her teeth were gray, her hair thin,
though she was barely twenty.
She clung to the bed for days.

But the mother began to make banitza,
in layers as thick as the days her child
had been gone: the first sheet of dough,
the film of clouds, opaque on the afternoon
they took her daughter away;

the next, a thin frost that formed
across the field where the girl
spent that first night, covered
only by a worn coat taken
off a man the soldiers had shot.

Then, the white crumbs of cheese,
the snow that fell on the day she stood
outside the camp trying to get a glimpse
of her daughter, but only being able
to imagine the girl shivering, starved.

Three eggs, beaten, for the years of waiting.
And then the butter, limp as her legs had gone
with the rumors of her daughter's death, pale
as the night she paced the iron fence outside the camp,

screaming for the body, for the truth.

And as she put the pastry in the oven,
the tears now fell freely, melting
like snow kept all winter in the mountains,
dripping down like the warming butter,
mixing with the mass of cheese and dough.

Then she placed this pastry
on her daughter’s tongue,
that they both might feel
some level of pain
begin to flake and fall away.

Family Secrets

The relatives wouldn't speak of her—they balked
at my questions, so I couldn't understand
her strange silence, the smudge above her hand.
My cousins and I laughed at the way she walked:
stiff-armed, wide-eyed as a perch left by the tide,
its fins pulled painfully in. Her legs would slice
the air like knives, front-back, each step precise:
she never faltered or slipped to the side.

After her death I learned she was found out
hiding Jews during the war. At Dachau,
too ill to work, she was dragged from bed
and forced to step between two lines of Kraut
bullets. Fevered, she willed herself somehow
to walk, fish on land, living dead.

A Personal History

Bulgaria, 1969

On September sixth, 1944
the Russians crossed our border in the north.
Of course, it'd been decided long before:
twenty-seven million dead should be worth
something, Stalin said, and walked away
from Potsdam and Tehran with the biggest shard
of Europe's broken glass, much to the dismay
of my father, whom the Party barred
on account of his Sorbonne education.

But his disgust never turned to anger,
except one New Year's Eve—every station
broadcast at midnight the routine languor
of Zhivcov's national address, the face
sneering on the new TV that took thirteen
months of his salary to buy. The space
of tension, then the shattering of the screen
as my father threw the champagne bottle straight
into the man's teeth. The glass wound, severe,
sparked and fizzed. My father, no longer irate,
turned slowly, raised his toast to the New Year.

While Walking to the Orphanage
at Shiroka Luka, Bulgaria

I stepped right over it:
flattened against the cracked
asphalt amid splotches
of garbage and grease,
the spread wings of a butterfly,
its opalescent white
swirled with rings of color—
oranges, reds, blues—
impossibly fine.

Later that day, the children
swam about in the sunlight
on the balcony,
blinking their frail lashes
against the unbearable brightness,
fluttering their tiny limbs
pleading to be lifted up
to settle in my arms.

Moments of Clarity

1.

It was a cold morning in September.
The first frost had settled the haze of summer
and the early sun honed the outlines
of the mountains in the distance,
black, sharp, unforgiving.
You swore you'd return.

2.

The first snowfall left soft flakes, white
on the dark wool sleeve of my coat.
They didn't melt right away, their sharp
lines as clear as the big newspaper shapes
we cut to hang on the tree when I was small.
The letter says *miss you, hope you're well*.

3.

The snow had already begun to melt, to slip
like silver tinsel down the mountain and drop
like mercury from the needles of pines;
the child was born at dusk and as the sun
set it left a pink stain on the grass,
each blade a shadow, severe and close.

4.

A warm afternoon in late July, the sun
piercing my shoulders, then my spine
as I bent and rose hanging heavy clothes
dark and wet with grief. Through the green branches
above me the thrust of the sun's glare
pushed the needles apart, defined each spear.

Warsaw in April

Amid dull puffs of smoke
from engines and filter-less cigarettes,
the thick gray noise of people and trains
arriving, departing, pushing off
toward some distant countryside
that amounts only to more of the same:
bread lines an hour long,
holes sewn, a third time, in worn-out socks,
and a gray sky that hangs like an old shirt,
refuses to storm or clear off, just hangs—

upon the platform where a train
arrives from Gdansk, two small boys emerge
in clean white shirts and matching pants,
trailing a father like proud birds.
The older grips a sprig of daisies
half bent, the tendrils curled
around his fingers: small hope.
But for the woman who will step
off the train, take the flowers carefully
like precious crystal, lift
the boys in her arms, each in turn,
whisper how she missed them: home.

Democracy Comes to the Black Sea

We are all topless, men, women, children
exposed, crowded onto the open sea's coast
flaunting our freedom like pink-breasted birds.
We talk loudly, crammed upon the sand—
consuming space, air, silence, wanting more
until we can hardly breathe from all the cigarette smoke
and we cannot feel the wind for the barricades
of plastic floats, portable radios, beach chairs
we have learned quickly to consume.
We let the water lap no further than our waists,
the transparent water that seems to go on forever.

Years ago we looked out and saw the west—
one swimmer could pass unnoticed, break
for the far shore. We were not worried
about the undertow, only the need to make it
out to the edge of the horizon, looking back
on the rows of red and yellow umbrellas,
the hot swarming bodies shrinking
into a single mass of flesh. Now there is nothing
to escape, nowhere left to go. Now we only sit
and burn, naked to the world, finding nothing:
not freedom, not release, only the sun's heat.

For My American Lover, Upon My Leaving

The first time I walked into an American
supermarket I nearly fainted, right between
the isles of bread stacked above my head,
beyond my reach: brown bread, flat bread,
big puffy bread, tiny bread like fists,
bread long and thin as arms, bread with nuts
on top, bread with different fruits inside,
so much bread it overwhelmed the shelves,
threatened to burst onto the floor.

At home, the store shelves were empty—no
butter, no cheese, no meat, perhaps a few
expensive cans of mushrooms or a box
of Dutch milk only foreigners could afford.
I had to wait in line just to buy a loaf of bread.
Most days they'd run out before my turn to buy.

You had never gone home empty-handed;
how could I explain my first taste of *freedom*—
not saying anything I wanted without fear
the nosy neighbor would report me to the authorities,
but bread I could buy and waste at will.
You wouldn't understand the phrase *too much,*
but I had learned to survive on hunger.
What was I to do with all of your affection?
Squander it, buy it up in boxes for fear
one day your shelves, too, would run empty?

III.

Portrait: Girl at 19

My mother's always spouting thoughts on life—
it's tough, not fair, too short; it's what you make
of it—words that seem to bounce from her mouth
like a reflex. I guess she's trying to give
me some advice without having to get
too much involved. But the odd part is how
she expects me to understand it all
without experience, to imagine what
I had not lived—like when she said "Life's not
all black and white" and I thought of old photos,
her colorless growing up. She knew what
she could not do, got married to have sex,
then got divorced. And though she noticed
something wrong and said *you know you can talk*
to me, I knew I couldn't. What I did,
I did alone. Sure, I thought of those films
from Catholic school, where the women sat—
a single white light behind them to shade
their shamed faces black—and spoke of disgust,
regret. But what I felt was not disgust.
Instead, I recalled the trip back from the coast.
We headed west all afternoon, the sun
unflinching, burning through the windshield.
My mother's face was lit—a white so stark
I could not see its features as she stared
ahead at the road, and when she turned to speak
to me, her face fell half into black shadow,
and I was afraid, afraid of that sun's

piercing anger, afraid that it would burn through
the glass. So when it finally gave in,
yielded to soft pink and orange, what I felt
was not sin, even though I bled for eight days.
Instead, it was the sigh of relief that spread
across the sky and reddened the horizon.

The Birth of Consciousness

I believed in love—he'd emerge with the length
of a pink scar down his back (as Plato guessed)
where we were split apart—a love whose strength
would give meaning, even on this unblessed
earth. Take Romeo and Juliet
spitting in the stubborn face of death.
But what happened when I reached the spotlight
was more like Daffy Duck tripping over himself
as he recites *to be or not*, the same
circle of questions, the same sorry plot.
It isn't love I want but the world before it came
veering out of focus, curved like a camera shot
that swings and zooms away—shrinking, so small.
And I… standing on the other side of it all.

What I Remember About Death

Our neighbors' dog tried to jump the fence
behind our house but caught his neck
and hung himself between the wooden slats.
I heard my mother and father mutter
that dog was really nuts.
They shoved me away from the window.
I didn't get a look, but afterwards an image
grew so clear in my mind I swore I'd seen it—
dark, heavy shadows angling above me—
that dog hanging from the fence
like a puppet, eyes glassed and wide.

Dark, heavy shadows angling above me:
that's what I said when the cops asked,
that's what I remembered.
That and the white light glaring down,
staring into me like a god.
That light later became headlights,
and forms slowly took shape in front of it—
dark, heavy shadows angling above me,
the dog's eyes glassed and wide.

At first I had to infer along with the cops
that my fractures and scrapes came
from being tossed out on the side of the road,
that the two teenage boys in the other car were drunk,
rehearsing the events until I could clearly recall
waiting in the grass for the paramedics to come—

that dog was really nuts, I heard them say,

his head was hanging from the fence like a puppet.

Grandfather and Dog

I stood beside the hole, looked up at him,
waited. At Grandma’s funeral he’d cried
but now his eyes just stared, detached and dim,
and soon the dirt flung was enough to hide
the lifeless form. The early evening shadows
defined his wrinkles, and I saw the sweat
drip off his clenched jaw. But only God knows
what he whispered through his cigarette.
I heard that after Grandma died, his dog ate
with him at the table; he read her all Scott’s
novels, and later, my mother would relate
how he’d kept the dog alive with morphine shots,
as though he knew he could not go on alone—
the hole I stood by six months later was his own.

The One That Got Away

The dead remind me of you,
road-side—
not the regular
squirrels and possums,
but those large and beautiful—

like that deer I saw
on my way to Memphis,
its graceful limbs bent so awkwardly
I couldn't drive
anymore that day,

or the moose
that summer in Yellowstone,
its eyes already
chewed out by flies.
I don't think I ate
for the rest of the week.

Strange, such life
wasted on a fender.
I saw you then
bolting through the wild shade of trees,
weightless on the delicate moss.

I imagine you now, running,
straight into the sunlight of an interstate,
refusing to stop

for the pavement.
The car that hits you is in a ditch,
its hood bent by your still
magnificent antlers.

Letter in Response to a Friend's Suicide Note

250,000 people live off garbage
in the capital city of Mexico,
right across the border, so far away
it might as well be another planet.

You are collapsed against the cheap
motel carpeting in the suburbs of Atlanta
no longer breathing in the residue
of semen and cigarette ash.

A few minutes ago you wrote
a few angry lines with the hotel pen,
your last words running into the hotel logo,
not enough to do anyone any good.

A woman in a Cairo prison wrote her memoirs
on toilet paper with an eyeliner smuggled to her
by a prostitute, the makeup smudging
against the soft tissue, blurred but barely readable.

She said *then, when I began to write,*
there was no more prison. When I began to write

What if I could tell you I loved you once
and you never knew, I was afraid to say it
and I could not look you in the eyes,
you seemed so far away and so close.

I want to say keep the pen pressed to the page
until the hotel walls fade and you find yourself
out amid the warm night air. Come closer,
tell us why we love.

A Confession

I must admit that more than once before
I’ve thought to wrap a rope around my neck,
to chase the indifferent tide too far from shore,
or, like my cousin Jude who fell—a fleck
of dirt—off a cliff in Butte, Montana
(I knew from how my mother said the word
accident what really happened), plan a
last dive, pushing through air, a heavy bird.
But what keeps my feet from kicking out the chair
or lifting off the ledge is that one moment,
half way to ground and half way out of air,
when the world suddenly lifts its cruel intent,
reveals the wonder I long ago forgot
too late to climb back up or cut the knot.

Spring in St. Andrews

It didn't matter that I had been cruel,
lashing out at everyone in reach,
felt life slipping through the cracks in the sidewalk
and had to try to get my teeth in something;
that I hated the world
and once sat until evening, shivering out
on the long pier, trying to get the nerve to jump
but finally fumbling back on my knees in the dark;
that I had pushed love away
like a curse,
pushed you away;
or that the sky was still
the same impenetrable gray it had been
every day since my arrival last fall;
suddenly, that unbearable city had lit up:
daffodils, like a blaze across
whole hills and fields,
gold and white and green—
even for my eyes.
Even for me.

Portrait: Woman, Raindrops, Buildings

It was raining
and it was going
to rain, that was my life—
dodging into underpasses,
thinning myself against
the sides of buildings,

up under rooftops of buildings
where it wasn't raining
as hard, my shirt wet against
my skin, shoes going
squish with water that passes
for life but is not life.

If I had a different life
that well-lit building
would be home, I'd pass
inside out of the rain
and I wouldn't be going
anywhere else against

my will, against
my better judgment. But this life
was my life and going
nowhere but the next building.
Once, to avoid the rain
I ran into a warehouse that passed

for an arcade and passed
three hours fighting against
the evil army and reigning
queen of darkness (to save life
on earth), stalking vacant buildings
not knowing where I was going—

I was never going
to win; I couldn't even pass
the first level—the buildings
kept yielding zombies against
me—a quarter for each life—
but I kept playing, the rain

pounding against the building
as I died, passed back into life
again, and the rain kept going.

IV.

The Synesthete

Peppermint tastes like a frozen lake,
smooth and cold beneath skates;
chocolate, white cows on a bright green field.
The letter “L” is pink and *anger*
purple, the color glowing with the word
on the page, around its sound in the air.

I was ten before I realized what I was.
I told my reading teacher
the girl in the story saw not envy
but embarrassment when she saw green.
The teacher stared at me blankly
and sent me to the school counselor.

After that, I grew careful.
When I fell in love with the boy
whose kiss made clouds spin out
like peacock feathers against the sky,
whose name was cherry red, my favorite color,
who swelled around me in a hum

like a swarm of bees, like the sense
of flying across a field of lavender
on a horse going faster and faster,
I was afraid he would turn from me
in mid-flight and see me for what I was.
I was afraid of falling off.

Instead, I married a man whose voice
is brown and crisp as buttered toast
and live in a house the pale gray shade
of a winter sky, the number 10, the letter "O,"
and when we kiss it's all cold water,
colorless against my skin.

Parts of Speech

Tomorrow, I will build a universe
of ink, and write you subject to my pen,
controlling all you do and think in verse
and changing every loss of mine to win;
for instance, I could start with adjectives,
crossing out the *old* that I’ve become,
replacing *dull* with *lovely*; or I’d give
your *careless* words a turn to *grateful* ones.
And then for nouns—inscribe your *apathy*
as *care* with but a movement of my wrist,
to trade *distaste* for *passion*, transform *me*
into *she*, and thus by you as her be kissed.
Or better than this wordy love-retrieving
I’ll simply stop all verbs, keep you from leaving.

Dinner with Foreigners

Your eyes are open but everything
is dark—or so
bright you can't see?
Nothing has shape; it just clicks,
clicks, the train
on the ride down, sound
and no meaning.

Forms wedge themselves in—
a few words
from Marlon Brando
or Clint Eastwood,
all they know of English
and you know
no movies in their language.

You jerk out phrases
like the sweater you wanted
in the middle of your bag;
you got pants, the bra
instead: Thanks
for invited you
here. The chicken
tastes pretty.

Conversation clatters on;
someone else beats out
lines you can't read

on the typewriter
in the next room…

Another glass of wine
and they've found
a boy to translate,
someone's son studies English!
in school!
He tosses you
bits of meaning

and soon the night has shape;
faces lean forward
take on personalities,
you have a personality.
The typing stops
the train slows down
you pull out the page
and read.

The Cult of True Womanhood

Jesus the lamb, Prometheus the liver
from whom all things taste finer: give us this day
our daily bread and meat, our stolen fire—
the prayer of a barbeque or flambé
that elevates us above the beastly rare—
and the gods' anger that made rise from clay
a woman, and stuck her in the kitchen, where
bending behind the oven she can't say
she saw them string him on the cross, tear out
his liver; still, she holds a paring knife
to dice the fruit, open the box, discover
the holy ghost is nothing but a vulture.
A prankster, she will teach you how to doubt
and you will look away, and call her wife.

After We Called It Quits

My shrink told me to take some time for myself
and recommended yoga. But rolling around on mats
breathing heavily was too much like sex without the payoff.
After getting stuck in the triangle pose,
feet spread wide, inner thighs aching like sin,
I was too mortified, too much in pain to go back.

I enrolled in an astrophysics class at the local
university to distract myself with star formation.
The violent story of universal birth, the matter
and antimatter pushing against each other,
letting nothing else survive for billions of years;
how could I not think of you?

Desperate, I went to the psychic down the street.
He offered a potion to bring me face to face with love.
But then what? Eventually, the universe would settle,
matter making suns and galaxies, antimatter shrinking
back into black holes holding it all together. Like all men,
you wanted children and someone to do the laundry.

I was sick of being the anti. I chickened out and only
pretended to drink, then told the psychic his potion
brought me himself, for indeed he was standing before me.
We got together, had dogs instead of children,
and wrote a book on coping in a contemporary universe.
It’s not a love story; it has sold well.

A Love Poem

For Peter

It was you who finally found
the glasses I couldn't see without
but had carelessly left
in some unmemorable spot,
folded neatly into empty oblong eyes.
I was annoyed by the ease of your discovery.

And there were other signs:
the first rain in three months
fell steadily on the day you arrived
and for three days after,
the tightly clinched sky
finally splitting, spilling over.

Then, the brown creeper
that flew in our open window.
I flinched,
remembering the thud
when a wren entered my childhood home
and slammed against the glass,
the tiny trickle of blood
that slipped down its beak—
but you, reaching out
toward the frenzied blur of brown and white,
grasped without crushing,
spoke comfortingly in an odd falsetto
until I dared to look up,

to watch it flutter into open air,
and breathe freely again.

Street Dogs

If it’s true that dogs are reborn souls of suicides,
then what seem mere shadows haunting garbage heaps

become recognizable, skin stretched around the nose
and jaw, teeth sharpened with the unfamiliar instinct

to live. Don’t let the narrowed eyes divert you—
the familiar face still lurks behind thick matted fur:

Hemingway asleep atop the Sunday edition,
Dido, trailing an ice-cream-dripping boy,

or L.E. Landon, still wet, just arrived
as one of Ophelia’s sixth set of puppies.

Others have grown into humble adults, locked outside
the heated living rooms of comfy chairs where love

is never enough. Better to scavenge, better
to pin your hopes on a carelessly dropped sausage.

Things My Dog Sees

Feet, ankles, roughened knees,
an occasional hand
reached down with a bland
morsel, or half-meant
pat on the head. The vent
under the couch—roach doorway.
The sun at midday,
dimpled by leaves, as it pours
over tables, across floors.
Unfinished undersides
of chairs, the rug that hides
dirt and crumbs of food.
A pile of books good
to mount, balance atop,
or, when tired, to prop
a chin on.
                    But the rush
of a passing squirrel or thrush
moving in catapults
sparks the vestigial pulse
disarmed but not undone:
and then, the hard, clear run,
the thrill of open field,
of grass and sky that yield
to no brick house or clever
flower bed, but go on and on forever.

We Could Not Bear

It seemed to go on for hours—
a painful cry like the screeching of tires,
or the swing of a door on a rusted hinge,
sometimes petering out for a minute or so
only to start back up again, even louder
and more desperate than before.

We weren't doing it to be cruel—
it's what all the dog books said to do—
let it cry, even if it goes on all night
or it will be sleeping in your bed,
on your pillow, for the rest of your life.
But there was no telling that to the dog,
so we went on trying to ignore it,
trying to get some sleep.

But as we, snug in the bed,
lay awake listening to that cry,
heard the sound of train cars colliding
in the night like distant thunder, heard a horn
honking on some far-off street, signaling
to someone to hurry up, your ride is waiting,
growing more desperate with every bleat,

the dog cried on, and we knew
the loneliness of a horn that, for all its bleating
could not draw the one it loved,
the loneliness of those train cars

that for all their clashing and coming together
were really always alone, driving
through the night across a still landscape.
We knew the loneliness that froze
within us like a snowy field in moonlight,
its grass stiff and dead, its trees bare.
It wailed within us like that dog,
a small but piercing cry not giving in
even as we lay together.

We knew what we could not bear.
The next night, that dog slept in the bed.

Deserts at Night

I turn over, shoulder hitting the mattress hard.
Too much to drink again. I need a glass of water
but it’s cold downstairs so I stay in bed
and think of deserts, stretching out as far

as I can see in all directions like my bed.
Empty but for me, it seems to be expanding,
though not as rapidly as the desert
which grows every year by the size of Vermont—

sand rolling over grass and shrubs, covering
farms and towns like ancient tombs, pushing back
the blue expanse of ocean and leaving white—
dust and salt flats forever. All this talk

about meteors and aliens when the narrative
of catastrophe is so close: as many grains
of sand as stars. They chafe against each other
as they cross the globe, wailing like demons.

I’ve thought of building walls to keep the dunes
back, shoveling out the sand where it drifts
over doorways, seeps through slits
in the window casing; but it’s pointless.

At night the desert grows cool and across
the wrinkles of sand the moon’s blue light
casts a shadow like the current of the ocean
rippling out forever beneath my feet.

V.

“Chatterton, Shelley, Keats and I”:

Reading Anne Spencer in the White Literary Tradition

Anne Spencer was one of the most important female poets of the Harlem Renaissance. Her poems appeared in Alain Locke's *The New Negro*, Countee Cullen's *Caroling Dusk* and James Weldon Johnson's *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, as well as in the two most important journals of the Renaissance, *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*. She was a close friend to James Weldon Johnson and Langston Hughes, and figures like W.E.B. DuBois, George Washington Carver, and Paul Robeson were among the many guests at her home. Because of her responsibilities as a wife and mother, and because she was not given the critical attention of her male colleagues during the Renaissance, she published very few poems in her lifetime. Nevertheless, she has left us with a small but impressive selection of poetry.

Critics of Spencer's work often focus on her biography,[1] and indeed her life merits recognition. She lived a dynamic and unconventional existence, working actively for civil rights in her small hometown of Lynchburg, Virginia, and refusing to conform to prescribed roles of blackness or womanhood. The fact that her poems deserve merit and study in their own right but that few studies of Spencer have attempted in-depth analyses of her work raises questions about how seriously critics take her as a poet. Certainly, any scholar of Spencer's work faces numerous challenges; not only is her work diverse in subject matter, but as Gloria Hull notes, her "mixture of free verse and rhymed, iambic-based lines…defies precise categorization."[2] In addition, the avenues of exploration that might first come to mind in dealing with her poems pose some difficulty upon more careful consideration. Certainly Spencer often writes about black and feminist concerns, most famously in "White Things" and "Letter to My Sister," and in Spencer's work even an address to a plate of fruit can become a meditation on the dilemma facing blacks in

western society, as it does in "Grapes: Still Life": "This, too, is your heritage, / You who force the plight; / Blood and bone you turn to them / For their root is white" (192).[3] However, the women poets of the Renaissance have typically been accused of a tendency to conform to a conventional (i.e., white male) aesthetic, and many critics find the controversial concerns that inhabited Spencer's life absent in her poetry.[4] Indeed, reading Spencer primarily as an African American or woman poet could present some difficulties, for in many ways her poems do not look very "black" or "female"; she writes in polished English with an academic vocabulary and often uses formal conventions of rhyme, meter, and stanza pattern. But most importantly, Spencer herself troubles such a reading by the way she envisioned herself as a writer. She proclaimed Robert Browning her favorite poet without conceiving of her affinity for him as a contradiction, and she wrote herself comfortably into the company of white men: "Chatterton, Shelley, Keats and I— / Ah, how poets sing and die!" (*TUG,* 197). Some critics explain this seeming contradiction as a separation of her art and her life and view her poetry as an escape, a substitution for the reality in which she was belittled and overlooked as an African American woman.[5] Her autobiographical statement in Cullen's anthology—"I write about some of the things I love. But have no civilized articulation for the things I hate"—does suggest, in Erlene Stetson's words, a desire to put "distance between herself and her genuine love of poetry."[6] And yet, can we understand Spencer's work fairly as the product of such a separation of her life as a black woman from her writing in a white male tradition?

The project of adopting the forms of the western tradition was one that many writers of the Harlem Renaissance shared. In his desire to reach out to a white intellectual

readership, in his hope that black art could lead to a revision of American culture, and in his belief that black writers could express "race-spirit" through a white aesthetic, Alain Locke's New Negro writes like a white person about black concerns. As Houston Baker notes, while *The New Negro* emphasizes a black community and a folk perspective, the work praises "formal mastery" and consists of mostly "formally *standard* works."[7] Yet, according to Baker, conforming to western standards was a critical step in the production of black art: "If the younger generation was to proffer 'artistic' gifts, such gifts had first to be recognizable as 'artistic' by Western, formal standards."[8] For black writers of the Renaissance, merely employing the very tradition that silenced, caricatured, and exoticized them constituted a cultural revolution. To inhabit the forms and methods of white literature meant to some extent buying into the ideology of the oppressor, but as Maureen Honey explains, "poets of the Renaissance did not consider the models they followed to be the province or reflection of the conqueror. Rather, these forms were conceived of as politically neutral vehicles through which Black culture could be made visible."[9] The alternative to writing in accepted forms—an attempt to forge a new literary aesthetic from the black folk forms of spiritual, jazz, and orality—was not always more desirable, for it gave in to notions of exoticism and primitivism encouraged by white patrons like Charlotte Mason. Such notions were particularly dangerous for black women, for they recalled a tradition of sexual abuse and images of black women as licentious.[10] Either way black artists turned they were criticized, and while black men could occasionally garner praise for their skillful use of traditional poetic form, as Countee Cullen and Claude McKay did, or for their innovation with new forms like the jazz rhythms of Langston Hughes, black women invariably suffered disapproval at either

end of the spectrum. Jessie Fauset's novels were too bourgeois, "too prim school-marmish and stilted," according to McKay, and Zora Neale Hurston's work was largely "ignored or disparaged."[11] Both, until recently, were forgotten.

Like most women writers of the Harlem Renaissance, Spencer chose to employ rather than overturn existing and recognizable structures. It is impossible to say whether this was the best choice Spencer could have made, and I do not wish to judge the harm or benefits that the aesthetic project of the New Negro had upon its participants. However, I do believe that Spencer made the most of her limited options, using traditional forms to her own purposes and formulating a productive relationship with the accepted tradition. Unlike those critics who see a separation between her radical life and conventional art, I agree with Charita M. Ford that she "never allowed her lyricism to confine her radical and rebellious symbolism and imagery."[12] I intend, in this essay, to read Spencer within the white male context in which she herself envisioned her work. Yet in reading her next to her beloved Browning and her contemporaries T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats, I do not mean to suggest that she denied her blackness or womanhood, for her poems constantly bring into play her own voice and concerns as a black woman. In my opinion, she managed with incredible skill the mutually exclusive terms of black, woman, and poet, marking through the white tradition every time she picked up the pen. Such an approach may have cost her a reading public; as J. Lee Green points out, she refused on several occasions to alter her poems for political or aesthetic reasons, choosing to limit her "publications rather than conform to the dictates of critics and editors and publishers who prejudged for the readers" (*TUG,* 140). What I hope to show, in reading Spencer beside such figures of the white western tradition as Yeats, Eliot, and Browning, is how poets

writing out of the same tradition, using similar forms and poetic conventions, produced very different results. Such differences can shed light not only on Spencer's artistic choices but upon the works of these white men as well.[13]

I. Men Speaking About Woman: Spencer's "Before the Feast at Shushan" and Browning's "My Last Duchess"

We know from Spencer herself that Browning was an influential figure on her poetry, and like Browning Spencer wrote a number of dramatic monologues, including "Change," "Lines to a Nasturtium (A Lover Muses)," and "The Wife-Woman." Perhaps her most well known dramatic monologue is her first published poem, "Before the Feast at Shushan." The poem is based upon the biblical story from the book of Esther in which Vashti, queen and wife of King Ahasuerus, refuses her husband's order to appear before him and his drunken men at a feast. His advisors warn him that her behavior will encourage other wives to disobey their husbands, and he has Vashti banished. Tradition poses a number of possible reasons for her refusal, although most center upon the motive of "personal modesty and dignity."[14] Vashti serves as an example of a woman who refuses to be put on display for the pleasure of a male audience, thereby preserving her self-respect even at the price of her queenship. Her blatant refusal contrasts with her successor Esther's supplication and indirect manner in approaching the king, through which Esther successfully saves her people. However, both women have been employed in women's writing—and particularly in black women's writing—as models of female influence and assertion.[15] Spencer's poem provides an interesting twist on the tale, for

she tells the story not from the point of view of the woman herself, but from the point of view of her harsh and misogynist husband, the king:

> Garden of Shushan!
> After Eden, all terrace, pool, and flower recollect thee:
> Ye weavers in saffron and haze and Tyrian purple,
> Tell yet what range in color wakes the eye;
> Sorcerer, release the dreams born here when
> Drowsy, shifting palm-shade enspells the brain;
> And sound! ye with harp and flute ne'er essay
> Before these star-noted birds escaped from paradise awhile to
> Stir all dark, and dear, and passionate desire, till mine
> Arms go out to be mocked by the softly kissing body of the wind—
> Slave, send Vashti to her King!
>
> The fiery wattles of the sun startle into flame
> The marbled towers of Shushan:
> So at each day's wane, two peers—the one in
> Heaven, the other on earth—welcome with their
> Splendor the peerless beauty of the Queen.
>
> Cushioned at the Queen's feet and upon her knee
> Finding glory for mine head,—still, nearly shamed
> Am I, the King, to bend and kiss with sharp
> Breath the olive-pink of sandaled toes between;
> Or lift me high to the magnet of a gaze, dusky,
> Like the pool when but the moon-ray strikes to its depth;
> Or closer press to crush a grape 'gainst lips redder
> Than the grape, a rose in the night of her hair;
> Then—Sharon's Rose in my arms.

And I am hard to force the petals wide;
And you are fast to suffer and be sad.
Is any prophet come to teach a new thing
Now in a more apt time?
Have him 'maze how you say love is sacrament;
How says Vashti, love is both bread and wine;
How to the altar may not come to break and drink,
Hulky flesh nor fleshly spirit?

I, thy lord, like not manna for meat as a Judahn;
I, thy master, drink, and red wine, plenty, and when
I thirst. Eat meat, and full, when I hunger.
I, thy King, teach you and leave you, when I list.
No woman in all Persia sets out strange action
To confuse Persia's lord—
Love is but desire and thy purpose fulfillment;
I, thy King, so say!

(*TUG*, 195-6)

Like King Ahasuerus, the speaker of Browning's famous dramatic monologue "My Last Duchess," the Duke of Ferrara, is a powerful male who attempts to demonstrate his authority by controlling women. Both men speak of women they have attempted to make into objects they can display for their own and others' pleasure. The duke desires a wife who will serve as an addition to his array of art pieces like his statue of Neptune taming a sea-horse, and the king similarly treats Vashti as a piece of property he can flaunt, equating her with the wine and meat he partakes of as he pleases. In addition, both women elude this objectification, for their behavior goes against the expectations of the speakers and the patriarchal societies they represent; the duchess is "too easily impressed" and takes as much pleasure in her white mule as in the duke's "nine-hundred-

years-old name,"[16] while Vashti tries to explain to the king that "love is sacrament" requiring an equality on the part of both partners that cannot be forced.[17] This unconventional behavior throws the men off balance and makes them feel that they have been made to look foolish, particularly as concerns their passion for the woman in question. The king tells us his desire for Vashti makes him open himself up to being "mocked" and grows angry at being "nearly shamed" by bending to kiss Vashti's feet. The duke also worries that the duchess' blushing for Frà Pandolf or an officious fool threatens his stature and is concerned with not being made to bow to the duchess: "I choose / Never to stoop" (*CWB,* 202). Of course, both women fare badly for making the speakers look as if they lack control, for the men respond with violence. The duke (so we are led to believe) has the duchess killed, and the king makes a suggestion of forced sexuality—"I am hard to force the petals wide"—and banishes Vashti in the subsequent events of the biblical tale.

Both the duke's and the king's need to dominate women comes across in their obsession with linguistic control. The duke speaks in carefully arranged heroic couplets, enacting his desire through language—"I gave commands;/ Then all smiles stopped together"—and controling his listener's thoughts and behavior through his words—"Will 't please you sit and look at her?"; "Will 't please you rise?"; "Nay, we'll go/ Together down, sir" (*CWB*, 201-2). The king, too, is preoccupied with giving orders—"Slave, send Vashti to her King!"—and he tells us it is Vashti's bold words that have upset his authority and worked "To confuse Persia's lord." Similarly, it is through language that the king attempts to reassert his authority in the final stanza. We can almost watch him trying to convince himself that indeed he has the upper hand in the relationship by telling

himself he controls their dialogue: “I, thy King, so say!” Like the duke, he relies on the ability to command action through language to assert his power. However, the linguistic balance, left intact in Browning’s poem, tips awkwardly in Spencer’s. While in “My Last Duchess” the duke does attribute to his late wife “approving speech,” what she actually says is less important than the fact that she “thanked men…Somehow” through her behavior (*CWB*, 202). The duke never tells us exactly what the girl has said, nor does it seem important enough to repeat. Vashti’s words, on the other hand, have remained on the king’s mind, and he reiterates, “How says Vashti” in the fourth stanza. The fact that he paraphrases in his own language what she has said suggests the extent to which he has absorbed her speech. Thus, while in “My Last Duchess” it is the Duke’s own words that reveal his obsessive behavior and insecurities, in “Before the Feast” it is the words of Vashti herself that reveal (and indeed create) the king’s uncertainty. Next to her view of love as more than flesh, his monosyllabic response—“I, thy master, drink, and red wine, plenty, and when/ I thirst. Eat meat, and full, when I hunger”—reveals a childish self-assertion that tells us just how far he is from comprehending the queen’s message.

Spencer’s poem differs from Browning’s in a number of other crucial aspects. Not only does Spencer import the biblical figure of Vashti championed in black and white women’s rhetoric into the tradition of dramatic monologue, but she also attributes to Vashti qualities beyond the modesty and defiance typically associated with her. In Spencer’s poem the queen desires a mature, mutual relationship and a spiritual love, concerns far beyond the duchess’s ridiculous blushings. While Browning’s poem centers upon the speaker and takes interest in the duchess primarily for how she sheds light on the duke himself, in “Before the Feast” Vashti comes to dominate our attention. The

poem is, ultimately, about her and about her desire to be treated equally as a human being, regardless of her gender.[18] We cannot feel much for the duchess beyond pity, for Browning's poem doesn't give us the chance to see her as anything more than a victim. Vashti, on the other hand, is a prophet with wisdom and insights that deserve our hearing; she becomes the hero of the poem rather than its victim.

One might wonder why Spencer chose to tell Vashti's story from the perspective of King Ahasuerus rather than from Vashti's point of view as Frances Harper's poem does. In fact, Honey finds that this approach makes the poem less effective, for she feels its "feminist message is masked by the king's archaic language and his use of metaphor to articulate chauvinist ideas."[19] However, we might see Spencer's choice as a sophisticated artistic maneuver that allows her to take full advantage of the possibilities that the dramatic monologue form offers. As Elizabeth Howe notes in her book-length study of the dramatic monologue, one of its most important characteristics involves the fact that the speaker, the "I" of the poem, differs from the poet. This difference implies a consciousness beyond that of the speaker and allows for the creation of a "moral distance" between the speaker and her audience, often "through the use of reprehensible characters" as in a poem like "My Last Duchess."[20] In "Before the Feast," Spencer employs such distance to comment upon the speaker in a way she would not be able to from the point of view of Vashti, with whom we fully sympathize. Spencer thus takes her cue from Browning's ironically rendered speakers and uses this technique to her own purpose. By putting events in the king's mouth, Spencer can have him repeat Vashti's speech and deconstruct himself and his power through his own language, a much more powerful and effective statement than had Vashti herself questioned or criticized him.

This approach also seems more true to both the power structure within which Vashti lived and to Spencer's situation as a poet. The fact that Vashti's speech can be heard only through the king's words and yet that it manages to take precedence over all that he says in the poem seems to mirror the ways in which women and blacks enter into the existing traditions of language and manage to destabilize them from within. Of course, Vashti represents a much more direct and defiant approach to male authority than does Esther with her entreating speech, and unlike Esther, Vashti's approach fails as she disappears from the narrative. The fates of the two women demonstrate how "As an exilic rhetoric, the Book of Esther privileges survival of the community over preservation of the absolute integrity of the individual."[21] Esther is called upon to subvert her own pride and dignity as a woman to the needs of the Jewish people, a situation many women in the Harlem Renaissance faced.[22] But for the black woman attempting to free herself from the stigma of slavery and to reclaim ownership of her own body, Vashti provides the more appropriate model. The fact that Spencer (and Harper before her) would focus upon Vashti and not Esther perhaps suggests the refusal to subordinate the needs of women to those of the "race-spirit." As a consequence, Spencer, like Vashti, paid a high price for her choice to pursue an individual aesthetic. Joyce Zonana notes how Vashti, dismissed by the remainder of the narrative of Esther, serves as a corollary to the experience of so many women writers of the Renaissance as "the woman forgotten within the dominant white culture."[23] As a woman speaking out, Spencer was excluded from the dominant literary narrative and, until recently, from the story of the Harlem Renaissance.

II. The Woman Speaks Back: Spencer's "The Lemming: O Sweden" and Yeats's "Michael Robartes and the Dancer"

The dramatic monologue was only one of the traditional forms Spencer found into which she could insert her voice as a black woman. In an unfinished poem that remained unpublished in her lifetime, "The Lemming: O Sweden," she uses a different dramatic form—a dialogue—to explore issues of race and gender. The poem relates closely in tone and form to the title poem of Yeats's 1921 volume, *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*. Both poems take the format of a conversation between a "He" and a "She"; both maintain a comically sophisticated tone that works against its own seriousness, and both question the role of women and appropriate realms for female knowledge. While Yeats positioned his poem upfront and center as the title poem of one of his most important collections, it has not received as much critical attention as other poems in the collection, perhaps because of its openly misogynist nature. Indeed, in spite of the fact that Michael Robartes is one of Yeats's masks and represents a personality distinct from the poet's own,[24] readers still find it difficult to take the poem's message that women should forsake the intellect to cultivate the body.

The dialogue begins as the *He* and *She*, presumably Michael Robartes and the dancer, are looking at a painting of St. George and the dragon. This painted chivalric fantasy of the brave knight rushing to save the helpless damsel in expression of his love requires that the lady be silent and grateful, giving back a reflection of her savior as the "wage" for his bravery. Robartes presents the scenario almost as a warning to the dancer:

> *He.* Opinion is not worth a rush;
> In this altar-piece the knight,
> Who grips his long spear so to push

That dragon through the fading light,
Loved the lady; and it's plain
The half-dead dragon was her thought,
That every morning rose again
And dug its claws and shrieked and fought.
Could the impossible come to pass
She would have time to turn her eyes,
Her lover thought, upon the glass
And on the instant would grow wise.

She. You mean they argued.

He. Put it so;
But bear in mind your lover's wage
Is what your looking-glass can show,
And that he will turn green with rage
At all that is not pictured there.

(175)[25]

Robartes provides his own take on the old myth, for in his reading the knight saves the lady not from a dangerous beast or exterior threat but from her own opinion and intellect, for which the dragon serves as a metaphor. Perhaps even more interestingly, the woman in the picture, as Elizabeth Cullingford notes, "is obstinately ungrateful, and the poem offers the comic spectacle of a knight in shining armour confronting a damsel who refuses to recognize her own distress."[26] Furthermore, the woman is given deflating and to-the-point responses to Robartes' convoluted syntax; "You mean they argued" sums up his twelve lines in less than one. As the dialogue continues, she tells him to get to the point, asking "May I not put myself to college?" and again later, "must no beautiful woman be/ Learned like a man?" (*CPY* 175). He responds by telling her (again rather

discursively) no; "For what mere book can grant a knowledge… Appropriate to that beating breast,/ That vigorous thigh, that dreaming eye?" (*CPY* 175). He then goes on to assert the advantages of the body:

> While Michael Angelo's Sistine roof,
> His 'Morning' and his 'Night' disclose
> How sinew that has been pulled tight,
> Or it may be loosened in repose,
> Can rule by supernatural right
> Yet be but sinew.
>
> *She.* I have heard said
> There is great danger in the body.
>
> *He.* Did God in portioning wine and bread
> Give man His thought or His mere body?
>
> *She.* My wretched dragon is perplexed.
>
> (*CPY* 176)

We can find great irony in her response "My wretched dragon is perplexed," which while it suggests she cannot get her head around Robartes' ideas simultaneously suggests that indeed she *can* but is playing the role he wishes her to play. She has obviously followed his argument closely enough, even at a moment of particularly confusing syntax,[27] to pick up on his reference to the dragon as a woman's thought, and she throws his metaphor back at him in a statement that could be viewed as making fun of his ridiculous expectations of women. Robartes then offers "proof" for his argument that it is a woman's duty to cultivate the physical beauty of the body:

> *He.* I have principles to prove me right.

It follows from this Latin text
That blest souls are not composite,
And that all beautiful women may
Live in uncomposite blessedness,
And lead us to the like—if they
Will banish every thought, unless
The lineaments that please their view
When the long looking-glass is full,
Even from the foot-sole think it too.

She. They say such different things at school.

(*CPY* 176)

Both Elizabeth Cullingford and John Harwood suggest the possibility that the final line in the poem, spoken by the woman—"They say such different things at school"—undercuts all of Robartes' previous speech. Indeed, much of the poem's success rests upon the ability of the dialogue form, with its dual perspective, to dismantle the ideas it conveys.[28] Nevertheless, Robartes' contention is serious, and though he "draws his proof from the very learning to which he would forbid his lady access," his thoughts are allowed significant weight as the primary message of the poem.[29] A misogynist reading like that of John Unterecker, who sees the woman as "Too stupid to realize that she does not need the sort of education she would have," remains a possible interpretation of the poem's opposing voices.[30]

If Elizabeth Cullingford foresees Robartes' uneasiness with allowing a woman to hold an educated opinion, noting his fear "that, if she were 'learned like a man', she might read his text differently," then Anne Spencer's "The Lemming: O Sweden" provides that different, female reading of his text for us.[31] Her version of the He-She

dialogue begins in media res, with the male voice making a particularly Yeatsian comment:[32]

> "…but," he said, "you just don't
> understand politics, no woman
> ever does. To the Eves of this world
> every phase of it is a person game
> played with the equation I-Me-Mine."
>
> (*TUG*, 193)

What follows in Spencer's poem is the She's lengthy response—much more substantial than the dancer's lines are ever allowed to be—that launches a critique of the dominant (white male) intellect and rationality:

> She: "For yourself, Sir, you are very old
> academy. No new sense; those good clichés
> when our earth was square, and
> we all fell off the edge… or
> could we turn back now to what
> your apology asked when we
> seemed to divide?"
>
> (*TUG*, 193)

Spencer's female speaker equates the man's "good cliché" that denies women knowledge with the notion, once promulgated by his old academy and now understood to be ridiculous, that the earth is flat. But the effect of her analogy reaches further, for it suggests that the entire world-view espoused by western society renders the world an absurd and impractical place. It does not even have a real physical basis, as becomes clear when the woman tries to picture a square earth and sees us all falling off the edge. Having thus humorously deflated the man's system of thought, she turns the conversation

back to his concern. Like the Duke of Ferrara's commands, her words, "could we turn back now," suggest her control of the conversation and its flow. At the same time her willingness to discuss the man's concerns, to turn back to his question at the very moment she is "winning" the argument, suggests that she is not as self-centered as the man would have us believe. His reply, brief and subdued, seems to refer to a previous part of their dialogue that took place before the poem began: "Yes, thank you—the scar?" His concern for her physical well-being and his protective response to the harm she has encountered, along with the nature of his speech as an "apology," reproduce the proper patriarchal stance of Robartes and the knight. But to a large extent, the He and She in Spencer's poem have switched the roles they played in Yeats's poem, and the woman has become the dominant and knowledgeable force in the dialogue.

The woman's final response continues in the critique of square-earth western ideology that she began in her first speech. In order to grasp her narrative, we must refer to the title to know that "they" are lemmings, and we can infer that the "scar" the man has mentioned is one she received when she leaned to help one of the lemmings out:

> She: "They came on flowing, floodless—
> mindless—plunging—war is so circle—
> many butted into it where I stood on
> the outside. One—it or epicene—
> smaller, yet more lovely than the
> rest, where winter had touched
> the silver coat with sable—poor
> creature, was errantly lamed…
> my offense was pity, as I
> leaned to help…it struck!"

(*TUG*, 193)

The tone of the poem shifts markedly here from the smooth, urbane flow of Robartes' words and of the man's and woman's first speeches. The dashed, disjointed syntax and the enjambed lines reflect the utter confusion of the situation—"war is so circle"—and the speaker's difficulty and perhaps distress in relating the events. Unlike the clever, reserved speakers in "Michael Robartes and the Dancer," the woman forgoes the sophisticated detachment of her first speech as she recalls her encounter with the lemmings, and the earnest intensity that enters her voice draws us into the poem and earns our concern. The "mindless" movement of the lemmings and their circular war echoes the "good clichés" of the first stanza that tell us the earth is square and women know nothing of politics. The woman, standing on "the outside," watches as they butt their heads against these false clichés they accept as common sense. In a way, the woman has taken the role of the knight in Yeats's poem, for she is the one trying to help the ungrateful lemming. But Yeats's knight, though he does not receive the gratitude from the lady he feels he deserves, is not physically harmed by the dragon. For the woman in this poem the harm is greater, and as she attempts to "help" the mindless lemming, to pull it out of its blind plunging, it responds by biting back, leaving her with a real physical scar. Like Vashti, banished for disturbing the king's perspective in trying to teach him to love her as an equal, the woman here is bitten for her attempt to interrupt the dominant worldview. The scenario flips the tables on Yeats's poem, for here the lemmings—followers of established patriarchal order like Robartes and the knight—are offered help by a woman. The idea of war and circularity suggest the absolute hopelessness of the situation and the circularity with which a man like Robartes defends his patriarchal ideals with proof from an old academy "Latin text" whose very contents are denied to women.

Even if Spencer's woman has not succeeded in "winning" the argument, she has at least succeeded in making all of Robartes' chauvinist ideas look ridiculous.

Greene has noted a further concern within the poem beyond that of putting the Robartes type in his place. According to Greene, the title of Spencer's poem tells us that it deals with a specific political situation, that of "black soldiers deserting the military and seeking political asylum in Sweden." He further suggests that the metaphor of the lemmings, on their suicidal rush into the sea, relates to the soldiers' blind search for a better life in a place like Sweden, which as part of the western world was not free from racial discrimination. Spencer further brings blackness into the poem in the lemming's sable coat, an indication that it has "lost its protective covering" and that its "blackness… makes it vulnerable" (*TUG*, 145, 146). Greene's reading complicates the metaphor of the lemmings as members of a racist, misogynist society that futilely butts against itself, for if the lemmings are black, then the poem suggests the complicity of the very members—blacks—that the society works to oppress. Such ideas closely align the poem with the ideas of double consciousness put forth by W.E.B. DuBois.[33]

"The Lemming," though, makes no straightforward statement against the subjugation of women and black people, for as in "Michael Robartes and the Dancer," the nature of the dialogue form leaves us with the unsettled interaction of differing perspectives. In the Yeats poem, Robartes' and the knight's iconic portrayal of women is deflated within the poem by the woman's direct and undercutting replies and the damsel's failure to realize she is in danger. Similarly, the woman in Spencer's poem has set upon a quest to aid a victim who does not realize it is a victim, seeking out a lame, effeminate, and seemingly vulnerable lemming that might allow her to feel pity—a

condescending attitude. As a species lemmings do not run from a threat but stand fiercely in defense, and this lemming accordingly responds to her offensive gesture of pity by striking back. As much as the knight has romanticized the lady and her distress, the woman here has simplified the lemming into an object of sympathy and suffered the price for doing so. The lemmings—the black soldiers—have also taken part in the poem's idealistic tendencies, for they have romanticized life in Sweden and run into it blindly, only to discover it is no better than the life they are leaving behind. Interestingly, the woman's words tell a story that seemingly has nothing to do with politics but in fact becomes a very effective metaphor for a political situation. Is the She pulling one over on the He, making him think she's selfishly telling the story of her own experience while actually presenting him with a political argument? Perhaps the man himself is a lemming, perhaps even the one she has tried to help and been bitten by? If we do read her speech as a warning or an attempt to help her fellow blacks—particularly black men—we can see the poem as a criticism of the treatment of black women writers during the Renaissance. By behaving according to the misogynist dictates of white society, black men were enacting the same system of oppression of which they themselves were victims. At any rate, the poem's defense of female intelligence and its reference to a political situation concerning black men serves to align both feminist and black concerns and the damage done by the dominant worldview to both groups.

III. Portraits of Women: Spencer and T.S. Eliot

In addition to the forms of dramatic monologue and dialogue, Spencer employs the convention of the lyric portrait in poems like "Lady, Lady" and "At the Carnival,"

both of which present us with images of women. The portrait form was employed by a number of modernist writers, including Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, and Henry James, but T.S. Eliot's portraits in poems like "Portrait of a Lady" and "La Figlia che Piange" seem closest to those of Spencer.[34] Both Spencer's "Lady, Lady" and Eliot's "Portrait of a Lady" present to us nameless women through the gaze of a speaker who seeks overtly to affect our perception of the women she/he presents. Eliot's speaker is a young man in whom the older lady of the poem has taken a romantic interest, and while the relationship between the speaker and subject of Spencer's poem remains undefined, Greene suggests the lady may have been based on the woman hired to do the Spencers' laundry.[35] The fact that neither portrait gives a name beyond "Lady" to the women involved seems significant, considering that Wendy Steiner has defined the name as a particular feature of the portrait structure. One of the few reliable components or qualities that identifies a person, a name "always has the same referent… [T]he name, regardless of context, refers to one and only one person."[36] Instead, these poems tend toward generalized portraits, Eliot's of a bourgeois woman with an artificial interest in art and Spencer's of a black washerwoman worn down by a white society.

In both cases the term "lady" is significant; in Eliot's poem it suggests the woman's pretentiousness and class aspirations. In Spencer's it questions the entitlement that such a name provides,[37] for though the woman in the poem is far from society's definition of a noble woman, she has about her a certain dignity:

> Lady, Lady, I saw your face,
> Dark as night withholding a star…
> The chisel fell, or it might have been
> You had borne so long the yoke of men.

Lady, Lady, I saw your hands,
Twisted, awry, like crumpled roots,
Bleached poor white in a sudsy tub,
Wrinkled and drawn from your rub-a-dub.

(*TUG*, 179)

The images that describe the woman suggest the burden that the "yoke of men" inflicts upon a black woman of the working class. As Maureen Honey notes, the "crumpled roots" of her hands symbolize "the stunting of her growth and crippling of her true posture," and the fact that they are bleached signifies her "consignment to a draining, exploited existence controlled by whites."[38] The image recalls that in "Portrait of a Lady" where the woman ineffectually twists lilac stalks about her fingers while she tells the speaker he holds life in his hands. In contrast, the lady's hands in Spencer's poem, though stunted and faded by years of hard labor, are still purposeful and efficient. While the woman in Eliot's poem strives for the whitening effect of culture and has hands useless in their leisure, the whiteness of the washerwoman's hands is seen as an undesirable draining of color; as in "White Things," Spencer reverses the ideological notions that associate whiteness with the superior and sought-after.

Though it approaches the matter from a different angle, Eliot's poem, like Spencer's, can also be read as a political act criticizing the exploitative bourgeoisie and valorizing the lower classes.[39] The poem makes the woman's bourgeois affectations of dropping French phrases and speaking intimately of Chopin seem ridiculous; the speaker is more moved by "a street-piano, mechanical and tired / Reiterat[ing] some worn-out common song."[40] Both poems, furthermore, adopt rather transparent strategies for transforming the women they portray in order to achieve this political purpose. Eliot's

speaker presents the woman's behavior in such a way as to emphasize her artificiality, and even when she speaks directly within the poem, her speech is reported in a context that conspires to make her look absurd.[41] In Spencer's case, the opposite occurs, and a laundry woman is exalted as divine:

> Lady, Lady, I saw your heart,
> And altered there in its darksome place
> Were the tongues of flames the ancients knew,
> Where the good God sits to spangle through.
>
> (TUG, 179)

While the first eight lines of the poem present concrete, physical features of the woman—her chiseled face, her wrinkled hands—these last four lines pretend to take us closer into the woman's heart but instead slip into the distanced abstraction of a "darksome place." The final couplet, elevating her to the knowledge of ancients and the seat of God, further distances us from the Lady through a heavy end-rhyme that calls our attention to its artifice. Significantly, the poem alerts us to the shaping force of art at other points as well; as the speaker begins to examine the Lady's face in the first few lines—"Dark as night withholding a star…"—she suddenly stops her description as "The chisel fell." While the chisel seems most obviously to refer to the "yoke of men" that has worn the woman down, it also calls to mind an artist at work and the manner in which the artist brings her own shaping ideals to the image she presents. The ellipsis tells us that work on this woman's face has suddenly stopped, suggesting not only the inability of society to pound the lady completely into the form it desires (she is still withholding the star of a core self), but also the inability of the artist to express satisfactorily the enigma of the woman's being. The noticeable abstraction and arrangement of the final lines of the

poem, where the poem attempts to proclaim the woman's mystery with authority and clarity, seems to further reinforce the difficulty of doing so.

Eliot's poem is similarly aware of its manipulation of its subject matter and asks the question of artistic interpretation when the speaker wonders in the final stanza:

> Well! and what if she should die some afternoon,
> Afternoon grey and smoky, evening yellow and rose;
> Should die and leave me sitting pen in hand
> With the smoke coming down above the housetops;
> Doubtful, for a while
> Not knowing what to feel or if I understand
> Or whether wise or foolish, tardy or too soon…
> Would she not have the advantage, after all?
> This music is successful with a 'dying fall'
> Now that we talk of dying—
> And should I have the right to smile?
>
> (*CPE* 12)

As Richard Shusterman suggests, this final image of the speaker sitting with pen in hand ready to record the memory of the relationship reveals him as "the man who has exploited the suffering of others as material for his art."[42] Does he have a right to smile and enjoy the art created out of the woman's pain? Is he justified in manipulating his presentation of her for the purpose of a well-wrought poem that makes us sympathize with him and dismiss her? As a number of critics have noted, the speaker's carefully orchestrated diminishment of the woman might end up serving to the woman's advantage after all, for it tempts us to ask what the young man gains by such a presentation. Indeed, his psychological need to distance himself from the woman's emotions indicates above all his own fear and insecure self-possession.[43]

We might similarly ask why "Lady, Lady" forces the elevating shift at the end of the poem that simultaneously distances us from the woman's reality. Both poems raise the question that Steiner suggests is inherent within the portrait form: "Is it indeed possible to capture an element of reality in art or is one confined within a perceiver's consciousness?"[44] If, in fact, another person's reality cannot be fairly portrayed by an artist, then we must view the portrait as telling us as much about its author and her aesthetic needs as it tells us about its supposed subject. Critics have noted in Spencer's poem a concern with the major themes of women's writing during the Renaissance and have praised its capacity for self-invention.[45] Perhaps, then, we can see it as an overt, if artificial, attempt to invent a space for such themes as female strength and survival. While Eliot's speaker is concerned with the pretensions of bourgeois society and the relationships that it gives rise to, Spencer's speaker has the more daunting task of forging an expression for the doubly silenced, doubly overlooked presence of a black woman. In Eliot's poem, the lady remains "the victim of social and cultural arrangements," and the poem, finally, is not concerned with her well-being.[46] But Spencer provides her Lady an escape route, which, even though it may be possible only in the mysterious, intangible realm of gods and ancients, promises the survival of the black woman's soul by placing it in a "darksome place" safe from the interference of a prejudiced society. Interestingly, as Cheryl Wall has discussed, in the final couplet "Spencer not only claims nobility for her subject, she attributes the gift of poetry to her as well" in the tongues of ancients and the spangling message of God. But in spite of the gift of poetry it grants to her, the poem never actually allows the woman to speak in words of her own. Indeed, Wall notes how "Spencer's language and her allusions serve to hold both the subject's condition and her

voice at a distance."[47] Like the chisel that fell in an attempt to render the woman's face, could the poem suggest the poet's failure to escape her own self-possession, much as the speaker of "Portrait" resists relinquishing his perspective to that of the lady? Does the final couplet take an easy way out by placing the woman in a superior, mysterious realm beyond our human understanding, and therefore beyond further questions? Perhaps the triumph that ends the poem can only be accomplished at the price of distance and generality. If we were to view the woman too closely the very burden—the "yoke of men," the bleaching—that the poem itself acknowledges might overwhelm that triumph with the insuperable facts of being black and female.

Spencer continues forging a statement of a female aesthetic in "At the Carnival." Like "Lady, Lady," a portrait of a woman whose work is also an art, "At the Carnival" gives us a view of a young woman artist. But where "Lady, Lady" is generalized and distanced from its subject matter, "At the Carnival" is highly specific and intimate. Most scholars have found in "At the Carnival" the possibility of beauty and redemption in the ugliest places.[48] But I believe that the poem pays the price for its intimacy and is unable to arrive at the clearly positive, empowering ending that "Lady, Lady" grants the washerwoman. Like the diving girl who is the subject of the carnival-goers' gaze, the woman portrayed in Eliot's "La Figlia che Piange" is also a work of art meant to be gazed upon. The title of Eliot's poem refers to a stele in an Italian museum that a friend had described to him and recommended he see. However, he was unable to find the work while traveling in Italy, and the poem itself deals with the mystery and lingering absence that this failure aroused in the poet's imagination. "At the Carnival," on the other hand, deals with a real human girl, a diver, whom the speaker of the poem encounters at a

carnival diving tank. The two poems work almost as opposite scenarios of one another, for Eliot's poem records the unsuccessful search for a work of art and his creation of his own art object, a poem, to stand in place of the absent, original work. Spencer's poem conversely records how the speaker came accidentally upon the spark of beauty in the girl when "The color of life was gray," and she expected no more from the carnival than a reflection of her own unhappy mood (177). The poem itself seems to burst forth from that moment, deriving life from the presence of the girl; Eliot's poem derives its life from the stele-girl's absence. Nevertheless, the women in both poems lead the speakers to further discoveries. For Spencer, the presence of the diving girl leads her to contemplate the innocence and purity the diving girl represents and the "sordid life" of experience surrounding the girl. For Eliot, the absence of the stele-girl leads the speaker to a reflection upon loss, desertion and the relationship between suffering and art.

As in "Portrait of a Lady" and "Lady, Lady," the women in these poems remain without specific names. But here, naming becomes an overt consideration, for both "La Figlia" and "At the Carnival" explicitly raise the question of the subject's name. Eliot's poem begins with an epigraph from Virgil's *Aeneid*—"O quam te memorem virgo…"—which means "Maiden, by what name shall I know you…" or "By what name should I address you maiden…" (*CPE* 26).[49] Spencer's poem begins, similarly, with a search for a name:

> Gay little Girl-of-the-Diving-Tank,
> I desire a name for you,
> Nice, as a right glove fits;
>
> (*TUG*, 176)

Though like Eliot's speaker, Spencer's speaker never learns the girl's real name, she provides the girl with her own very specific titles—"Naiad of the Carnival-Tank," "Little Diver," "Gleaming Girl"—that take us closer to the subject than do Eliot's feminine pronouns. Furthermore, the search for a name indicated in Virgil's epigraph emphasizes the speaker's knowledge, and his desire for a name stems from his need to empower himself with language; a name will not help him to better understand the woman, but to better manage his relationship with her.[50] The name closes off possibility, delimiting and defining, and it distances us from the mystery and uncertainty of the actual person. Similarly, the commands addressed to the woman in the first stanza demonstrate the speaker's attempt to master and control the woman and her behavior:

> Stand on the highest pavement of the stair—
> Lean on a garden urn—
> Weave, weave the sunlight in your hair—
> Clasp your flowers to you with a pained surprise—
> Fling them to the ground and turn
> With a fugitive resentment in your eyes:
> But weave, weave the sunlight in your hair.
>
> (*CPE* 26)

These imperatives, as Denis Donoghue notes, "have a distancing effect, showing how much the feeling in the scene has to be controlled" (69).[51] In order to create, the artist of Eliot's poem attempts to remove himself by ordering his subject's name, behavior, and image.

While for the speaker of "At the Carnival" finding the perfect name for the girl could also serve to limit the girl's mystery through definition, the concern of the speaker here seems less a way of controlling the girl and more a way of granting her authority and

expression in language. Rather than wanting the name to *call* her or *know* her by, this speaker wants a name that *fits*, a name that will communicate her power and encapsulate it for presentation in a social setting just as a snug glove presents the elegance of a hand, decorating it but letting its original form and grace come through. Unlike the implication in Eliot's epigraph that a name is necessary to know a person, Spencer's poem suggests the opposite, for already the speaker and others watching recognize the girl without knowing her proper name:

> I know you—a glance, and what you are
> Sits-by-the-fire in my heart.
> My Limousine-Lady knows you, or
> Why does the slant-envy of her eye mark
> Your straight air and radiant inclusive smile?
> Guilt pins a fig-leaf; Innocence is its own adorning.
> The bull-necked man knows you—this first time
> His itching flesh sees form divine and vibrant health,
> And thinks not of his avocation.
>
> (*TUG*, 176)

The speaker clearly does not feel the need to arrange the actions or appearance of the girl, for "Innocence is its own adorning," and the girl is already better than anything the speaker herself could create in art. Nor does she feel a need to distance herself from the girl's power. On the contrary, she sees in her proximity to the girl's beauty the possibility of redemption, or at of least a momentary relief from the sleazy atmosphere of the carnival and of life in general:

> We need you—my Limousine-Lady,
> The bull-necked man, and I.
> Seeing you here brave and water-clean,

> Leaven for the heavy ones of earth,
> I am swift to feel that what makes
> The plodder glad is good; and
> Whatever is good is God.
>
> (*TUG*, 177)

Like the Lady, whose heart is connected to the seat of god, the diving girl is linked to God through a sort of analogous chain, and she is seen as a triumphant figure from whom the speaker can gain much by close association. Eliot's speaker, whose main function in addressing the woman is to control her actions (or at least to write them into control), moves away from a direct address in the second and third stanzas of the poem. In Spencer's poem, however, the direct address works to create a tone that is intimate and inclusive rather than imperative. Even after the speaker falls away from second person in the middle of the poem to focus on the pitiful and repulsive scene of the carnival, she moves back to address the girl directly again as soon as she catches a glimpse of her, as though she cannot resist the connection:

> Here the sausage and garlic booth
> Sent unholy incense skyward;
> There a quivering female-thing
> Gestured assignations, and lied
> To call it dancing;
> There, too, were games of chance
> With chances for none;
> But oh! the Girl-of-the-Tank, at last!
> Gleaming Girl, how intimately pure and free
> The gaze you send the crowd,
> As though you know the dearth of beauty
> In its sordid life.

(*TUG*, 177)

While Spencer's poem does not radically upset poetic tradition by fixing the gaze of the poem upon a male subject, it does empower the girl with confidence and allows her to gaze back on the crowd. In contrast to Eliot's woman, who is always and only the product of male artists, the girl of Spencer's poem—though she has been put on display for the spectators' pleasure—is also a diver and an artist in her own right. Like the poet, who is creating the work of art on the page before us, the diver faces the daunting dilemma of any female artist attempting to enter a tradition that posits her as its subject and its muse. The diver-artist casts her own gaze, struggling for autonomy, but she is simultaneously and inescapably the subject of the gaze that aesthetic convention insists must look upon the female form.

If the speaker of "At the Carnival" gains reprieve from the ugliness of the world (and the poem that results) in her communion with a fellow female artist, the speaker of Eliot's poem also gains from his encounter with the woman of "La Figlia," for by watching her suffering and abandonment he manages to create a work of art. He does not actually want her to suffer; he contemplates how he himself would handle the situation differently, finding "Some way we both should understand," and imagines what would have happened had the lover stayed:

> And I wonder how they should have been together!
> I should have lost a gesture and a pose.
> Sometimes these cogitations still amaze
> The troubled midnight and the noon's repose.

(*CPE* 26)

The speaker quickly recognizes that the lover had to leave the girl, for without the girl's pain he "should have lost a gesture and a pose." Without her loss there could be no work of art, no stele and no poem. Here, as several scholars have noted, reality and art come into conflict and the poem is forced to acknowledge that it cannot have both at once. As Moody suggests, in the poem "things are so arranged, by fate or by the poet, that he must lose the girl in the image."[52]

Spencer's poem presents a similar problem, for it relies upon an idealized image of the diving girl in order to make its point in contemplating beauty and innocence against the backdrop of the corrupt carnival world. However, Spencer subverts this image at the end of the poem:

> The wonder is that you are here;
> I have seen the queer in queer places,
> But never before a heaven-fed
> Naiad of the Carnival-Tank!
> Little Diver, Destiny for you,
> Like as for me, is shod in silence;
> Years may seep into your soul
> The bacilli of the usual and the expedient;
> I implore Neptune to claim his child to-day!
>
> (*TUG*, 177)

While the girl is an original wonder, elevated to the role of goddess, the poem suggests that she will not remain so. The speaker's identification with the girl culminates in her recognition that the girl's destiny, like her own, holds silence and dissatisfaction. For in spite of the fact that the girl's loveliness and purity promise the possibility of salvation, she finally "cannot redeem this wayward world. It is more likely that her innocence will be sacrificed to it."[53] In opposition to the experiences of pain and loss that provide the

speaker of Eliot's poem with "a gesture and a pose" from which to construct his art, in Spencer's poem, the experiences life deals out are destructive and numbing and detract from beauty and art instead of adding to it. In "La Figlia," the image of the body, worn and deserted, serves as a metaphor for the man doing the leaving, where the woman is made the victim; it is the man who benefits from the current arrangement of aesthetic ideals that arrange the stele-girl and the diving-girl for the male gaze. But the speaker of "At the Carnival" refers to herself when she tells the diving girl, "Years may seep into your soul," for she has experienced the pain and disappointment of the poem firsthand. For a woman poet of the Renaissance, existence as an artist meant, more than anything, a stunted growth and a life "shod in silence." Spencer's poem finds no hope that suffering and loss will compel the imagination into creation and instead turns in the end to a desperate and impossible plea to Neptune to magically rescue the girl from the speaker's own diseased fate. While Eliot's speaker writes the stele girl into art in order to possess and control the uneasiness he feels in her absence, Spencer's attempt to lift the diving girl into art and myth at the end of the poem stems from a genuine concern for the girl and from a desire to protect the purity and artistry that the girl represents.

Both "At the Carnival" and "La Figlia che Piange" end in failure and frustrating circularity. Eliot's poem throws the reader back into the poem and the "cogitations" that "still amaze/ The troubled midnight and the noon's repose," and Spencer's poem sees the repetition of her own experience repeated in that of the girl diver (*CPE* 26). However the dilemma that Steiner identifies as fundamental to the portrait form—that of "the aesthetic versus the referential," the outward turning toward the real person the portrait portrays versus the inward turning toward itself as a work of art—reveals a crucial difference

between the endings of the two poems.[54] Eliot's poem directs us almost entirely inward, for its description of the woman is vague (it is based upon an image he never actually saw) and relies upon our experience of a similar situation to put the poem together. The final stanza reveals the poet's obsession with his own "cogitations" and his mind's transformation of the woman's figure. What is important is not the woman herself but her effect on the artist, and the poem leaves us amazed by the art of the poem itself rather than by the reality that inspired it.

In Spencer's poem, we see a similar move inward as the poet explores the effect of the Gleaming Girl upon her own gray mood and then sees her life reflected in that of the girl. But the focus of the poem remains upon the girl herself, who is portrayed in a detailed and lively manner that emphasizes her uniqueness. Even her effect upon the speaker's mood serves as much to enhance and heighten the girl's power as to raise our interest in the speaker. In addition, the girl does not force the speaker to turn inward but instead draws the speaker out of herself and her "brood of misdeeds," and the final movement of the poem emphasizes the connection between the two women. What shines through in Spencer's poem is not a vague and generalized story of love and loss that could have happened between any man and any woman, but a specific and singular relationship between the speaker and the diver, two women artists. Though the women share a heavy burden, the poem announces their success: "The wonder is that you are here." That the girl and the poet exist at all, even for this short glimmering moment, is a miracle. Against all odds they have risen above the mediocre environment that insists that they, as women, give up their roles as artists for "the usual and the expedient" roles of muse, mother, and wife. While the end of the poem is hardly a triumph and indeed

predicts the demise of the girl's beauty and innocence in a future of silence, the poem and the girl remain as a testament to possibility. Indeed, the fact that Spencer herself and other women of the Renaissance managed to survive as artists and to leave us such works of beauty—"Leaven for the heavy ones of earth"—provides for many contemporary readers the type of surprise and awakening that the diver represents for the speaker of the poem.

In spite of the fact that many studies of the women of the Harlem Renaissance (and indeed of the Renaissance in general) begin convinced of the failure of the artists they explore,[55] I cannot comprehend Anne Spencer's artistic career as a disappointment. The prejudices that worked against her as a black woman poet in "The bacilli of the usual and the expedient" certainly limited her options and her output and excluded her from the literary canon for decades. However, what remains of her work indicates her original and ingenious approach and her ability to employ the western poetic tradition to her own purposes. Her subtle and often ironic responses make us constantly aware of the difference with which she inhabits that tradition and how, like other writers associated with the project of the New Negro, she is able to alter that tradition from within. Arnold Rampersad claims that until black poets could "allow the race to infuse and inspire the very form of a poem, not merely its surface contentions… black poetry would remain antiquarian, anti-modern."[56] But in fact, Spencer's aesthetic was incredibly modern, as a comparison of her poems with other modernist works demonstrates. Though she was not revolutionary in her forms or overtly feminist or black in her subject matter, her concerns as an intelligent and politically sensitive black woman come through in almost everything she wrote. Far from merely mimicking writers like Browning, Yeats, and Eliot, Spencer

takes their tradition (and the art so long held to be the province solely of white men) and uses it to protest the exclusion and neglect of voices like her own. The fact that we are still able to hear her voice clearly through her poems—in the assurance of Vashti asserting her new ideas at any cost, in the dispute of "The Lemmings" against racist and sexist ideology, in the Lady withholding her dark star of individuality and self-worth, and in the diving girl's beauty amid a sordid and unfair life—marks the triumph of her art.

---

[1] While in studies of Spencer critics often write about her poetry, they typically do so within the context of her life. Even Lee Greene's two chapters devoted to her poems in his important study, *Time's Unfading Garden* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana UP, 1977), a book to which I am indebted for the ability to write this essay at all, examine her poems primarily in connection to her life, her journals, and his conversations with her.

[2] Gloria T. Hull, "Afro-American Women Poets: A Bio-Critical Survey," *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets*, ed. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1979), 171.

[3] All of Spencer's poems have been cited from J. Lee Greene's biography of Spencer, *Time's Unfading Garden*, which collects 42 of her poems and fragments. Further references to this edition will be cited parenthetically in the text as *TUG*.

[4] Maureen Honey in Shadowed Dreams: Women's Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1989), Gloria Hull in Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987), and Cheryl Wall in Women of the Harlem Renaissance (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995),

have written on the difficult position women writers of the Renaissance were in and have discussed their tendency to write conservatively in keeping with the western tradition. About Spencer in particular, Greene states, “She was a ‘controversial’ figure all her life, yet her poetry for the most part cannot be termed controversial” (1). Lorraine Elena Roses and Ruth Elizabeth Randolph claim that “With the exception of ‘White Things’ racial themes are absent from Spencer’s poetry” and that “Few of her poems express her outspoken nature” (“Anne Bethel Bannister Scales Spencer,” Harlem Renaissance and Beyond: Literary Biographies of 100 Women Black Writers 1900-1945 [Boston: G.K. Hall, 1990], 300). Wall similarly finds “few references to race or racism in her poetry… Despite her work as a civil rights activist” (16).

[5] Wall sees in her work “The desire to invent another world in poetry” which she can substitute for the harsh reality of life as a black woman: “In most of her poems, her speakers and subjects find at least momentary release from the real world of ugliness, impurity, and hate” (16).Roses and Randolph find similarly that “ Through her garden and her poetry, she sought to transcend mortality and escape the limitations society placed on her as a black woman” (300).

[6] Erlene Stetson, “Anne Spencer,” *College Language Association Journal* 21 (1978): 401.

[7] Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987), 85.

[8] Baker, 86. Feminist scholars have pointed out a similar strategy among women writers, noting how different voices working within the conventional realm can disturb that convention from within. See, for example, Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women’s Poetry in America* (Boston: Beacon, 1986), and Rachel Blau

DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985).

[9] Maureen Honey, 7.

[10] Wall views the aesthetic conservatism and genteel language of black women poets as a "determination not to conform in even the slightest manner to hateful stereotypes" where "black women were burdened with an almost exclusively sexual identity" (14). And William Drake suggests that "The first wave of black women poets were understandably cautious in submitting themselves to any myth of black womanhood that might perpetuate the lingering 'scent of slavery'" (*The First Wave: Women Poets in America, 1915-1945* [New York: Macmillan, 1987], 231). This move toward projecting a conservative image in literature parallels the efforts of black women's social clubs in the early part of the twentieth century. As Floris Barnett Cash explains, "The clubwomen looked to progress and respectability to bring the masses in step with the values and attitudes of the middle class… The politics of respectability was a means of expressing black women's identity, discontent, and agenda for social action" (*African American Women and Social Action: The Clubwomen and Volunteerism from Jim Crow to the New Deal, 1896-1936* [Westport: Greenwood, 2001], 4).

[11] David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (1981; reprint, New York: Oxford, 1989), 124, 304.

[12] Charita M. Ford, "Flowering a Feminist Garden: The Writings and Poetry of Anne Spencer," *SAGE* 5 (1988): 11.

[13] The project of reading writers of the Harlem Renaissance in connection with white writers of American or European modernism is a fairly new one. While the black

---

Renaissance artists and the white modernists often interacted with one another and read each other's work, the two movements have in retrospect most often been studied as distinct entities. Recently, however, scholars are turning more and more toward the connections between the black writers of the Renaissance and the white modernists. The winter 1992 issue of *MELUS*, *Black Modernism and Post Modernism,* calls for a move away from typical modes of criticism which have "disconnected modernism, avant-gardism, and postmodernism from the development of African American literature in the twentieth century" (1). A recent issue of *Paideuma*, *Ezra Pound and African American Modernism,* includes articles that explore Pound's relationship to figures of the Renaissance, including Langston Hughes and Claude McKay, and asks how such comparative studies might "open up modernist study to new kinds of questions" (ed. Michael Coyle, 29 [2000]: 3). Several recent books also look at associations between white and black culture; Ann Douglas views the interaction of Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance as a positive sharing and mutual revision of American culture, where "Toomer's prose in *Cane* anticipated… Crane's poem *The Bridge*; Eliot's obituary for Western civilization, *The Waste Land*, had a sequel in McKay's 'The Desolate City,'" and a "uniquely expressive mix of romantic imagination and shrewd observation" unites the novels of Fitzgerald and Hurston (*Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* [New York: FSG, 1995], 82). Michael North takes a more troubling view of the interaction, noting crucial differences between poets like Eliot, who was showered with recognition at the end of his career, and McKay, who worked as a manual laborer at the end of his: "Such differences are so hard to ignore that modernism and the Harlem Renaissance have come to seem not just mutually exclusive but even inimical terms. Yet

---

there was a time when it seemed natural to couple the two, when at least some Harlem writers sought an alliance with their white compatriots in the modernist avant-garde" (*The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* [New York: Oxford UP, 1994], 127). Indeed, in spite of the vast socio-political divisions between African American and white writers, North claims "it is impossible to understand either modernism without reference to the other, without reference to the language they so uncomfortably shared, and to the political and cultural forces that were constricting that language at the very moment modern writers of both races were attempting in dramatically different ways to free it" (11).

[14] Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1991), 165. According to Fox, "Tradition holds that she was to dance naked before the king's dinner guests. Modern scholarship suggests that she may have been called to an after-dinner orgy, as if she were a concubine and not a queen" (149).

[15] Susan Zaerske ("Unveiling Esther as a Pragmatic Radical Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 33 [2000]: 193-220) and Joyce Zonana ("Feminist Providence: Esther, Vashti, and the Duty of Disobedience in Nineteenth-Century Hermeneutics." *Through a Glass Darkly: Essays in the Religious Imagination*, ed. John C. Hawley [New York: Fordham UP, 1996], 228-249) identify the presence of Esther and Vashti in the works of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, as well as in the writings of black women abolitionists like Maria Stewart, Sojourner Truth, and Angelina Grimké. Perhaps the most famous example in black women's writing, however, is Frances Harper's poem "Vashti."

[16] Robert Browning, "My Last Duchess," in vol. 3 of *The Complete Works of Robert Browning, With Variant Readings and Annotations*, ed. Morse Peckham, Park Honan,

and Warner Barnes, gen. ed. Roma A. King, Jr. (Athens: Ohio UP, 1971), 202. Further references to “My Last Duchess” are to this volume and will be cited parenthetically in the text as *CWB*.

[17] Greene recalls an explanation Spencer gave to James Weldon Johnson concerning Vashti’s desire for an egalitarian relationship in the poem: “Many times the King and Queen must have been together in the beautiful garden; this particular time Vashti *tried* to tell the old beast what love really meant—in the last two verses I have had the King repeat in reflective monologue (without quotation marks) something of the ‘new thing’ that she aimed to teach him… That Ahasuerus remained unchanged by his lesson we know from the tragic outcome of the feast, an episode happening later, as recorded in Esther” (52).

[18] Most critics agree that the poem portrays feminist concerns. Sharon G. Dean believes the poem is Spencer’s “most sustained employment of dramatic monologue to express themes of sexual equality and feminine defiance” (“Anne Spencer,” *American Poets, 1880-1945*, ed. Peter Quatermain, vol. 54 of *Dictionary of Literary Biography* [Detroit: Gale, 1987], 425). William Drake sees the poem as expressing in particular the concerns of black women. He finds the poem signals Spencer’s “lifelong preoccupation with sexual violence as the central experience of black women, and suggests her shrewd assessment of the political power behind it” (218).

[19] Maureen Honey, 20.

[20] Elizabeth Howe, *Stages of Self: The Dramatic Monologues of Laforgue, Valery, and Mallarme* (Athens: Ohio UP, 1990), 18.

[21] Susan Zaeske, 203.

---

[22] Elise Johnson McDougald, in her article on "The Task of Negro Womanhood" in *The New Negro* makes clear how the Renaissance expected women to subordinate their needs to the needs of the black community (*The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Alain Locke [1925; reprint New York: Touchstone, 1997], 369-82). McDougald tells us that "On the whole the Negro woman's feminist efforts are directed chiefly toward the realization of the equality of the races, the sex struggle assuming the subordinate place" (380-1). Erlene Stetson and other contemporary feminists similarly note how "racial themes dominated the Renaissance" at the expense of "women writers' special treatment of gender" (9-10).

[23] Joyce Zonana, 240.

[24] Elizabeth Cullingford reads the poem in a way that convincingly suggests "that we have here the portrait of an attitude rather than the portrait of the artist" ("Yeats and Women: Michael Robartes and the Dancer," *Yeats Annual* [1986]: 33). John Harwood also, in spite of finding some parallels between the poem's stance and the poet's own, comes to the conclusion that Yeats's attitudes towards women in real life differ significantly from those in the poem (" 'Secret Communion': Yeats's Sexual Destiny," *Yeats Annual* 9 [1992]: 3-30).

[25] W.B. Yeats, *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats,* ed. Richard J. Finneran, 2nd ed. (New York: Scribner, 1996). Further references to Yeats's poems are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as *CPY*.

[26] Elizabeth Cullingford, 32.

[27] Donald Davie notes how the rapid pace of the first part of the poem causes problems: "the expression 'her thought' is not weighty nor sharp enough to make its impact as the

syntax whirls past us. The rural-archaic or 'Shakespearian' flavour of 'not worth a rush' prepares us to take 'was her thought' as 'was in her thought'. We read the sixth line to mean 'It was the dragon she was thinking about', and only on a second reading do we grasp the intended meaning, 'It was her thought (or rather, her thinking) that was the dragon'" ("Michael Robartes and the Dancer," *An Honoured Guest: New Essays on W.B. Yeats*, eds. Denis Donoghue and J.R. Mulryne [London: Edward Arnold, 1965]: 81). Whether or not we agree with Davie's assessment of poem, we can certainly give the woman credit for following Robartes' quick and convoluted expressions.

[28] Both Alex Zwerdling (*Yeats and the Heroic Ideal* [New York: New York UP, 1965]) and Stan Smith (*W.B. Yeats: A Critical Introduction* [Houndmills: Macmillan, 1990]) remark upon the dialogue's unique function within the poem. Zwerdling claims that within a dialogue "a desirable ambiguity can be retained without sacrificing either clarity or the energy generated by passionate conviction" (167); Smith notes how the dialogue "deconstructs the ideology, the 'opinions', it is supposed to advance" (84).

[29] Elizabeth Cullingford, 33.

[30] John Unterecker, *A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats* (New York: FSG, 1959), 159.

[31] Elizabeth Cullingford, 33.

[32] This first comment of Spencer's *He* reflects one of the central concerns of *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, the issue of women's involvement in politics. In "Prayer for My Daughter," the speaker laments the detrimental effect a political life has had on a woman like Maud Gonne and hopes his own daughter will "think opinions are accursed" (*CPY* 189). "Easter, 1916" states that Constance Gore-Booth spent "Her nights in

argument/ Until her voice grew shrill," her political involvement ruining her once sweet, beautiful voice (*CPY* 180).

[33] The images of helpless self-destruction, circularity, and war in the poem relate closely to DuBois' analysis of the black man in white America: the American world "yields him no true self-conscious, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others… One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (*The Souls of Black Folk* [1903; reprint, New York: Bantam, 1989], 3).

[34] Though "A Portrait of a Lady" is considered a dramatic monologue, it differs from those of Browning which present very dramatic situations where a speaker addresses a particular audience. Eliot's poem flows much like a lyric portrait in that it follows the speaker's inner train of thought and is concerned more with interior thoughts and interpretations of events than in the external expression of a personality. "La Figlia che Piange" is something of a double portrait, for it is based upon a visual work of art and portrays a woman as she has already been portrayed by a statue.

[35] "For a long time the Spencers hired a lady to do the family's washing who was so admired that more than once she is the subject of an entry in Mrs. Spencer's Notebooks. 'She was not and never [was] a washer-woman, nor ever, a finicky word, laundress, so much as she was a high priestess of cleanliness. She washed and sunned and wind-swept and ironed whatever needed it, for herself and the town, which was her home, because that was the port of what she could do…'" Greene goes on to claim, "It may be the sight

---

of this lady washing that provided the descriptive portrait for Mrs. Spencer's poem 'Lady, Lady'" (*TUG,* 46).

[36] Wendy Steiner, *Exact Resemblance to Exact Resemblance: The Literary Portraiture of Gertrude Stein* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1978), 6.

[37] Cheryl Wall and William Drake both note the importance of the name by which the speaker addresses the washerwoman; Wall finds that Spencer "subverts the class connotations of the title by applying it to a washerwoman" and claims it allows her to invest "her subject with a dignity the world denies" (18). According to Drake, "By capitalizing 'Lady,' Spencer ironically but compassionately evokes an image of aristocracy" (228).

[38] Maureen Honey, 18.

[39] William Doreski discusses this issue at length in "Politics of Discourse in Eliot's 'Portrait of a Lady,'" *Yeats Eliot Review* 12 (1993): 9-15.

[40] T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1963), 10-11. Further references to Eliot's poems are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as *CPE*.

[41] Many critics have noted the speaker's strategy in reporting the woman's dialogue and behavior; as M.A.R. Habib notes, his "language, in its attempt to exceed hers, is addressed only to the reader" while "hers occurs on the poetic stage, offered up to scrutiny and laughter" (*The Early T.S. Eliot and Western Philosophy* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999], 90-1. William Doreski claims that the speaker's "screening and selection of her monologue fictionalizes her as an insipid, pretentious bore" (13).

---

[42] Richard Shusterman, "Aesthetic Education or Aesthetic Ideology: T.S. Eliot on Art's Moral Critique," *Philosophy and Literature* 13 (1989):109-110.

[43] A.D. Moody, for example, reads the poem as, finally, a deflation of the speaker rather than of the lady: "Her end may be pathetic, but his is clownish or worse…. Though she stands only for dying romanticism, he cannot conceive a better attitude to life or death" (*Thomas Stearns Eliot: Poet* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979], 22). Shusterman sees the speaker as "a young man, who is both painfully aware of this aesthetic artificiality and agonizingly afraid of her very genuine emotion which underlies it" (98). And John T. Mayer finds the in speaker's critical portrayal of the woman an enactment of his own insecurity, his "self's satisfaction at maintaining itself, in escaping the clutches of the other" (*T.S. Eliot's Silent Voices.* [New York: Oxford UP, 1989], 104).

[44] Wendy Steiner, 26.

[45] According to Honey, the poem "brings to the surface the three major themes of women's poetry (equation of Blackness and femaleness with strength, resistance to white male oppression, survival of the core self)" (18). And Wall claims that "Lady, Lady" represents the capacity for self-invention required of black women authors "at a time when the terms 'black,' 'woman,' and 'artist' were never complementary" (203).

[46] John T. Mayer, 112.

[47] Cheryl Wall, 18.

[48] Dean claims that the girl "begins to symbolize the possibility of redemption from this sordid life" (427). Cheryl Wall also believes that the speaker finds "momentary release from the real world of ugliness, impurity, and hate" through the young diver (16). Greene reads the poem almost allegorically, seeing in the carnival scene "A microcosm of this

---

imperfect world after Eden"(104). In his interpretation, "the world of reality is seen metaphorically as a carnival peopled primarily by grotesque figures and blind crowds. Those at the carnival of life, whether as participants or observers, can recognize in such fragile symbols as the diving-tank girl our hopes for redemption from this world of Vanity Fair. And though the poem concentrates on negativism, on the carnival of life, it ultimately moves to a conclusive statement of hope and affirmation" (103).

[49] I have taken the first interpretation of Virgil from Tony Pinkney's reading of the poem (*Women in the Poetry of T.S. Eliot: A Psychoanalytic Approach* [London: Macmillan, 1984], 55) and the second from Denis Donoghue, who cites the Loeb edition of the *Aeneid* translated by H. Rushton Fairclough (*Words Alone: The Poet T.S. Eliot* [New Haven: Yale UP, 2000], 66). John Mayer offers two further possibilities: " 'By what name shall I call you?' or 'What name shall I remember you by?'" (32). The quote comes from a moment in the epic where Aeneas meets Venus, his mother, but does not recognize her, and she reveals herself to him only as they part. Donoghue and Moody link the reference to other moments of parting in Virgil's poem, including his leaving Dido behind and his meeting with her later on in Hades after she has killed herself. At this later meeting she turns away from him emotionlessly, leaving him to contemplate his own guilt. Gareth Reeves also speaks at length about the poem's relationship to the Virgilian epic in *T.S. Eliot: A Virgilian Poet* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1989).

[50] I see this impulse as closely akin to the Lacanian understanding of the categorical definition of the feminine: "To believe in The Woman is simply a way of closing off the division or uncertainty which also underpins conviction as such" (Jacqueline Rose "Introduction II." *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the Ecole Freudienne,* eds.

Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, trans. Rose [New York: Norton, 1982], 51). Pinkney also notes the psychological distancing within the poem (as well as in Eliot's other work) and connects this distancing with the need for a name: "If woman in Eliot is in one aspect all that resists language, if she is nameless because she threatens a psychotic collapse that will reduce language to the non-signifying babble of apes and parrots, then the poetry itself will be the process of resisting that resistance, of conferring a name. Eliot's poems are accordingly not passive 'expressions' or 'reflections' of psychoanalytic phantasies, but rather *strategies* whereby the adult ego struggles to establish an effective distance over against the psychic conflicts that buffet it" (55).

[51] Donoghue, 69. Other critics have also noted the odd effect of these imperatives, serving seemingly to inform us of her actions but simultaneously implying much about the relationship of the speaker to his subject matter. Pinkney claims that "Ambivalently situated between imperative and indicative, these verbs at once neutrally report and actively dispose the gestures in question" (56). Derek Roper says at one point that "they tell the woman to do what she is doing already… Their function is purely descriptive," but he goes on to state that "The imperatives establish a convention by which the speaker participates in a scene in which he cannot be present" ("T.S. Eliot's 'La Figlia Che Piange': A Picture without a Frame," *Essays in Criticism* 52 [2002]: 224, 225). And Moody notes how "The verbs at once declare her actions and direct them; and this transforms them from mere reactions into responses" (39).

[52] A.D. Moody, 39.

[53] Sharon G. Dean, 427.

[54] Wendy Steiner, 5.

[55] Such criticism, of course, works to explain and understand such failure rather than to blame the artists. Honey claims “Their failure to challenge a literary tradition built by the very culture that oppressed them resulted in a rather awkward fusion of radical sentiment and sentimental form, just as the movement toward affirming things distinctly Afro-American conflicted with an impulse to define their sensibility in Romantic or classical terms. In many ways, these poets failed to provide the kind of legacy they aspired to create, and the contradictions under which they labored produced, at times, curiously stilted pieces” (32). Hull notes how their “lack of formal innovation… combined with their conventional, age-old themes… made their work relatively unexciting in a renaissance awakening that required some flash and newness. Because of temperament and socialization, they did not loudly raise their voices in protest, pride, or primitivism” (*Color, Sex, and Poetry,* 25).

[56] Arnold Rampersad, “Langston Hughes and Approaches to Modernism in the Harlem Renaissance,” *The Harlem Renaissance: Revaluations,* eds. Amritjit Singh, William S. Shiver, and Stanley Brodwin (New York: Garland, 1989), 63.