

REVOLUTION AND MODERN AMERICAN POETRY: GENEVIEVE TAGGARD'S *CALLING WESTERN UNION**

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ABSTRACT

Anthologies of American literature have moved female protest poets of the 1930s, such as Muriel Rukeyser and Genevieve Taggard, towards the center of modernist discourse. Literary critics have since debated the quality of Taggard's writing. This essay reconsiders Taggard's writing in the context of her collection of poetry *Calling Western Union*'s hybrid structure, especially its framing devices and filmic, photographic, and musical elements. In effect, this essay exposes the aesthetic and rhetorical nuances of Taggard's writing and clarifies why her writing deserves space in anthologies of modern American literature.

KEY WORDS: Anthology of American literature, modern American poetry, protest poetry, proletarian realism, Genevieve Taggard, *Calling Western Union*, revolution.

RESUMEN

Las antologías de literatura americana han colocado a las poetisas políticas de los años treinta del siglo XX, tales como Muriel Rukeyser y Genevieve Taggard, en el mismo centro del discurso modernista. Desde entonces, los críticos literarios han debatido sobre la calidad de la escritura de Taggard. Este ensayo reconsidera la escritura de Taggard en el contexto de la estructura híbrida de su colección, *Calling Western Union*, especialmente sus artificios de estructura y elementos cinematográficos, fotográficos y musicales. De hecho, este ensayo muestra los matices estéticos y retóricos de la escritura de Taggard y clarifica por qué su escritura merece un espacio en las antologías de literatura americana moderna.

PALABRAS CLAVE: antología de literatura americana, poesía americana moderna, poesía política, realismo proletario, Genevieve Taggard, *Calling Western Union*, revolución.

Anthologies of American literature have marginalized political poetry written by women in the 1930s. In response, American studies scholars have insightfully narrated the repression of female political poets and prominently situated women's 1930s protest poetry in anthologies. Paula Rabinowitz & Charlotte NeKolá's *Writing Red: An Anthology of American Women Writers, 1930-1940* (1987) and Cary Nelson's *Anthology of Modern American Poetry* (2000) have moved poetry by such

writers as Muriel Rukeyser, Lola Ridge, Tillie Olson, and Genevieve Taggard towards the center of modernist discourse. The anthologies have also prompted debates on the quality of the women's writing. In a review of the *Anthology of Modern American Poetry*, for example, Marjorie Perloff both described Taggard's poetry as "just plain bad writing" and also criticized the "simple-mindedness of her message" (210). Taggard's seemingly "bad" and "simple-minded" writing gains more aesthetic and rhetorical significance when read in the context of her collection of poetry, *Calling Western Union* (1936).

Three notable framing devices organize the collection's verse: the title, *Calling Western Union*; the preface, "Hawaii, Washington, Vermont: A Frame for the Verse"; and the collection's sections, called "Note Books." The framing devices emphasize the collection's ties to the aesthetics and rhetoric of proletarian realism and new media, especially newsreels and photography that swiftly document the harsh realities of working class Americans in the 1930s. The framing devices also emphasize the collection's diversion from the aesthetics and rhetoric of more mainstream modern poetry that Taggard associates with individualism and societal antagonism (31). Finally, the framing devices enact the collection's advocacy of synchronization and solidarity by connecting the collection's individual poetic lines and poems into nested narratives of artistic, technological, and social revolutions. In short, reconsidering Taggard's writing and messages in the context of *Calling Western Union's* framing devices exposes the collection's aesthetic and rhetorical nuances and clarifies why Taggard's writing deserves space in anthologies of modern American literature.

The collection's title, *Calling Western Union*, gestures towards using solidarity and technological advancements to communicate more effectively for working class Americans. First, the oral verb "Calling" invokes the collection's advocacy for solidarity vis-à-vis synchronized oral communication ranging from chants to songs. As Nancy Berke notes in response to the collection's poem "Mass Song," "poetry, for Taggard" becomes a "collective chant, a *mass song*, "with one refrain: /OUR HOPE'S NOT VAIN"" (46). The collection's musical aspects reflect Taggard's desire to rework modern poetry in order to achieve the collectivity generated by song, for as Taggard herself wrote in *Long View* (1942), "Song is collective. (Poetry should be.)" (104).

Second, the title's calling "Western Union" during a decade plagued by labor strikes evokes a collective spirit generated in what historians refer to as the Great Strike, that is, the Great Strike against the telegraph company Western Union. In 1883 American telegraphers and linemen used the telegraph to generate, in the words of Edwin Gabler in *The American Telegrapher: A Social History, 1860-1900* (1988), as "flattering a picture of the brotherhood and its crusade as possible" (13). By succinctly alluding to effective communication and organization methods for working

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class solidarity, the title both superimposes the unique collective spirit of the Great Strike of 1883 onto the strikes raging through the United States in the 1930s and also signals the collection's rhetorical and aesthetic similitude to proletarian realism. In the early 1920s, the *Liberator* editor Michael Gold clarified that proletarian realism should "create "cinema in words" through 'swift action' with a "social theme" that described the labor process 'with technical precision'" (qtd. in Rabinowitz 19). In other words, Gold urged writers to generate a hybrid literary/cinematic form in the same communist party publication that Taggard also edited. Traces of the proletarian realist aesthetic even appear in the title of *Calling Western Union*.

Calling Western Union's preface reinforces the collection's allegiance to proletarian realism by framing the verse in a recurrent theme of leftist literature, documentary film, and documentary photography published in the depression-era United States: the union of westward geographic movement with leftist political progress and working class solidarity. As Rabinowitz explains, in 1932 V.F. Calverton connected "the West and the Left, in his call for intellectuals to join the young writers of the 'mine, mill and farm'" in "Leftward Ho!" (3, 14) As a self-proclaimed "left of center" writer (qtd. in McCann 377), Taggard appropriately narrates the westward journey of Taggard, her immediate family, and her ancestors in *Calling Western Union's* preface. More specifically, Taggard praises Hawaii's international ambiance and hybridity and criticizes the racism and ignorance of the white people living in Washington State, even calling them "barbarians" (xvi). Thus the preface delivers a more nuanced portrayal of the west than promoted by prominent leftist writers, such as Gold and Calverton, who represented the west as a panacea for American workers and writers, especially male workers and writers (Rabinowitz 3, 19).

The preface, "Hawaii, Washington, Vermont: A Frame for the Verse," also foreshadows the geographic and metaphoric journeys that take place in *Calling Western Union's* first poem if one interprets "Washington" as Washington state and interprets the poem in the epistolary context signaled by its title, "Night Letter to Walt Whitman" (2). Then the poem charts the transference of a written message from the west coast of the United States to the east coast where Whitman lived the last years of his life. In addition, Taggard's emphatic political assertion in the preface's conclusion, "I am not conservative" (xxxI), foreshadows the collection's revolutionary conclusion in "Lark." The opening lines of the collection's last poem urge a reversal of the eastward movement narrated in the preface's title that could symbolize conservatism for leftist writers told to go west or left in V.F. Calverton's "Leftward Ho!"

"Lark" narrates a transition from darkness that evokes narrow-mindedness, backwardness, or ignorance to lightness that evokes forward-thinking, progress, and enlightenment or knowledge:

O Lark, from great dark, arise!
O, Lark of light,
O, Lightness like a spark,
Shock ears and stun our eyes
Singing the day-rise, the day-rise, the great day-rise. (73)

Even if the lark's song does not travel westward, the sun's natural westward movement allows the poem's "believer" and the "[r]ejoicer" to "arise" and also "[s]ing the day-rise. /The great day-rise" (73-74). The poem's progression from "great dark" to "light" and its sparking qualities galvanize the emergent spirit of a desired new and "great" day for Americans. Thus Taggard uses poetry to make her desired reality, "The great day-rise," history (74).

Read together, "Night Letter to Walt Whitman" and "Lark" map the transmission of revolutionary messages across the United States, the technological advancement of communication in the United States (from the printed form of letters or the telegraph, derived from the Greek roots *τῆλε*, meaning afar, and *γραφος*, meaning written, to the vocal form of song or the telephone, derived from the Greek roots *τῆλε* and *φωνή*, meaning voice or sound), and the enlightening effects of these developments for Americans. "Night Letter to Walt Whitman" and "Lark's" performance of the geographical movements and political developments narrated in the preface signals that the verse should be read in the context of the collection's nested framing devices, ranging from the title and preface to the prose notes preceding the "note books."

The word "Frame" in the preface's title, "Hawaii, Washington, Vermont: A Frame for the Verse," substantiates an argument for reading Taggard's verse in the context of the collection. "Frame" implies an aesthetic association with exemplary modern frame stories, such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), and it also conjures the visual framing of 1930s photographers and filmmakers. The "speaker's" first-person interjections within *Calling Western Union's* poems, Taggard's prose notes preceding the books, and her autobiographical preface framing the collection resemble Marlow's interjections in *Heart of Darkness* or Francis Ford Coppola's filmed presence in the novel's adaptation, *Apocalypse Now* (1979): they function as a form of documentary voice-over narration or "commentary" that articulate Taggard's perspective. In effect, these parts of *Calling Western Union* remind readers that Taggard conducts the collection's revolutionary movements.

The collection's sequentially labeled "Note Books" add the final significant layer to the title's proletarian and realist allusions. Each of the four note books begins with an approximately one-page prose passage that introduces the themes of a note book's poems. The first note book's prose notes criticize "modern" poets' "romantic" notions of "godlike perfection" as "poison food" that sets poets apart from and against society (31). In addition, the prose notes advocate for an extremely different kind of poet who draws on associations with the working class in order to build bridges between poets and society. In this sense, the prose notes foretell and justify the collection's aesthetic and rhetorical departures from "most modern poetry" (31). Indeed, *Calling Western Union* shares more with the succinct repetitive lines of protestors' chants, the social themes of proletarian realist writing, and the stark imagery of documentary photography and newsreels than the primitivism of Pablo Picasso's cubist paintings, the dense symbolism of Stéphane Mallarmé poetry, or the lengthy lines of Virginia Woolf's stream-of-consciousness literature in order to promote solidarity among poets and working class Americans who suffered during the 1930s.



The organization of the first note book's poems reveals an advancing temporal movement and metaphorical journey through a season ripe for revolutionary changes. The sequential numbering of the poems and note books generates a sense of organized narrative progression from poem to poem and note book to note book. The first note book's first poem, "Funeral in May," crucifies a poet who idolizes self and verbal ornamentation in order to usher in aesthetic, technological, and social developments vis-à-vis the new age of the "*Newsreel*" (36). The first note book's second poem, "This Way We Make History," locates change in the usurpation of power from deceivers' hands (38).

In other words, "This Way We Make History," instructs people how to achieve the new beginning celebrated in "Funeral in May." "This Way We Make History's" first stanza urges,

Take power. Power has been passed —(Do you get me?)—
Like a jewel, a dirk, black poison, under cover of hands—
Now do you get me? Polished hands, deceptive, clever,
Have slipped power around the inner circle with a wink
For centuries. Do you begin to get me?

May I suggest? Break the tight ring. Take and create
Power. Let it grow safe and leviathan-large
So huge; huge as a tank or a turbine. Take, oh take and transform! (38)

If people follow the poem's advice to take power or history into their own hands and "Break the tight ring," then people should rupture the dominant historical and literary narratives circulated by the powerful. If people also follow the poems' instructions and read Marx alongside their "new" historical knowledge (4), the rupture should empower people to envision and ideally enact the socially-minded writing and exhibited revolutionary movements of striking and mass organization.

The first note book's remaining poems develop the rationale for enacting the poems' aesthetic, technological, and social messages. The speaker's admission of perplexity in the note book's fifth poem heightens readers' awareness of the subjective and admittedly questionable qualities of the poems' answers, and therefore, encourages readers to interpret poets and their poems' answers critically. "To My Daughter, 1936" encourages people to protest and fight in order to diminish harm or damage to their own and others' lives rather than sit passively aside and only economically insure their own well-being when a family member dies. "To My Students" urges people to change their attitudes towards the world because being and doing affect thinking, and improving the world will also improve oneself. With these answers given, the series concludes with "Flute in Late Summer," which warns against the severe consequences of passivity: we will "see ripeness decayed /And the bright earth bare" (45).

By beginning the first note book with a new beginning in May in the first poem and ending in the last ripe days of late summer, jamming antitheses alongside theses, and grounding the poems in concrete experiences that occur in multiple geographical locations in the depression-era United States, the first note book docu-



ments and galvanizes the exigencies and possibilities for revolutionary changes for many people dispersed through the United States. In this sense, the poems share aesthetic and rhetorical strategies observed in the government-funded documentary photography of the 1930s, which in the words of Carl Fleischhauer & Beverly W. Brannan show “the down-and-out, usually described in captions as victims of the Depression or the Dust Bowl” alongside “photographs of newly constructed government housing or the like —pictures that displayed the positive results of RA [Resettlement Administration] and FSA [Farm Security Administration] programs” (4). By documenting the breadth of economic disparity in the United States, the first note book emphasizes that people will continue starving and disease will continue spreading if power is not drastically redistributed within the United States.

The collection’s momentum continues into the second note book. The second note book’s prose notes first advocate a “forward advance” for the “mass of people” who “wail,” a “class” that “is terribly, terribly, terribly tired” (47). The word “wail” and the reappearance of “Lark” in *lento tempo* with Henry Leland Clarke’s music in Taggard’s *Collected Poems, 1918-1938* (1938) exemplify how the “note” in “note book” and the notes themselves signify both the written word and a pitch or duration of a tone.

The orchestration of the elements within the second note book produces something different than that contained in any sentence, stanza, or poem. Hearing, smelling, and envisioning the vomiting pregnant mill-mother whose child died from malnutrition in the note book’s first poem, “Mill Town,” alongside Nan, the small vomiting girl who eventually dies in the series’ second poem, “Up State–Depression Summer,” reinforces the concluding message of the first note book: people desperately need revolutionary changes in their lives, the time for change is ripe now, and that will not be the case for much longer.

The concluding lines of the series’ third poem, “Feeding the Children,” also bolster the meanings and images of the first two poems:

We must feed the children. Have you joined the Union?
 We must feed the children. March today.
 We must feed the children. How shall we feed the children?
 We must feed the children. Vote the strike! (55)

The stark visual gap separating the repetitive chanting of “We must feed the children” and the following questions, imperative, and exclamation emphasize that unionizing, marching, and voting will deconstruct the masses’ need to wail for children. The association of these three poems with the “forward advance” advocated in the notes (47), and the nightmarish social situations presented in the preface amplifies the exigencies, and therefore, the potential for revolutionary changes.

Since *Calling Western Union* grapples with proletarian realist themes through the presentation of multiple perspectives and styles, *Calling Western Union* could almost be described in terms of Nelson’s reading of Rukeyser’s “Book of the Dead” (1938), a “collage of perspectives and styles that reflect on and amplify the body of facts at its core: the cynical destruction of workers’ lives” (112); however, *Calling*

Western Union's affinities with the synchronization of chants and songs, the organization of frame stories, the voice-over narrations of films, and the subjects and arrangements of depression-era documentary photography generate something much more self-consciously constructed than a collage.

In conclusion, *Calling Western Union's* exploration of musical forms and new media in its predominately poetic yet hybrid structure and its candid commitment to urgently enact revolutionary movements generate a rich proletarian realist project. The multiple strains and unique constellations of musical, narrative, filmic, and photographic forms in *Calling Western Union* invite additional critical readings that focus on the multiple media at play within this collection and Taggard's other works, especially *Collected Poems, 1918-1938* and *Long View*. Taggard's experimentation with auditory, abstract, and visual imagery and forms of representation in *Calling Western Union* also exemplifies her stated commitment to significantly alter the course of modern poetry in order to renew hope and reclaim power for socially-minded writers and working class Americans (31). Thus Taggard's writing functions as a meaningful counterpoint to and example of modern American poetry, and therefore, deserves a place in anthologies of modern American literature.

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