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“NEW POETRY” IN EARLY-TWENTIETH-CENTURY NORTHERN CALIFORNIA: GEORGE STERLING’S “NIGHT-SENTRIES” AND “THE LAST DAYS”¹

“NUEVA POESÍA” EN EL NORTE DE CALIFORNIA A PRINCIPIOS DEL SIGLO XX: “NIGHT-SENTRIES” Y “THE LAST DAYS” DE GEORGE STERLING

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ABSTRACT: This article aims to challenge the critical perception of early twentieth-century Northern California poetry as a continuation of nineteenth-century Romanticism. Focusing on two overlooked poems by George Sterling, “Night-Sentries” (1913) and “The Last Days” (1914), this study analyzes how these texts reflect a modern thematic sensibility aligned with the principles of the “new poetry” movement—as defined by Harriet Monroe—despite their use of traditional formal elements. Through close reading and drawing on recent scholarship that reconsiders the dominance of formalist criteria in literary analysis, I argue that Sterling’s work engages with contemporary realities and

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participates in broader national currents of poetic renewal during the 1910s. In doing so, it repositions Northern California poetry as an active and innovative part of early twentieth-century American literature.

KEYWORDS: Northern California, George Sterling, new poetry, Harriet Monroe, Romanticism.

RESUMEN: Este artículo cuestiona la percepción crítica de la poesía del norte de California a principios del siglo XX como una prolongación del Romanticismo decimonónico. A partir de dos poemas de George Sterling ignorados por la crítica, “Night-Sentries” (1913) y “The Last Days” (1914), el estudio analiza cómo estos textos reflejan una sensibilidad temática moderna acorde con los principios del movimiento de la “nueva poesía” —tal y como los enunció Harriet Monroe— a pesar del uso de elementos formales tradicionales. A través de una lectura atenta y basándome en estudios recientes que reconsideran el predominio de los criterios formalistas en el análisis literario, sostengo que la obra de Sterling se comprometió con las realidades contemporáneas y participó en corrientes nacionales más amplias de renovación poética durante la década de 1910. Así, Sterling reconfiguró la poesía del norte de California como una parte activa e innovadora de la literatura estadounidense de principios del siglo XX.

PALABRAS CLAVE: norte de California, George Sterling, nueva poesía, Harriet Monroe, romanticismo.

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INTRODUCTION: LOCATING MODERNITY IN THE MARGINS OF AMERICAN POETRY

Critics have generally considered the poetry written in Northern California during the first two decades of the twentieth century to be a continuation of nineteenth-century Romantic verse. I use the term “Romanticism” in the sense defined by Elizabeth Renker (2018) to refer to the style of nineteenth-century American poetry: a conceptualization of the lyric characterized by exhibiting a lofty tone, a transcendental approach to nature,

and an imaginative orientation that prioritizes exalting the sublime, the fantastic, or the cosmic over the representation of everyday human experience (pp. 4-5). Thus conceived, the term “Romanticism” refers to a poetic mode based on idealizing reality, searching for transcendent beauty, and evading the mundane.² This widespread perception has led to a critical devaluation of Northern California poetry, which has been dismissed as marginal or anachronistic in light of the formal and thematic changes that began shaping modern poetry after 1910 (Sidney-Fryer, 2011a, pp. 93-94). In particular, the critical bias is largely due to the identification of this regional poetry with George Sterling (1869–1926).

The close association between Sterling and early twentieth-century Northern California poetry is not a coincidence. Rather, it is the result of historical, cultural, and literary factors that explain why he came to represent the region’s poetic imagination almost exclusively. First, Sterling was central to the intellectual life and bohemian culture of the San Francisco Bay Area and Carmel-by-the-Sea from the 1900s to the 1920s (Starr, 1986, p. 254; Sidney-Fryer, 2009, p. 31). There, he led literary circles that included writers such as Jack London, Upton Sinclair, Sinclair Lewis, and Nora May French (Dumont, 1941, p. 41). Second, Sterling became the region’s most popular poet after the success of his two best-known works: “The Testimony of the Suns”, in 1903, and “A Wine of Wizardry”, in 1907.³ The poems not only consolidated his reputation as a poet, but also brought Northern California poetry to the national poetic scene. However, the success

² Precisely this understanding of Romanticism explains why most critics, as will be discussed throughout the article, have associated Sterling’s poetry with nineteenth-century Romanticism. Sterling drew specific influence from English Romantics such as Percy Bysshe Shelley, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and John Keats, as well as from American Romantics like Edgar Allan Poe, poets he studied intensively during adolescence (Dumont, 1941, pp. 19-23). He particularly admired their use of escapism to realms of aesthetic beauty, a feature he associated with the idea of “pure romance” (Sterling, 1914, p. 282). Of Shelley’s “Skylark”, Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan”, Keats’ “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”, and Poe’s “Ulalume”, Sterling wrote: “There are (...) poems of greater ethical import (...) but none in my estimation of sheerer imagination, nor more radiantly washed by the light that never was on sea or land” (*ibid.*). Consequently, when the article addresses “escapism” in Sterling’s work—and, by extension, Northern California poetry—it refers specifically to his understanding of this device: using the poem as a vehicle for evading everyday reality through imagination, rather than depicting sublime, overwhelming, or transcendental experiences in the Kantian or Emersonian sense. As Sterling (1911) put it, “[t]here is a thing in poetry that is greater, to me, than sublimity, and that is imagination” (p. 153).

³ Hereafter, “TTS” and “WoW”, respectively.

of these poems paradoxically associated Sterling's work with a characterization from which he could never escape. Scholarship (Gross, 1969, p. 17; Ferlinghetti & Peters, 1980, pp. 106-107; Starr, 1986, p. 270; Wertheim, 1989, pp. 15-16; among others) assumes that Sterling's poetic style remained static in the escapist romanticism of the first phase of his career, represented by "TTS" and "WoW", from 1896 to 1926. The poems' archaic diction, iambic pentameter and tetrameter, and regular rhyme reinforce the interpretation of his work as hackneyed and outdated. According to critics (Monroe, 1916, pp. 309-310; Wertheim, 1989, pp. 17-18), the themes of both poems —focused on escapism through the cosmos in "TTS", and fantasy in "WoW"— make Sterling's work seem alien to the historical and material coordinates of the early twentieth century. During this period, especially from the 1910s onward, a poetic sensibility emerged that challenged nineteenth-century values and gave rise to what the poet, editor, and critic Harriet Monroe (1918) termed "new poetry" (p. v). This movement was characterized by a diction closer to contemporary speech, greater metrical freedom —with an emphasis on free verse— and, above all, a desire to express individual experience in a world undergoing profound economic, technological, social, and political change. The "new poetry" rejected the transcendental abstraction of romantic lyric, as represented by Sterling's major works, and instead sought to portray, in Monroe's words, "a concrete and immediate realization of life", even when that life was unpleasant (1918, p. vi).

However, Sterling's work reveals a dimension largely overlooked in this context of tension between tradition and the avant-garde in a rapidly changing American reality. During the 1910s, the poet wrote several poems that incorporated themes similar to those of the "new poetry" movement, which placed human beings and their modern environment at the forefront. "Night-Sentries" and "The Last Days", published in Sterling's fourth collection of poems, *Beyond the Breakers and Other Poems* (1914),⁴ are paradigmatic examples. Although both feature regular meter and rhyme —forms typical of nineteenth-century romantic tradition— the poems explore scenes from modern everyday life. Rather than

⁴ "Night-Sentries" was first published in *Harper's Monthly* in 1913 before being included in the collection.

seeking to escape this reality, the poet attempts to understand and reflect on it. In this sense, the focus on the tangible world displayed in “Night-Sentries” and “The Last Days” explains the selection of these poems as objects of analysis in the present study. They are the only poems in *Beyond the Breakers* that 1) most explicitly engage with the themes centered on the real, modern life championed by “new” poets and 2) have received significant critical recognition. Although they are scarcely noticed today, influential critics and anthologists of the 1910s held both compositions in high esteem. William Stanley Braithwaite (1913) named “Night-Sentries” one of the best poems of 1913 (p. 69), and Harriet Monroe and Alice Corbin Henderson (1918) included “The Last Days” in their seminal 1918 anthology (p. 319). Also, more recently, Dana Gioia (2004) highlighted “The Last Days” as a representative example of California poetry (pp. 39-40).

Therefore, this article first aims to analyze “Night-Sentries” and “The Last Days” in light of Harriet Monroe’s critical framework developed around the concept of “new poetry”. Monroe (1918) emphasized that the essential element of this innovative lyric was not formal rupture but rather the “spirit” of the poem (p. v); in other words, its ability to capture the immediate, concrete, and real, regardless of the meter used. From this perspective, the present study uses close reading to demonstrate how the traditional formal dimensions of Sterling’s poems, specifically their use of iambic meter and regular rhyme, coexisted with a modern thematic dimension that drew on subject matter representative of American daily life. However, this methodological approach to textual analysis also follows recent studies that have questioned the predominance of the formalist approach in the study of twentieth-century poetry, such as those by Newcomb (2012; 2015), Nelson (2012), Kappeler (2014; 2018), or Nurhussein (2020), among others. According to these scholars, a poem does not need to break with traditional forms to be considered part of the movement that sought to move beyond nineteenth-century Romanticism, what Harriet Monroe called “new poetry”. In other words, this category is not limited to works that adopted the everyday language or employed irregular or unrhymed meters. Poems that retained conventional structures while exploring themes grounded in

contemporary life can also be included in the scope of “new poetry.” This critical approach thus reaffirms the importance of thematic content in literary analysis and echoes the pluralistic vision Monroe defended in 1918, when she argued that the essence of poetry did not lie “in mere details of form” (Monroe, 1918, p. v), but in overcoming “the shop-worn subjects of past history or legend, which have been through the centuries a treasure-trove for the second-rate” (p. vi).

Based on this theoretical and methodological framework, I argue that Sterling’s poems “Night-Sentries” and “The Last Days” represent a significant turning point in his poetic career and that they refute the idea of Sterling’s work as exclusively romantic. By doing so, this study challenges the prevailing perception of Northern California poetry as merely an imitation of an obsolete poetic sensibility. Instead, it shows how the poetry written in this region actively engaged with primary trends of poetic renewal on a national scale during pivotal periods such as the 1910s.

1. HARRIET MONROE’S DEFINITION OF NEW POETRY AS A CRITICAL FRAMEWORK

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, the United States experienced rapid social and technological changes that reshaped daily life and individual identity (Muller, 2013, p. 86; Beeby & Ingrassia, 2017, pp. 23-24). Urbanization, industrialization, and innovations such as electricity, the telephone, and the automobile accelerated the pace of life, while shifts in gender roles and social hierarchies challenged traditional nineteenth-century norms (DuPlessis, 2001). These transformations also coincided with scientific advances, particularly in astronomy, which undermined anthropocentric worldviews and fostered existential uncertainty (Tomsich, 1971). The First World War exacerbated this anxiety, since it became a tangible manifestation of humanity’s own barbarism and cruelty (Fussel, 1975, pp. 169-170). As Amy Lowell (1917) put it, it was “impossible for any one writing to-day not to be affected by the war” (v).

Therefore, the poetry of this period reflected modern society as an inhospitable place. As Octavio Paz (1975) puts it, “since its inception, modern poetry has been a reaction of, toward, and against modernity” (p. 10).⁵ However, unlike nineteenth-century Romanticism, there was no desire for escape. Instead, poetic expression sought individual introspection, exploring the place of the self in this new material, ideological, and spiritual reality, as well as in emerging social dynamics. In the 1910s, poets and literary critics published essays and anthologies examining how the modern context was changing contemporary poetry. By 1913, Ezra Pound had published “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste”, defending poetry that was free of abstractions and idealism and focused on concrete images of everyday urban life (Pound, 1913a, pp. 201-202). His early iconic poem “In a Station of the Metro” embodied these groundbreaking poetic principles: “The apparition of these faces in the crowd: / Petals on a wet, black bough” (Pound, 1913b, p. 12). Soon after, between 1912 and 1918, poets such as Edna St. Vincent Millay, Vachel Lindsay, Amy Lowell, and Robert Frost published their first collections (Newcomb, 2012, p. 47), while Jessie B. Rittenhouse and Edgar Lee Masters compiled the first anthologies of “modern” American verse: *The Little Book of Modern Verse* (1913) and *The Spoon River Anthology* (1915), respectively. However, it was Harriet Monroe who, with *The New Poetry: An Anthology* (1918), co-edited with Alice Corbin Henderson, most influentially articulated the expressive concerns of this new sensibility. In her insightful prologue, she precisely defined what “new poetry” consisted of (Newcomb, 2012, p. 22).

Five years before the anthology was published, Monroe founded the literary magazine *Poetry* to give visibility to poets whose works were systematically excluded from the best-selling literary magazines of the time, such as *McClure’s* and *Munsey’s*. These publication venues, aimed at a mass audience, devoted little space to poetry and, when they did feature it, typically favored works rooted in romantic idealism over those engaging more directly with the realities of contemporary life (Nurhussein, 2020, pp.

⁵ “Desde su origen la poesía moderna ha sido una reacción frente, hacia y contra la modernidad” (Paz, 1975, p. 10). Translation is mine.

343-344). They were convinced, as Monroe herself argued in one of the inaugural essays of the first issue of *Poetry*, that there was no longer an audience for poetry in modern America (Monroe, 1912, p. 27). Contrary to this belief, *Poetry* brought together a large number of contributors and readers, as evidenced by the immediate success of its first issue (pp. 27-28). In this way, the magazine also offered a poetic alternative to the nineteenth-century model.

In 1918, when Monroe and Corbin Henderson promoted an anthology to bring together the leading exponents of “new poetry”, Monroe offered one of the most influential definitions of the movement in the introduction (Newcomb, 2012, p. 22). She described this poetry as an art that “strives for a concrete and immediate realization of life” and rejects “the theory, the abstraction, the remoteness found in all classics not of the first order” while seeking to represent “the concrete object or the concrete environment, whether these be beautiful or ugly” (Monroe, 1918, p. vi). The novelty was in the choice of themes, as the “new poetry” was anchored in individual experience and a context marked by technological transformations, the trauma of World War I, and the crisis of traditional values. As Monroe pointed out, this poetry was indeed *new* due to its “direct relation with contemporary thought, contemporary imaginative and spiritual life” (p. vi).

Monroe also recognized that formal experimentation was another distinctive feature of “new poetry”. She defined it as a search for “an ideal that implies an individual, unstereotyped diction and rhythm” (p. vi), as opposed to the archaic language and regular metrical patterns typical of the nineteenth century. This new sensibility promoted a language closer to modern speech and greater structural freedom, as evidenced by its frequent use of free verse. However, Monroe devoted much of her preface to clarifying that this formal revolution was not a prerequisite. Although certain more radical authors, such as the Imagists led by Pound, relied almost entirely on stylistic experimentation, “new poetry” did not necessarily imply “a disrespect for tradition” (p. vi). In fact, many poets used regular or archaic forms to convey content deeply committed to the representation of the mundane (p. xii). At first glance, then, Monroe’s definition of “new poetry” may

seem unusually inclusive, encompassing poets as formally and thematically diverse as T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, Robert Frost, or even George Sterling himself. Yet this breadth reflects the lyric panorama of the 1910s, when poetic innovation was understood less as a unified aesthetic program than as a general impulse toward renewal. Experimentation often meant a reorientation of subject matter toward contemporary reality rather than a radical formal rupture. Therefore, Monroe's category functioned as a flexible framework to account for the variety of ways poets engaged with modern life before the more extreme formal experimentation of High Modernism emerged.

Monroe's emphasis on thematic over formal innovation was a view shared by many writers and critics of the decade. Amy Lowell (1917), a regular contributor to *Poetry*, supported this idea. She warned that the novelty of the movement was assumed to lie in the use of freer forms, but this distinction was "misleading in the extreme, for, after all, forms are merely forms, of no particular value unless they are the necessary and adequate clothing for some particular manner of thought" (p. 3). Similarly, the anthologist and poet Louis Untermeyer (1919) argued that the radical transformation of American poetry did not lie in "a mere revolt from stilted, aestheticized speech" (p. 11), but rather in its return to "actuality, to heartiness and lustiness" (p. 10).

However, throughout the twentieth century, critics often adopted a reductionist view of what constitutes "modern poetry". The dominant belief was that breaking with past traditions could only be accomplished through formal innovation; specifically, by abandoning regular meter, rhyme, and the archaic diction typical of nineteenth-century verse. Steele (1990), for instance, explicitly links modernity to the "complete abandonment of meter" (55). Earlier critics such as Hamilton (1936, pp. 16-25), Swallow (1952, pp. 345-346), and Kindlen (1956, pp. 119-121) dismissed poets who did not follow the formal experimentation of writers like Pound, Eliot, and Hilda Doolittle as merely conventional or conservative. Consequently, critics increasingly identified leading modernist figures—especially T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound—as the principal catalysts in the departure from nineteenth-century poetic norms (Hamilton, 1936, p. 67; Starr, 1986, p. 281; Benediktsson,

1980, p. 112). However, this perspective dismissed the innovative potential of realistic content. If such content was conveyed through forms such as blank verse, the sonnet, or the ballad, or through meters such as the iamb, it was often deemed merely “traditional” (Hamilton, 1936, p. 30) and lacking in “lasting power” (Swallow, 1952, p. 346). Poets such as Marianne Moore, George Santayana, Edwin Arlington Robinson, and William Vaughn Moody —now recognized for their opposition to the escapist idealism of the nineteenth century— were labeled “new traditionalists” because they did not fully abandon inherited forms. According to Kindilien (1956), their detachment from the modern poetic spirit lay in attempting “to create an aesthetic that did not throw out traditional forms” (p. 121).

In the early decades of the twenty-first century, criticism moved beyond the formalist approach that had dominated earlier studies. Among others, scholars such as DuPlessis (2001), Newcomb (2012; 2015), Nelson (2012), Kappeler (2014), Cohen (2015), Davis & Jenkins (2015) highlighted two key aspects overlooked by previous criticism: first, twentieth-century criticism failed to consider how the “new poetry” of the 1910s confronted modern reality by rejecting the escapist and idealizing ideals of Romanticism; second, their formalist approach also established a limited canon of modernist poets, such as Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. In short, the twentieth-century critical approach defined modernity exclusively by formal experimentation, dismissing poets who employed traditional forms. However, from a broader perspective, recent criticism advocates for an approach to “new poetry” that goes beyond the binary opposition between “traditional” and “modern” poets defined solely by formal traits. This perspective emphasizes thematic innovation as the true catalyst for the break with Romanticism, recognizing both canonical figures like Pound and Eliot and lesser-known poets who also reflected modern society in their verse. Consequently, contemporary scholarship has shown growing interest in exploring the “social meanings and debates” (DuPlessis, 2001, p. 11), “social forms” (Nelson, 2012, p. 56), “social lives” (Cohen, 2015, pp. 9-10), and “spaces and social

dynamics of the industrial city” (Newcomb, 2015, p. 21) found in early twentieth-century American poetry.

This renewed critical sensibility is evident in recent collections edited by Nelson (2012), Davis & Jenkins (2015), and Kalaidjian (2015), which include essays exploring how early twentieth-century poetry engaged with issues such as gender, race, multicultural nationality, the construction of white masculinity, disability, the market, and sexuality. As Kappeler (2014) notes, this thematic emphasis is, in fact, more historically consistent with the period in question. As previously stated, in the 1910s, Harriet Monroe argued that what was truly “new” in poetry resided in its themes and concrete engagement with reality, rather than in formal experimentation. In this sense, contemporary criticism aligns with the original conception of “new poetry” as it was understood at the time of its emergence. In that sense, using this critical framework, we can understand the “modernity” of Sterling’s poetry in the 1910s. In poems such as “Night-Sentries” and “The Last Days”, Sterling abandoned romantic models of escapism into otherworldly realities that had characterized the early stage of his career to reflect instead a newfound dedication to realistically and critically portraying modern American reality.

2. THE CRITICAL CONSTRUCTION OF STERLING AND NORTHERN CALIFORNIA POETRY AS “ROMANTIC”

Sterling began writing poetry in 1896, but did not gain national recognition until the publication of his first collection, *The Testimony of the Suns and Other Poems*, in 1903. The volume featured the 644-line title poem, “TTS”, which marked a turning point in both his career and the development of Northern California poetry in the early 1900s. Composed in a series of quatrains using the *In Memoriam* stanza,⁶ the poem follows a speaker who escapes into outer space, imagined as a cosmic battlefield where the stars wage eternal conflict: “On Night’s inviolable breast! / (...) / In war’s unrest their legions

⁶ This stanza consists of a quatrain in iambic tetrameter with an *abba* rhyme scheme.

surge, / Foam of the cosmic tides that urge / The battle of contending skies” (Sterling, 1903, p. 44).

The total omission of any reference to everyday experience gives the poem an imaginative transcendence that was key to its critical reception. Ambrose Bierce, Sterling’s mentor until 1910 and a staunch defender of art for art’s sake, praised both the “greatness of the theme” (Bierce, 1902, p. 51) and the author, whom he defined as “the poet of the skies, the prophet of the suns” (p. 52). Likewise, the press hailed the poem for its deliberate departure from the mundane. For critics and reviewers, “TTS” possessed a “haunting unearthly beauty” (“The Poetry”, 1904, p. 30), a “‘mist of the suns’ and other hazy accessories” (“Activities”, 1904, p. 10), and a rejection of any “namby-pamby sentiment” (“Testimony”, 1904, p. 3) that brought it closer to human feeling. The publication of “WoW” in 1907 in *Cosmopolitan Magazine* further consolidated Sterling’s reputation. The 207-line poem, written in regular iambic pentameter, tells the story of “Fancy”, a personification of the speaker’s imagination, who awakens after he stares at the vivid scarlet and copper hues of port wine in a glass:

Into a crystal cup the dusky wine
I pour, and, musing at so rich a shrine,
I watch the star that haunts its ruddy gloom.
Now Fancy, empress of a purpled realm,
Awakes with brow caressed by poppy-bloom,
And wings in sudden dalliance her flight. (Sterling, 1907, p. 551)

The poem traces Fancy’s journey through a fantastical universe generated by the speaker’s mind. Consequently, his visions fluctuate between the dreamlike and the grotesque. “Fancy” visits places such as “strands where opals of the shattered light / Gleam in the wind-strewn foam” (p. 551), “an iceberg oriflammed / With rayed auroral guidons” (p. 552), caves where “wattled monsters redly gape” (p. 552), and abysses where “a demon altar burns” (p. 559). The press was divided in its response to the poem. Reviewers such as Thrasher (1907, p. 18) and Smith (1907, p. 18) condemned its excessive fantasy as the

product of an unbalanced mind. However, many other reviews, published in various regions across the country, praised Sterling's escapism and his ability to create imaginary landscapes completely detached from physical experience ("Book Notes", 1907, p. 9; "Wine of", 1907, p. 18). Some evaluations even compared Sterling to classic Romantic authors, such as Edgar Allan Poe and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, highlighting his aesthetic connection to a visionary tradition (Cooney, 1907, p. 16).

Later critics, however, interpreted Sterling's fame as a poet in the 1900s for his evasive tendencies in light of the subsequent innovations brought about by the emergence of "new poetry" in the 1910s. Consequently, they emphasized the outdated and artificial nature of the themes of "TTS" and "WoW". In a review of Sterling's poetry from 1916, Harriet Monroe herself described the form of both poems as "a maze of words" (p. 310) and their content as "the frippery of a by-gone fashion" (p. 309). Subsequently, editors and critics such as Walter Neale (1929, p. 289) and Alfred Kreymborg (1934, p. 282) dismissed Sterling's interest in the cosmos and the fantastic as an expression of an obsolete idealistic impulse, an heir to a romantic tradition that was already exhausted.

From the second half of the twentieth century to the early twenty-first, critics have continued to promote a reductionist understanding of the thematic range in Sterling's poetry. As a result, his work has often been evaluated through a methodological lens that situates his poems within an inappropriate historical framework by systematically comparing them to the thematic and formal innovations of the Imagists, the most experimental wing of the "new poetry" movement. This approach overlooks that poems like "TTS" and "WoW" were written in the early 1900s, before the institutionalization of "new poetry" and before platforms like *Poetry Magazine* had even emerged. Consequently, critics tend to dismiss Sterling's impersonal aesthetic as archaic, especially when contrasted with the modern sensibility of Imagists, which favored concrete depiction of everyday life within the rapidly evolving American sociocultural landscape of the early twentieth century (Gross, 1969, p. 16; Ferlinghetti & Peters, 1980, pp. 106–107; Longtin, 1980, p. 227). Gross (1969), for instance, claims that Sterling showed no interest in writing about

“seemingly mundane subjects” (p. 16), a misconception echoed by critics such as Wertheim (1989) and Weir (2008). Both interpret Sterling’s visionary imagination as a conscious rejection of the physical world and of the emotional tensions experienced by the modern subject amid a shifting existential order (Wertheim, 1989, p. 23; Weir, 2008, p. 146).

This critical pattern was reinforced not only by anachronistic methodological assumptions, but also by the material and institutional conditions that shaped Sterling’s position within the early twentieth-century literary field. Although he briefly entered East Coast literary circles in the 1910s—establishing personal contact with “new” poets such as Zöe Akins, Witter Bynner, and Harriet Monroe (Gross, 1969, p. ix), and publishing in nationally influential magazines including *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The North American Review*, and *Harper’s Monthly*—Sterling never became fully integrated into the experimentalist networks that were beginning to define the emerging modernist canon. As Emery (2020) suggests, geographical location and economic precarity played a decisive role: despite publishing in prestigious Eastern periodicals, Sterling received very low remuneration and, burdened by debt, returned to San Francisco by May 1915, where a stable circle of admirers provided both material support and cultural recognition (p. 61). His withdrawal from the East Coast at a time when literary experimentalism was becoming increasingly institutionalized may therefore help explain, alongside later critical misreadings, why his engagement with the spirit of “new poetry” failed to register in subsequent accounts of American modernism.

Within this critical context, many scholars have identified an inherent transcendent idealism in the poetry written in California, interpreting it as a strategy employed by early twentieth-century poets to construct a regional identity that still remained culturally undefined, barely sixty years after California’s incorporation as a state. This escapist tendency was frequently projected onto the lush natural landscapes of the region or onto mythologies drawn from its multicultural influences, particularly those of Mexico and Asia (Blatt, 1977, pp. 15–28; Gioia, 2004, pp. xxv–xxvii; Allmendinger, 2015, pp. 4–5). Geneva M. Gano (2015) even describes this type of poetry as explicitly “anti-modernist”

(p. 187). However, from the 1980s to the present, scholarship has taken a more localized approach to the study of Californian poetry, with growing attention to specific regions of the state. One such line of inquiry has centered on Northern California. Critics such as Starr (1986, pp. 270), Weir (2008, pp. 145-146), and Sidney-Fryer (2009, pp. 64-67; 2011b, pp. 4-5) have continued to uphold the traditional view that links this body of poetry to an escapist aesthetic rooted in Romanticism. Their focus is particularly on the two main literary circles active in the northern part of the state during the early twentieth century: the San Francisco Bay Area—home to figures like Jack London, Ambrose Bierce, and Gelett Burgess—and Carmel-by-the-Sea, where writers such as Mary Austin, Upton Sinclair, and Sinclair Lewis gathered.

Therefore, for these critics, the connection between the poetry of the region and the themes of Romantic escapism is largely grounded in the work of George Sterling, a central figure in both circles and a key voice in Northern California poetry on the national stage, thanks to the recognition he received for poems such as “TTS” and “WoW”. From this perspective, Kevin Starr (1986), one of the foremost authorities on California literature, describes the early twentieth century as the “romantic era” of Bay Area letters (p. 282). Similarly, other scholars explain the prominence of fantastical and cosmic imagery in these literary communities as a result of Sterling’s influence on his close associates, including Nora May French and even Bierce himself—poets who, like Sterling, “cherished” a lyricism oriented toward imaginative and otherworldly dimensions (Weir, 2008, pp. 126–131; Sidney-Fryer, 2009, pp. 68-69; Starr, 2013, p. xvii). In this sense, Sidney-Fryer (2011b) argues that these literary circles preserved “not just the Late Romanticism of the 1800s but also the Modern Romanticism of the 1900s” (p. 5).

Nevertheless, more recently, literary historian Vince Emery (2020) has argued that by the 1910s Sterling’s “style was evolving” and that the poet “turned his pen to other themes” (p. 64), distinct from those entirely detached from human reality, as embodied in “TTS” and “WoW”. Emery’s effort to challenge the long-standing narrative of Sterling’s supposed thematic stagnation had, in fact, already been anticipated by the

poet's contemporary and fellow writer Carey McWilliams (1927). The writer argued that in 1910 Sterling "was no longer concerned solely with the polishing of amber gems in the artificial glow of the decadent and mid-Victorian imagination" (p. 22). Sterling himself explicitly acknowledged this shift in his poetic concerns during the second decade of the twentieth century, when his work began to incorporate previously neglected mundane subjects. He even expressed regret for having spent the early part of his career pursuing a deliberately elusive and emotionally distant aesthetic: "I'm trying to become somewhat more 'human'. It's not so easy as I had fifteen years' start in the wrong direction" (Sterling, 1913, p. 252).

The publication of Sterling's fourth poetry collection, *Beyond the Breakers and Other Poems* (1914), clearly demonstrated the author's innovative shift in thematic perception. Fewer poems in this collection resorted to imaginative evasion as a refuge from the rapidly changing world. In fact, reviews of the volume classified it as "modern poetry" ("Annual Book", 1914, p. 2) and proclaimed Sterling's abandonment of his previous inhuman themes:

Sterling began poetry as the singer of the cosmos. This earth was not big enough for his verses. He brought beauty out of chaos (...) But now the veil has been rent; the poet has leaped the uplifted bar. His interest in the storm of atoms has waned a little; the sun's air is as stringent for him as ever, but it no longer presses to drive it. ("New Sterling", 1914, p. 47)

Even Harriet Monroe (1916), who had previously criticized the imaginative themes of "TTS" and "WoW", praised several poems from *Beyond the Breakers and Other Poems* for their "simple, sincere, and beautiful" character, in keeping with the themes of the modern poetry movement (p. 312). She highlighted "The Last Days", which she later included in her anthology of "new poetry", a notable recognition, since subsequent criticism has largely ignored its early indication of Sterling's involvement with emerging modernist

trends in American verse. This poem, along with “Night-Sentries”, exhibits a clear departure from the lyrical evasion typical of Sterling’s work in the 1900s. In both poems, the lyrical space becomes a site for representing the rise of industrial and technological modernity, as well as a platform for reflecting on how individuals relate to these new material textures and reconsider their place within a constantly changing world.

3. GEORGE STERLING’S “NEW POETRY” IN THE 1910s

3.1. The Integration of Technological and Urban Reality in “Night-Sentries”

In “Night-Sentries”, Sterling articulates an ode to night *guards*; in other words, to those who work night shifts performing essential tasks that ensure both individual safety and the operation of modern technological infrastructure. Within the narrative of the poem, these workers are depicted as unseen guarantors of an order that persists while the rest of society sleeps. Night, then, is not depicted as a time of stillness or closure, but as the silent continuation of collective progress:

Ever, as sinks the day on sea or land,
Called or uncalled you take your kindred posts.
At helm and lever, wheel and switch you stand,
On the world’s wastes and melancholy coasts.
Strength to the patient hand!
To all, alert and faithful in the night,
May there be Light! (Sterling, 1914a, p. 19)

The poem takes the form of an apostrophe directed at these workers, a device emphasizing Monroe’s view of poetry as thematically modern, even within traditional rhetorical structures. The first seven stanzas are devoted to various professional sectors that sustained the nation’s material and social progress in the early twentieth century. In the first stanza

quoted above, Sterling focuses on land transportation workers —particularly train drivers and operators— who “stand, / On the world’s wastes” (Sterling, 1914b, p. 19). They are thus portrayed as guardians of a hostile yet necessary space that sustains mobility and national connectivity. The second stanza refers to communication workers, specifically telegraph operators, evoked metonymically through the sites and instruments of their labor: the “signal towers” and the “stammering keys” of the telegraph (Sterling, 1914b, p. 19). This strategy enacts what Monroe (1918) described as an engagement with “contemporary thought, contemporary imaginative” (p. vi), suggesting that nocturnal communication both transmits information and maintains the symbolic circulation of modern life, even amid darkness: “How many watchers guard the barren way (...) / What word the whispering horizons say!” (Sterling, 1914b, p. 19).

While the third stanza focuses on the work of police officers who ensure civil safety “[o]n ruthless streets, on by-ways sad with sin” (p. 20) through their nighttime vigilance, Sterling uses the fourth stanza to praise maritime professionals, such as helmsmen and crew members, who work at night on merchant ships or naval vessels:

Now reels the pulsing hull adown the sea:
Gaze onward, anxious eyes, to mist or star!
Where foams the heaving highway wide and free?
Where wait the reef, the berg, the cape, the bar?
Whatever menace be,
To all, alert and faithful in the night,
May there be Light! (Sterling, 1914b, p. 20)

In the fifth stanza, Sterling continues to align the poem with the spirit of “new poetry” through a thematic commitment to “actuality” (Untermeyer, 1919, p. 10), here embodied in a tribute to coast guard and maritime rescue teams working “at the ocean’s edge” (Sterling, 1914b, p. 20), who attempt to save drowning victims by launching “the rocket

where the billows grind” (p. 20). From the third to the fifth stanza, Sterling sustains a lexicon of danger that foregrounds the constant risk faced by these civil protection professions. Terms such as “sin”, “guilt”, “cruel”, “anxious”, and “menace”, together with the compound noun “ocean-edge” (*ibid.*), build an atmosphere of threat and sacrifice that departs from nineteenth-century idealizing or escapist conventions, reinforcing the poem’s engagement with the material realities that “new poetry” sought to articulate.

With a similar aim of honoring nighttime public service professions, the sixth and seventh stanzas center on a shared, essential element in their work: artificial light. Lamps and electricity become emblems of professional dignity. From this point of view, in the sixth stanza, Sterling praises lighthouse keepers, who warn sailors with “the lamps that warn (...) / Within the fog that welds the sea and skies!” (p. 21). In the seventh, focused on doctors and nurses, it is the glow of hospital lamps that guides their care through the darkness of night and suffering:

Now glow the lesser lamps in rooms of pain.
Where nurse and doctor watch the joyless breath,
Drawn in a sigh, and sighing lost again.
Who waits without the threshold, Life or Death?
Reckon you loss or gain?
To all, alert and faithful in the night,
May there be Light! (Sterling, 1914b, p. 21)

However, in the last stanza, the perspective of the apostrophe expands. Rather than addressing a particular professional group as in the rest of the poem, Sterling addresses all night workers who keep modern society functioning. In short, the poet concludes the poem by giving them credit for being the true guarantors of collective well-being:

Honor to you that guard our welfare now!
To you that constant in the past have stood!

To you by whom the future shall avow
 Unconquerable fortitude and good!
 Upon the sleepless brow
 Of each, alert and faithful in the night,
 May there be Light! (Sterling, 1914b, p. 22)

Therefore, the poem maintains a solemn tone as Sterling pays tribute to workers who remain largely invisible yet whose labor is essential to the functioning of modern American society. However, the ode to modernity in this poem is paradoxically constructed through the combination of a theme that embodies what Harriet Monroe called “a concrete and immediate realization of life” (Monroe, 1918, p. vi) and traditional formal features. Structurally, the poem consists of eight symmetrical seven-line stanzas and is written primarily in iambic pentameter, with a recurrent shift in the final lines to an iambic dimeter refrain: “To all, alert and faithful in the night. / May there be light!” (Sterling, 1914b, pp. 19-22). Despite this formal shift, the overall rhythm remains steady, as does the consistent *abababcc* rhyme scheme. This use of traditional meter and rhyme thus contributes to its categorization as “new poetry”, since, as Lowell (1917), Monroe (1918) and Untermeyer (1919) argued, formal experimentation was not the exclusive criterion for a poem to be considered modern. In this sense, the formal dimension allows Sterling to exalt both technological progress and the new professional roles that defined everyday life in early modern America.

Indeed, the repeated use of the refrain at the end of each stanza constitutes another poetic device commonly associated with traditional forms such as the villanelle.⁷ However, far from serving as a mere rhetorical ornament, the ritual repetition of “May there be light!” endows the text with a hymn-like quality. Sterling thus employs the line as a solemn

⁷ A villanelle is a nineteen-line poetic form composed of five tercets followed by a concluding quatrain. It is characterized by the repetition of two refrains, which give the poem a circular, musical quality and often reinforces its central theme.

celebration of night-time professions, giving them a heroic and even sacred character within the framework of modern America's development. But beyond its musicality, the refrain's symbolic contrast of light and darkness, where night denotes both the literal time of work and the social invisibility of these laborers, while light signifies recognition, dignity, and progress, becomes an illustration of a traditional rhetorical device repurposed to address modern themes.

Ultimately, the poem revolves around three interrelated themes deeply rooted in early twentieth-century reality: the centrality of technological advances in shaping modern life; the structural anonymity of the individual within these new material conditions; and the consequent invisibility of the human effort that sustains that system. As a result, Sterling also highlights the loneliness of the modern subject, trapped in an impersonal work dynamic that, despite its relevance, is rarely recognized.

3.2. The Flaws of Flesh and Earth: Mundanity and Transience in "The Last Days"

Amy Lowell argued that nature poetry was one of the lyrical spaces in which the thematic evolution of modern verse beyond romantic escapism could be most clearly appreciated. For her, in the new modern expression, nature as a poetic theme was treated "in a different way from most nature poems of the older writers; for nature is not now something separate from man, man and nature are recognized as a part of a whole, man being a part of nature" (Lowell, 1917, p. vii).

This is precisely the case in Sterling's "The Last Days". In this poem, the detailed depiction of nature does not serve as a gentler alternative to mundane reality, as it often did in nineteenth-century Romantic poetry, where nature was conceived as a superior and transcendent realm offering imaginative escape. By contrast, "The Last Days" refuses to establish a hierarchy between *ideal* nature and *imperfect* humanity. Sterling's perspective on the landscape of Carmel-by-the-Sea, where he moved in 1905 after fifteen years in the Bay Area, is not idealistic, but realistic. Rather than offering an escape from human

concerns, the poem reflects on human condition, mortality and temporal decay, in line with broader early twentieth-century modern poetry's preoccupations. The opening stanza illustrates this approach:

The russet leaves of the sycamore
Lie at last on the valley floor—
By the autumn wind swept to and fro
Like ghosts in a tale of long ago.
Shallow and clear the Carmel glides
Where the willows droop on its vine-walled sides. (Sterling, 1914c, p. 130)

The lines foreshadow the poem's focus on imagery that signals the fading vitality of the natural landscape at the end of fall. Throughout its four stanzas, the grass loses its green color and becomes dry, the mountains and rivers darken under an absent sun, birds migrate, and rainfall becomes more frequent. Considering this spare and unadorned approach to nature, we notice that the lexicon does not seek to idealize the Carmel landscape that Sterling observes. Instead, it is grounded in a realistic perspective and adopts a purely descriptive tone:

The bracken-rust is red on the hill;
The pines stand brooding, somber and still;
Grey are the cliffs, and the waters grey,
Where the seagulls dip to the sea-born spray.
Sad November, lady of rain.
Sends the goose-wedge over again.
Wilder now, for the verdure's birth,
Falls the sunlight over the earth;
Killdees call from the fields where now
The banding blackbirds follow the plow;

Rustling poplar and brittle weed

Whisper low to the river-reed. (Sterling, 1914c, pp. 130-131)

Certainly, at times, the diction of the poem takes on an archaic tone through syntactic and lexical choices that deviate from the “simplicity” and spontaneous speech advocated by the “new poetry”. For example, Sterling reverses the typical subject-verb order in lines such as “Grey are the cliffs” (1914c, p. 130) and “Falls the sunlight over the earth” (p. 131). He also coins compound terms like “goose-wedge” (p. 130), complicating an otherwise straightforward image of migrating geese in flight. However, these formal features do not lead the narrative to “the abstraction, the remoteness” that Monroe (1918, p. vi) criticized as exhausted poetic conventions. In contrast, Sterling grounds the poem in a specific and realistic setting through vocabulary tied closely to the local landscape of Northern California, particularly Carmel-by-the-Sea. He refers to the “sycamore” (p. 130), a tree native to the region; the “killdees” (p. 131), the most common plover there; and the tricolored “blackbird” (p. 131), a species endemic to California. He also offers a precise description of the Carmel River and its banks in the lines “Shallow and clear the Carmel glides / Where the willows droop on its vine-walled sides” (p. 130). In this way, the nature portrayed is concrete and observable, not an idealized retreat into imagination.

However, the narrative acquires a strong metaphorical dimension. The description of the natural landscape just before winter points to the inevitability of time’s passage and human helplessness before constant change; a change that affects all aspects of reality, including the human body. This physical deterioration progresses steadily toward an eternal “winter” that drains vitality: death. In this way, the autumnal imagery becomes symbolic of that irreversible process, representing the gradual decay to which all individuals are subject. From this perspective, the final stanza serves as a conclusion: “Days departing linger and sigh; / Stars come soon to the quiet sky; / Buried voices, intimate, strange, / Cry to body and soul of Change; / Beauty, eternal fugitive, / Seeks the home that we cannot give” (p. 131). As this final stanza suggests, human bodies decay easily and

youthful vitality fades quickly, rendering human beings unworthy of the ideal, eternal, and perfect beauty sought by nineteenth-century Romantic poets. In response, Sterling uses verse to interrogate the transcendent ideals of the Romantic subject, contrasting them with the realistic and disenchanting perspective of the modern subject who recognizes in the accelerated material and ideological shifts of early twentieth-century America a mirror of his own deterioration.

Considering Sterling's rhetorical intent, the central theme of the poem appears to draw on the classical motif of *tempus fugit*. This seemingly traditional element lends "The Last Days" an aura of conventionality further reinforced by its formal features: the symmetry of its four sestets, the predominance of iambic pentameter, and a consistent couplet rhyme scheme. These characteristics might suggest a late continuation of classical poetic traditions within early twentieth-century American verse. However, Sterling engages in what Newcomb (2015) describes as a "repurposing of traditional poetic forms" (p. 13). Both the *tempus fugit* motif and the poem's formal regularity are reconfigured to express a distinctly modern sensibility shaped by the experience of the 1910s. Rapid urbanization, industrialization, technological innovation, and an emerging scientific vision of an infinite, impersonal universe transform the meditation on time, so that *tempus fugit* no longer signifies merely life's brevity but instead conveys a skeptical, disillusioned view of the insignificant human condition within the cosmic order and a loss of dignity.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis demonstrates that "Night-Sentries" and "The Last Days" are poems in which Sterling embraces themes aligned with the spirit of "new poetry" as defined by Harriet Monroe in the 1910s. Both poems retain a traditional formal structure, employing regular meter and conventional rhyme schemes that do not reject nineteenth-century poetics. Nevertheless, their thematic concerns reflect a modern sensibility focused on depicting the everyday realities of the common human experience. This representation of

the mundane does not seek imaginative escape into idealized realms, as seen in Romantic poetry, but instead confronts the immediacy of the present moment directly. Consequently, both poems engage with the material conditions of early twentieth-century America without resorting to simplistic idealization or condemnation. Rather, “Night-Sentries” and “The Last Days” explore both the positive and negative dimensions of modern life, offering a nuanced perspective on the effects of progress and the transformation of the human environment.

“Night-Sentries” praises certain professions that helped sustain the well-being of early twentieth-century American society, made possible by technological advances such as electricity, the railroad, and new forms of public safety and protection. However, the poem also acknowledges the drawbacks associated with these occupations in the context of modern life. Although essential, these jobs were often lonely, hazardous, and socially invisible. A similar realistic approach characterizes “The Last Days”, where the beauty of a specific natural setting, Carmel-by-the-Sea, serves as the central focus of the poem. Yet, nature is not idealized; rather, Sterling employs it as a vehicle to meditate on the transience of human existence and the relentless pace of physical change that inevitably leads toward death. This existential perspective exposes the collapse of a traditional anthropocentric worldview, one already challenged by scientific discoveries that, in the early twentieth century, began to radically reshape the understanding of humanity’s place in the universe.

The fact that Sterling wrote poems grounded in the direct representation of reality directly challenges the still-prevalent critical view that his work is confined to the realms of the fantastic, the cosmic, or the ideal. On the contrary, it reveals the extent to which studies of his poetry have often relied on a limited and partial perspective that failed to recognize how the specific shaping of poetic themes to reflect modern reality in the compositions examined here aligns Sterling with the innovative national current of lyric expression that Monroe identified in the “new” poets, regardless of his limited engagement with formal experimentation. Therefore, when read through Monroe’s own critical criteria,

Sterling emerges as a legitimate participant in the early formation of American “new poetry”. Moreover, considering that Sterling was widely recognized during the 1900s and 1910s as the leading poetic voice of Northern California, the existence of poems like “Night-Sentries” and “The Last Days” also undermines the long-standing critical portrayal of the region’s poetry as an isolated bastion of “California romantics”, in Sidney-Fryer’s terms (2011b, p. 5). Instead, these texts demonstrate that Northern California participated actively in the national dialogue surrounding the renewal of modern poetry. Although poets in the 1910s had not yet agreed on the precise formal characteristics that should define “new poetry” —whether it required a radical break with tradition or could still incorporate established forms— they shared one fundamental conviction: in a transforming and unstable society, it was necessary to move beyond the escapist and idealized themes of the previous century and engage directly with modern experience.

Based on the analysis of the poems discussed in this study, we propose a critical perspective that invites a reassessment of Northern California poetry. Rather than viewing it as an anachronistic continuation of nineteenth-century traditions, it can be understood as a space where more realistic themes, connected to the shifting social and material conditions of early twentieth-century America, were actively explored. This approach encourages the recovery and reevaluation of other poets associated with Sterling, such as his friend Herman Scheffauer and his protégé Nora May French, who have also been traditionally classified as essentially Romantic (Sidney-Fryer, 2009, p. 55; 2011c, p. 308). A sustained thematic analysis of their work may help determine whether Sterling’s engagement with modern reality was exceptional or, rather, symptomatic of a broader, understudied modern sensibility within Northern Californian poetry.

More broadly, this perspective invites a reconsideration of how modernity itself is defined within both regional and national literary canons. If modern poetry is understood not exclusively in terms of formal rupture, but also through its thematic engagement with contemporary reality, then Northern California poetry may no longer be considered marginal or anachronistic. Instead, it emerges as a participant in the

heterogeneous American “new poetry”, contributing modes of modern expression that coexist with, rather than simply precede or be subordinated to, more overtly experimental traditions.

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