Conservative Cincinnati and Its Outspoken Women Writers

Susan S. Kissel

Cincinnati, with its long standing conservative reputation, would seem an unlikely home for radical women reformers and outspoken writers. Nevertheless, it has played an important role in the lives of a surprising number of visionary women authors. These women, who lived in Greater Cincinnati for a period of their lives and were affected by their experiences in the area, span a period of over 150 years and include Frances Wright, Frances Trollope, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Alice and Phoebe Cary, Elizabeth Madox Roberts, Harriette Arnow, and the contemporary poet, Nikki Giovanni. Often attacked for their opinions, or misunderstood in their own time, these authors together present a remarkably unified concern with human injustice.

Earliest, and most radical of all of these women, was Frances Wright. Born in Dundee, Scotland, on September 6, 1795, she made her first trip to America in 1818 and later became a naturalized American citizen and a champion of American democracy and social equality. Her travel book, *Views of Society and Manners in America*, 1821, gave a glowing account of the individual hope and freedom she believed possible in America:

"The wonderful advance which this nation has made, not only in wealth and strength but in mental cultivation, within the last twenty years, may yet be doubly accelerated when the education of the women shall be equally a national concern with that of the other sex, and when they shall thus learn not merely to enjoy but to appreciate those peculiar blessings which seem already to mark their country for the happiest in the world."  

In subsequent years, she challenged America's practice of social equality, while continuing to maintain optimism about America's potential. In 1825 when she purchased 640 acres in Tennessee near Memphis to found Nashoba, a community where she intended to educate slaves to function independently as freed men and women, she became "the first woman in America to act publicly to oppose slavery." Nashoba failed in 1828, after relentless battles with disease, nature, public misunderstanding, and social disapproval of its liberal values and practices, and Frances Wright moved to New Harmony, Indiana, another shaken but still surviving social experiment in community living, to co-edit the *New Harmony Gazette* with reformer Robert Dale Owen. In 1828 she gave the Fourth of July address at New Harmony and shortly afterwards came to Cincinnati where on August 10 she commenced her career as a public lecturer at the Cincinnati Courthouse. Soon she had raised $1,300 in a Cincinnati campaign led by fifty of the city's liberals to help found a "Temple of Reason," established in New York City in 1829.

By this time Frances Wright had achieved two more "firsts" for American women, having became the first woman since colonial times to edit an American newspaper for general circulation and the first woman in America to give a main address on a public occasion before a mixed audience. In the years 1828-1830 she became well-known, even infamous, as a lecturer drawing large crowds throughout the east and midwest. Her speeches emphasized that educational equality was essential to develop the reasoning public so necessary to the democratic process. She exposed

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On August 10, 1828, Frances Wright began her career as public lecturer when she delivered her speech on the Cincinnati Courthouse steps.
the social and legal oppression of the poor working class, of blacks, and of women in “free” America, and she was particularly pained by the religious revivalist fervor she saw everywhere she went, believing that it was undermining the American dream and pervading the American consciousness. She felt that war was the inevitable result when church and state alike encouraged human selfishness, and she abhorred the way in which religious doctrine aided the state in restricting women’s lives to “the narrowest precincts of the individual family circle...forcibly closing [their] eyes upon the claims of the great human family without that circle.” She felt it essential that American men and women work together to make the democratic dream a reality, for on them rested the hope of freedom for the entire world:

Let them examine the relation in which the two sexes stand, and ever must stand, to each other. Let them perceive, that, mutually dependent, they must ever be giving and receiving, or they must be losing;—receiving, or losing in knowledge, in virtue, in enjoyment. ...Jealousies, envyings, suspicions, reserves, deceptions—these are the fruits of inequality. ...Think it no longer indifferent whether the mothers of the rising generation are wise or foolish. ...Is this such a republic—while we see endowed colleges for the rich, and barely common schools for the poor; while but one drop of colored blood should stamp a fellow creature a slave, or, at the least, degrade him below sympathy; and while one half of the whole population is left in civil bondage, and as it were, sentenced to mental imbecility?

Her ideas on education became ones that “guided the development of kindergarten and grammar schools in the United States;” Walt Whitman wrote of his immense respect for the ideas and courage she evidenced as a public speaker, embodying her views in his poetry; while Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Matilda Joslyn Gage, and Susan B. Anthony in their gratitude used her picture as the frontispiece for the *History of Woman Suffrage*.

Yet her life was a painful one of unfulfilled hopes and dreams, public scandal, notoriety, and personal misery. Following a difficult marriage in 1831, a painful divorce from her French husband and fellow educational reformer, Phiquepal d’Arusmont, in 1851, and a heartbreaking estrangement from her daughter, Sylva d’Arusmont, she returned to Cincinnati in 1843 to the place where her lecture career as a reformer had begun. The record of that last, sad period, as expressed in her letters at the Cincinnati Historical Society, remains one of an undying commitment to freedom. Thoroughly disillusioned by the reality of American society, she yet continued to wish that English Chartists might come to America, see the “mixture of all

At Nashoba Wright intended to educate slaves to function independently as freed men and women but in 1828 her experiment failed.
races” to be found in the teeming immigrant population of America, and understand “that universal male suffrage is not the sovereign panacea for all its ills, as they imagine.”

Three weeks before her death and burial in Spring Grove Cemetery in Cincinnati, she wrote to her lawyer W.Y. Gholson, in physical pain and anguished loneliness, “This is a sorry world for which we take so much trouble, you to punish its errors and I to prevent them.” Nevertheless, all her life she had struggled valiantly to prevent human error and to bring about true equality, justice, and freedom for all people.

A seemingly unlikely fellow traveler, but one whose life, nevertheless, became interwoven a number of times with that of Frances Wright, was Frances Trollope. Coming to America to flee creditors in England and to recoup financial losses by establishing a department store in the New World, Frances Trollope sailed to America with Frances Wright in 1827 and arrived with her at Nashoba in Tennessee. Distressed by the failing community she found there, she left immediately with her children for Cincinnati, Ohio, the long-time object of her trip to America, to try her fortune in what she understood to be “the finest situation west of the Alleghenies.” Upon her return to England in 1830, however, she made Cincinnati notorious through her close scrutiny of every aspect of its frontier life in her 1832 travel book, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*.

Conservative in many ways, with a decided respect for social conventions and an acceptance of social class inequities as inevitable, Trollope nevertheless shared with Frances Wright important insights into the American way of life and the courage with which to express her criticism. She, too, found slavery abhorrent, “striking painfully against every feeling of justice, mercy, or common humanity,” was repulsed by the spectacle of American religious revivals and what she saw as their exploitation, in particular, of women, and pointed out, again and again, how remote the American ideals of social freedom and classlessness were from the reality of American life.
While seemingly accepting her female role in society in a way that Frances Wright did not, calling herself "a feeble looker on, with a needle for my spear," Trollope used her female role in such a way as to become an outspoken critic of the American way of life: [I leave to abler peers the more ambitious task of commenting on the democratic form of the American government; while, by describing, faithfully, the daily aspect of ordinary life, I have endeavoured to shew (sic) how greatly the advantage is on the side of those who are governed by the few, instead of by the many.]

What she saw and heard, she recorded, relentlessly, knowing full well the breadth of her seemingly "small" concerns. On the development of Cincinnati from a forest to an important city, for instance, she commented: Some of the native political economists assert that this rapid conversion of a bear-break into a prosperous city, is the result of free political institutions; not being very deep in such matters, is a more obvious cause suggested itself to me, in the unceasing goad which necessity applies to industry in this country, and in the absence of all resource for the idle. During nearly two years that I resided in Cincinnati, or its neighbourhood, I neither saw a beggar, nor a man of sufficient fortune to permit his ceasing efforts to increase it... neither art, science, learning, nor pleasure can seduce them from [money's] pursuit.

She commented, too, as had Frances Wright, on the sorry separation of the sexes in America, "The gentlemen spit, talk of elections and the price of produce, and spit again. The ladies look at each other's dresses till they know every pin by heart; talk of Parson Somebody's last sermon on the day of judgment, on Dr. T'otherbody's new pills for dyspepsia," concluding that, "were it not for public worship, and private tea-drinkings, all the ladies in Cincinnati would be in danger of becoming perfect recluses."

On attending Frances Wright's first public lecture in Cincinnati, she commented that the shock a female speaker had produced "in America, where women are guarded by a seven-fold shield of habitual insignificance...can hardly be described." So important did she feel the degradation of women in American society was that she concluded that, "West or East, my observations have brought me to the same point, namely that the American people will not equal the nations of Europe in refinement till women become of more importance among them."

Having returned to England after the failure of her Cincinnati Bazaar, Frances Trollope at the age of fifty-two wrote Domestic Manners of the Americans and continued her literary career into her seventies, publishing 130 volumes. Of the thirty-four novels she wrote, The Life and Adventures of Jonathan Jefferson Whitlaw; or, Scenes on the Mississippi (1836) continued Trollope's attack upon slavery; The Barnaby's in America (1843) once more satirized American society; and The Old World and the New (1849) returned to the subject of America once more, on somewhat more peaceful terms, at the last. She died quietly, but as courageously as she had lived, on October 6, 1863.

While some were worried that Frances Trollope's outspoken criticism of America in Domestic Manners of the Americans had once more stirred up enormous bitterness and war-like feelings between Britain and America, her contemporary, Harriet Beecher Stowe, also became known as a trouble-maker. Although President Lincoln joked that she was "the little lady who started that great war," others did not find it a joking matter. The outrage over her protest novel continued for decades. George Holmes of the Southern Literary Messenger in 1853 completely lost control when confronted with "the gross fancies and course nature of [this] Cincinnati school-mistress" and pronounced that "the woman's rights Conventions, which have rendered the late years infamous, have unsexed in great measure the female mind,..."
Queen City Heritage

UNCLE TOM’S CABIN;
OR,
LIFE AMONG THE LOWLY.

BY
HARRIET BEECHER STOWE.

VOL. I.

BOSTON:
JOHN P. JEWETT & COMPANY.
CLEVELAND, OHIO:
JEWETT, PROCTOR & WORTHINGTON.
1852.

and shattered the temple of feminine delicacy and moral
grace; and the result is before us in these dirty insinuations
of Mrs. Stowe. . . . The Stowe-ic philosophy is a fatal con-
tamination to woman.” As late as 1893 the Sewanee Review
ran a courtly article blaming Stowe for the slaughter “of the
millions of brave men mutilated and done to death in the
ranks of the blue and gray.”

Yet Stowe had written her novel to create
greater understanding between the North and the South.
Shortly after leaving Cincinnati, where she had lived for
eighteen years (1829–1847), Harriet Beecher Stowe had read
an eye-witness account of the escape of a woman with her
children across the ice of the Ohio River from Kentucky,
then “began to meditate . . . and the scene of the story began
gradually to form in her mind.”23 She desired “to show that
the evils of slavery were the inherent evils of a bad system, and
not always the fault of those who had become involved in it
and . . . its actual administrators.”24 To reveal this complexity,
Harriet Beecher Stowe made the evil Simon Legree a
northerner, and created Mr. Shelby, Tom’s humane master as
a southerner. Not only did she oppose slavery, but critic
Dorothy Berkson and others believe Stowe’s fictional world
posts:

*a reversal of social and political values in which the traditionally
“feminine” values will be infused into political and social
institutions. . . . The new society that will result from this wedding of
Christian and feminine virtues . . . will be communal, anti-
materialistic, non-competitive, racially tolerant, and essentially
classless. It will be a society governed by the same principles that
govern the loving, well-ordered family.*25

In writing *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* Stowe wanted to
make her readers feel the injustice of slavery, know how
inimical it was to family and community values for blacks
and for whites, alike, and create not outrage and hatred but
reform.

Harriet Beecher Stowe had not, perhaps, been
born a fighter, but she had gained strength and conviction
through her own growth and suffering during the years of
her marriage—experiencing the death of an infant son, the
necessity of taking in boarders in her house on Gilbert
Avenue in Cincinnati, the birth of seven children without
substantial means always available to feed and clothe them.26
She had also witnessed black families split up and sold down
the river while she lived in Cincinnati, had written letters for
a former slave woman to her husband from whom she had
been separated by his continued enslavement in Kentucky,
and had taught black children (along with her own children)
in her Cincinnati home as “there was no provision for the
education of colored children in her vicinity.”27 In Cincin-
nati she had also seen anti-abolitionist “mobs and riots [in
which] the free-colored people were threatened, maltreated,
abused, and often had to flee for their lives.”28 Through all of
these personal experiences, Harriet Beecher Stowe had
developed compassion for the mistreatment and suffering of
blacks, as well as practice in creating the home and com-

munity values in which she believed.29

*Uncle Tom’s Cabin,* written at the age of forty
when she was still caring for her youngest and seventh baby,
appeared in thirty-seven different languages. For the next
thirty years, Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote almost a book a
year, as well as essays, poems, children’s stories, and maga-
zine articles, many under the pseudonym Christopher
Crowfield, as well as lectures to affect reform and “make
herself useful.”30 As with Frances Trollope, Harriet Beecher

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Stowe wrote when she was
forty-years-old and caring for
her seventh baby, appeared in
thirty-seven different
languages.
Stowe's energy was considerable, awesome, in one so oppressed by the never-ending work of motherhood, yet she was oddly liberated as well. As she said, "Nobody expected anything...and so I wrote freely."31

Alice and Phoebe Cary were not as controversial as Frances Wright, Frances Trollope, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, but they, too, took courageous stands as women in the nineteenth century, both in their personal lives and their writing. Born in Cincinnati, Alice in 1820 and Phoebe in 1824, in the Cary Cottage (historically preserved and maintained today by the Cary Cottage Group), they began to consider themselves writers at an early age and had poems published in Cincinnati papers while still in their teens. Their childhood experiences are recorded in Alice Cary’s *Clovernook; or, Recollections of our Neighborhood in the West* (1852), a series of regional sketches which began the short story genre.32 In 1850 Alice moved to New York, with Phoebe following the next year. For fifteen years in their home there, Alice held her famous Sunday evening receptions for literary people, all the while “maintaining her indepen-
dence. Both Phoebe and Alice appear to have rejected offers of marriage in order to stay together, quite literally creating a domestic life based on sisterhood.”33

Both women were abolitionists and feminists although neither took on a large public role. Alice Cary wrote for the abolitionist weekly, *The National Era*, championed Abraham Lincoln as “the grandest leader of the grandest war,”34 while Phoebe Cary seconded her sister’s views in poems on Lincoln, the Civil War, and the heroism of black soldiers. Although Phoebe Cary wrote frequently and ironically about marital “bliss,” of “we women [who] always ask too much; more than we ever find” in poems such as “Arthur’s Wife,” “Dorothy’s Dower,” “Coming Round,” “Disenchanted,” “A Woman’s Answer,” and “Dead Love,” it is Alice Cary’s “A Bridal Veil” which has become the most frequently anthologized of all poems on any subject by the two sisters.35 The poem argues that there must be mutual growth in a true marriage; when that does not happen, Alice Cary exposes the psychological desertion which inevitably occurs, even under the guise of nineteenth century wifely devotion:

While living in Cincinnati on Gilbert Avenue Stowe took in boarders.
We're married! Oh, pray, that our love do not fail!
I have wings flattened down and hid under my veil:
They are subtle as light—you can never undo them,
And swift in their flight—you can never pursue them,
And spite of all clasping, and spite of all bands,
I can slip like a shadow, a dream, from your hands.
Nay, call me not cruel, and fear not to take me,
I am yours for my life-time, to be what you make me,—
To wear my white veil for a sign, or a cover,
As you shall be proven my lord, or my lover;
A cover for peace that is dead, or a token
Of bliss that can never be written or spoken.  

In the only public speech either of the two women is known to have made, Alice Cary, as the first president of Sorosis, one of New York's pioneer women's clubs, called on women to come "out of womanly self-distrust and disqualifying diffidence, into womanly self-respect and self-knowledge."37 As conventional as Harriet Beecher Stowe in many of their views on the importance of home, family, friendship, and religion, the two sisters argued for the independence of women and blacks and, themselves, lived lives apart from the ordinary sphere of the majority of women of their age. In "A Woman's Conclusion," Phoebe Cary admits that, could she have had whatever her age believed would make a woman "blest," that is, marriage, love, children:

Yea! I said, if a miracle such as this
Could be wrought for me at my bidding, still
I would choose to have my past as it is,
And to let my future come as it will!8

As they had lived, the two sisters died in New York, close together in 1871.

A decade later, in 1881, Elizabeth Eleanore Roberts (later known as Elizabeth Madox Roberts) was born in Springfield, Kentucky. From 1896 to 1900, she came to Covington, Kentucky, just across the river from Cincinnati, attending Covington High School, her grandmother Brent stimulated her interest in history. Covington, which seemed big and new and strange to her, was transformed into the fantasy city of "Mome" in the

In 1859 Alice Cary moved to New York and for years held her Sunday evening receptions for literary people. Phoebe Cary like her sister was an abolitionist and feminist who wrote poems on Lincoln, the Civil War, and the heroism of black soldiers.
prologue to her novel, *My Heart and My Flesh*. Upon her graduation from Covington High School, she returned to Springfield, Kentucky, where she lived out most of her life in frail health, writing, reading, contemplating, and resting. She interrupted her quiet there only briefly, once to attend the University of Chicago at the age of thirty-six for a few years and, other times, to teach school occasionally. In beginning to publish her writing, she worried to Robert Morss Lovett when he placed several of her child poems with *The Atlantic Monthly*, "Would I have to compromise my agnosticism to get in a popular magazine? I will not."

She would hold to her vow of writing uncompromisingly, using her regional heritage, the rhythms of the daily life and speech she knew, the familiar, yet mystical, cycle of nature she loved, to reveal "the common reality shared by the people for whom the poet speaks," refusing to conform to "the false commercial and materialistic spirit of the time." As a writer, she ventured forth from her reclusive life very seldom, giving public readings in Springfield, Lexington, Louisville, and Covington.

In her seven novels, Elizabeth Madox Roberts wrote of humble tenant farmers who dream with her heroine Ellen Chesser in *The Time of Man* of "some better country. Our own place maybe. Our place to keep," of people who travel on, who "asked no questions of the way but took their own turnings," people of courage and endurance. Her works, told through the consciousness of her female protagonists, Ellen Chesser, Theodosia Bell, Dena Janes, Diony Hall Jarvis, Joselle Drake, portray strong women, survivors, who cope with grim realities yet never lose their sense of the beauty of life. Her protagonists reveal "the feminine consciousness discovering being and the order and mystery of life," but they represent more than simply the life impulse. According to Lewis Simpson, Elizabeth Madox Roberts' novels depict the female will to change history, "the intricate and unceasing aggression of the female will against the masculine will," for "Elizabeth Madox Roberts grasped the possibility that the implication of sexuality in history may be the most momentous event in modern history." Her women persist to the end, affirming life's value in spite of their path, creating their own patterns, and leaving behind remembrances of their strength, their vision, and their love, as in her poem, "The Old Woman Sewing."

Harriette Arnow was another Kentucky author whose Cincinnati years were formulative in stimulating her interest in region and history. Coming to Cincinnati in 1931, she found work as a waitress during the Depression, wrote Cincinnati area histories for the Federal Writers Project, and worked on her own writing, as well. As Welton Eckley explains, "The largest town she had ever known, Cincinnati was probably for Harriette what London was for Boswell. ...[She] made the acquaintances of other writers and editors...[and she] became more cogently aware of what was going on in the world." She continued to develop a series of sketches recording her experiences as a teacher in a one-room schoolhouse in Kentucky in a place so remote that the school trustees had met her on a mule. These sketches became her first novel, *Mountain Path*, published in 1936. Two years later, when she married Harold Arnow, a newspaperman returning from three years in Alaska, she moved with him from Cincinnati to the Cumberland, Kentucky, area, then to Detroit, and finally to Ann Arbor, Michigan, where, in her seventies, she continues to live with her husband.

Her Depression year experiences in Cincinnati, the early years of her marriage when she and her husband failed in their attempts to live independently off the land in the Cumberland area, as well as her World War II experi-

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Women Writers

*The Quilt.*

What do you make with your bits of cloth?
What do you make as you snip the thread?
'Tm piecing a snake-and-rider quilt,
Hit'll cover them over when I am dead.

She's boiling soap in the milking lot—
Wallie he taken a woman of sense—
Hit's few that boils soap today—
And Newt and Harry are building fence.

Yes, Harry and Newt are off by the branch,
And Wallie is burning tobacco bed,
And I am making a calico quilt
To cover them over when I am dead.

I hear folks asking, 'How's your ma?'
Coming from town with their pokes and bags.
'Oh, she's well enough, she sits by the fire
Amusing herself with scraps of rags.'

Amusing herself—by the fire all day!
Hit'll cover them up when I am gone.*
ences in a Detroit housing project shortly after their move to Michigan, all sensitized Arnow to the lives of the impoverished, the inarticulate, and the victimized in American society. Along with Elizabeth Madox Roberts, she became a voice for those people who could least express or even understand their own experiences. In *Hunter's Horn*, published in 1949, for example, the protagonist, Nunn, victoriously hunts down the mythical King Devil fox, only to stumble across his own defeat, and that of his daughter, as well, when they find themselves caught in the reality versus the dreams of their lives:

*Suse, who'd never lived by God and the neighbors no more than he, to go as Keg Head's hired girl into the never done work of raising Lureenie's children along with her own and waiting on Keg Head and his wife in their old age; Suse, the proud one, to be tolerated and shamed and prayed over.... He couldn't hold his head up: all these years he'd held his head down in a way, drinking and fox-hunting and carousing around....*

*The Dollmaker*, published in 1954, continues this portrayal of the way in which dreams turn to disaster and dust for America's poor working class, as inevitably as for America itself. Contemporary novelist Joyce Carol Oates has said that Gertie Nevels, the protagonist of *The Dollmaker*, who comes to represent America and its fate, is "both an ordinary human being and an extraordinary human being, a memorable creation, so real that one cannot question her existence, involving us as she does in the solid fact of life's criminal exploitation of those who live it. *The Dollmaker* is...our most unpretentious American masterpiece." Arnow's fiction reveals her characters participating in their own destruction, acquiescing to their fates and accepting their social inferiority, to America's own discredit and despair, without understanding the importance, for themselves and for American democracy, of their "assuming individual freedom and responsibility."

This theme of independence, so important to so many of these women writers, from Frances Wright to the Cary sisters to Harriette Arnow, is once more being voiced today by Cincinnati poet, Nikki Giovanni. As controversial as many other outspoken writers of Cincinnati's past, Nikki Giovanni has chosen, in the words of her friend, Ida Lewis, "at a time when the trend in the Black community is away from the individual and toward the mass...[to give] consent to independence," saying, "I write what I see...and I take responsibility for it. Why should thirty million people have to have me as a spokesman?" She writes of all of those, black and white, who have become "slaves...to the uncaring...of a nation," insisting that individuals must stand up and initi-

As with other women writers considered here, Nikki Giovanni has used her writing, in over ten volumes of poetry and prose, courageously, to "plant her feet" where she felt they would do the most good, working to raise the consciousness of her readers and empower them to speak out, themselves, against injustice. Nikki Giovanni believes, "family is love: love is family. She has reached a simple philosophy more or less to the effect that a good family spirit is what produces healthy communities." Her concern, as with the other women writers mentioned, is to make possible a society in which healthy communities and healthy lives are a human birthright. Until the individual dignity, common justice, and self-determination inherent in the American dream become realities for all, Nikki Giovanni's protest will continue, and in her voice we will hear echoes of some of Cincinnati's finest women writers before her, as well as foreshadowings of those who are to follow in her footsteps.

99. Ibid., p. 41.
100. Ida Lewis, Forward to My House, xii.