



The Transmutation of Love and Avant-Garde Poetics (Modern & Contemporary Poetics)

Jeanne Heuving

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The Transmutation of Love and Avant-Garde Poetics is a probing examination of how the writing of sexual love undergoes a radical revision by avant-garde poets in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Today, the exploration of love by poets—long a fixture of Western poetic tradition—is thought to be in decline, with love itself understood to be a mere ideological overlay for the more “real” entities of physical sex and desire.

In *The Transmutation of Love and Avant-Garde Poetics*, Jeanne Heuving claims that a key achievement of poetry by Ezra Pound, H.D., Robert Duncan, Kathleen Fraser, Nathaniel Mackey, and others lies significantly in their engagement with the synergistic relations between being in love and writing love. These poets, she argues, have traded the clichéd lover of yore for impersonal or posthuman poetic speakers that sustain the *gloire* and mystery of love poetry of prior centuries. As Robert Duncan writes, “There is a love in which we are outcast and vagabond from what we are that we call ‘falling in love.’”

Heuving claims that this writing of love is defining for avant-garde poetics, identifying how such important discoveries as Pound’s and H.D.’s Imagism, Pound’s *Cantos*, and Duncan’s “open field poetics” are derived through their changed writing of love. She draws attention to how the prevailing concept of language as material is inadequate to the ways these poets also engage language as a medium—as a conduit—enabling them to address love afresh in a time defined through preoccupations with sexuality. They engage love as immanent and change it through a writing that acts on itself.

The Transmutation of Love and Avant-Garde Poetics ascribes the waning of love poetry to its problematic form: a genre in which empowered poetic speakers constitute their speech through the objectification of comparatively disempowered subjects, or beloveds. Refusing this pervasive practice, the poets she highlights reject the delimiting, one-sided tradition of masculine lovers and passive feminine beloveds; instead, they create a more nuanced, dynamic poetics of ecstatic exploration, what Heuving calls “projective love” and “libidinized field poetics,” a formally innovative poetry, in which one perception leads directly to the next and all aspects of a poem are generative of meaning.

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