

SARA TEASDALE  
AT  
125



# Her Lyric Poetry Still Inspires Lovely Music

Natasia Sexton Cain

**O**f American poet Sara Teasdale, a critic for the *New York Times Book Review* wrote in 1917, “Miss Teasdale is first, last, and always a singer.”<sup>1</sup> One hundred twenty five years after her birth, Sara Teasdale’s voice still sings with expressive intensity in the twenty-first century. Her legacy of lyric poetry is bountiful and choral composers continue to be inspired by her delicate and economic iambic lines. The formal and introspective voice of her poetry, which sometimes was considered antiquated and Victorian by her critics early in the twentieth century, was first and foremost musical and melodic—so much so that she referred to her poetry as songs and frequently sang her poems to herself while making up a tune to fit the words.<sup>2</sup> Although Teasdale was reputedly a guarded individual, her great gift for lyric poetry revealed a world of deeply personal feelings and images. The numerous choral settings of her poetry confirm what her contemporary critics realized—her poetry was full of musical language and evocative emotion.<sup>3</sup>

A lyric poem is “any fairly short poem, consisting of the utterance by a single speaker, who expresses a state of mind or a process of perception.”<sup>4</sup> Sara Teasdale, through the cadence of consonants and the euphonious succession of vowels, transformed her lyric poetry into musical language. With the additional consideration of the gentle yet persistent rhythm of her stanzas and her simple, direct diction, her poems have become natural vehicles for choral expression. Her poetry has become standard fare for composers Kirke Mechem and David Childs who both express their appreciation of her work in



## Barter

Life has loveliness to sell,  
All beautiful  
and splendid things,  
Blue waves  
whitened on a cliff,  
Soaring fire that sways and sings,  
And children’s faces looking up,  
Holding wonder like a cup.

Life has loveliness to sell,  
Music like the curve of gold,  
Scent of pine trees  
in the rain,  
Eyes that love you, arms that hold,  
And for your spirit’s still delight,  
Holy thoughts that star the night.

Spend all you have for loveliness,  
Buy it and never count the cost;  
For one white singing hour of peace  
Count many a year of strife well lost,  
And for a breath of ecstasy  
Give all you have been, or could be.

—Sara Teasdale

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the book *Composers on Composing for Choir*.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to considering how choral compositions by Mechem and Childs intensify her lyric voice, this article also examines Teasdale choral settings by René Clausen, Dale Warland, David Dickau, and Z. Randall Stroope. As a context for understanding how each composer captures Teasdale's voice, the article will first discuss influences affecting the poet's style followed by a brief description of that style. Following the article is an appendix that recommends twenty choral octavos based on Teasdale's poetry.

### Personal Influences upon Teasdale's Poetic Style

A unique combination of influences affected Teasdale's poetic style. A child of the late Victorian era, throughout her life she was ensnared by those associated codes of behavior. Her natural enthusiasm was curbed while her Romantic interest in nature and love was also kept at bay. Providing careful

management of Teasdale's time and energy were her middle-aged parents who offered her an established, highly respected St. Louis home in which to grow, study, and mature. Although St. Louis was an intellectual hub with its German heritage offering much in terms of art, music, and literature, it was also a city with a strict puritan tradition that emphasized morality and ethics; it was this aspect of St. Louis that her parents embodied.

Born in August 1884, Sara's devout Baptist parents reared her to be obedient and docile while granting her all the luxuries they could afford. However, her tendencies toward frailty and sickness—which would plague the rest of her life—were accepted by her parents and society as a sign of gentility during the Victorian era.<sup>6</sup> Her parents' steady prescription of rest and solitude became the common approach of her doctors who later addressed her recurring bout of depression by enforcing long periods of isolation and silence. Such treatments contributed to a duality in her nature, and Teasdale referred to this duality by

describing herself as a "Paganized Puritan."<sup>7</sup>

The conflict between Teasdale's pagan-self and puritan-self might seem insignificant today, but for Teasdale during the early twentieth century, the contrasts weighed heavily. In a study of Teasdale, Carol B. Schoen frequently returns to this idea of duality when analyzing Teasdale's works. Schoen attributes this duality to a conflict between Victorian expectations imposed by Sara's mother and Sara's own sensuous tendencies.<sup>8</sup> This conflict is manifest in Teasdale's poetry through various guises—contrast between "silence" and "sound" (in terms of which emotions were considered permissible for a woman of the era to express), contrast between reality and a world of dreams, and contrast between pain and pleasure.<sup>9</sup>

Describing her life's conflicts, Sara once referenced a line of her own poetry to summarize her situation saying, "I was the flower amid a toiling world."<sup>10</sup>

Romance for Teasdale was conditioned by the late Victorian era and her restricted upbringing. Still living with her parents in 1914, Sara was courted by both the poet Vachel Lindsay and a prosperous businessman Ernst Filsinger. Lindsay, full of vitality and energy, showered her with "fantastic letters of beautiful exuberance"<sup>11</sup> but was penniless. Filsinger, on the other hand, was an expert in international trade and, at the end of the year, Teasdale married this man who best fit the expectations of her well-bred family and contemporaries.<sup>12</sup> The marriage was at first happy, yet, over time, Filsinger's frequent travels wore on Teasdale and, after only fifteen years, she divorced him. For the remaining years of her life, Teasdale maintained her independence in a New York City apartment and romance took flight only in her poetry.

### Description of Teasdale's Lyric Style

In *Sixty American Poets, 1896–1944*, Allen Tate cites Sara Teasdale as "one of the best lyric poets of her generation."<sup>13</sup> William Drake, a Teasdale biographer and poetry critic, describes the lyric quality of her poetry in his introduction to Teasdale's *Mirror of the Heart: Poems of Sara Teasdale*.

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# Teasdale at 125: Her Lyric Poetry Still Inspires Lovely Music cont.

He explains that "for Teasdale the point of a lyric was not merely to state an emotion . . . but to clarify and analyze, to coax it from the dim regions of disquiet into consciousness."<sup>14</sup>

Being more traditional than experimental and more conservative than avant-garde, Teasdale's poetry is recognizably formal. Many works employ the simplest lyric forms of two or three quatrains with single rhyme and lines of three- or four-footed iambic meter.<sup>15</sup>

In the introduction to the *Collected Poems of Sara Teasdale*, Marya Zaturenska defends Teasdale's traditional style explaining that "clarity, emotional sincerity, [and] technical simplicity" were her primary objectives and her poetry thereby "transmuted the everyday world in which

she lived into a shimmer of cool, glittering imagery and warm, intense feeling."<sup>16</sup>

An ever constant craftsman, Teasdale's natural diction and precision in choosing words led critics to describe her work as "exquisite refinement," "restrained beauty," and "simple lyric intensity."<sup>17</sup>

If Teasdale's technique was conservative and formal, then the content of her poetry was traditional in its consideration of female themes such as romantic love, nature and beauty, and an acknowledgment of mortality. However, in *The Poetry of American Women from 1632 to 1945*, Emily Stipes Watts declares that where Elinor Wylie and Edna St. Vincent Millay "celebrate," Teasdale "mourns."<sup>18</sup>

It is true that Teasdale often delighted in restraint and renunciation and that her poetry is more observational than participatory; however, such characteristics are likely attributed to her frequent and long periods of isolation that she experienced due to various health complications.<sup>19</sup>

Her notion of romantic love is accompanied by an "omnipresent fantasy lover" who is both "elusive" and "disembodied."<sup>20</sup>

While Teasdale maintains a sense of distance in the love poetry, she participated more heartily in the poetry of nature and beauty. Images such as the sea and stars embody her joy in nature's beauty, and the moon and snow symbolize resignation and melancholy.<sup>21</sup>

The final poems, collected posthumously in

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*Strange Victory*, consider mortality, and here she “shows her characteristic emphasis upon the inviolateness, the essential aloofness of the human soul amid perishable things and fugitive emotions.”<sup>22</sup>

### Discussion of Individual Poems and Representative Choral Settings

Choral settings of Teasdale’s poetry represent the various stages of her poetic development and each of her published poetry collections. During her lifetime, seven different collections of her own poems were published between 1907 and 1930 while the last collection, *Strange Victory*, was published in 1933, nine months after her death. A cursory investigation searching for Teasdale

choral settings within choral music publisher’s Web sites and catalogues indicates the majority of these choral settings employ poems from the 1915 *Rivers to the Sea* collection. Among the most popular poems to be set from this collection is “I Am Not Yours.” However, “Barter,” from the 1917 *Love Songs*, has been set for choral voices no less than ten times since 1984 and the poignant “There Will Be Rest” from *Strange Victory* has been set at least four times since 2000 alone.

### “I Am Not Yours”

*Rivers to the Sea* is a collection of poetry reflecting Teasdale’s early years of marriage. The collection is organized into two parts. Part One follows a single love story through

the seasons of the year and, although the lovers ultimately separate at the end of the cycle, what is discovered and valued is the act of love rather than one particular lover. “I Am Not Yours” begins Part Two which is a catalog of life’s sorrows including death, disillusionment, and fickleness.

In “I Am Not Yours,” the poet-narrator confesses that, although she loves her partner and he loves her in return, she longs for an experience which overwhelms her and erases the line that separates her soul from her lover’s soul. The poem acknowledges a separateness which maintains distance between the lovers. Closing each of the three quatrains is a simile that symbolizes the longing for total immersion of her being into his. “Lost as a snowflake in the sea” and

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47 *a tempo* *p*  
 S2 I am not yours, not lost in you, although I long to be  
 A I am not yours, not lost in you, although I long to be I  
 T [+3 Alto 2] *pp* I am not lost in you, I long to be  
 B I am not yours, not lost in you, although I long to be I  
 I  
*a tempo*

Figure 1. Z. Randall Stroope, *I Am Not Yours*, mm. 47–50.

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“Lost as a light is lost in light” express her desire for complete absorption and loss of self. In the closing stanza, Teasdale transitions from a reflective voice to one of emphatic declaration. No longer musing over the separateness defining her situation with her lover, she proclaims, “Oh plunge me deep in love—put out / My sense, leave me deaf and blind,”—a sensual metaphor suggesting a sudden and unexpected action resulting in either complete immersion or full penetration. Carol Schoen suggests that in this poem Teasdale may have been protesting the Victorian codes with which she was so familiar. Schoen explains that, “Having created an idealized figure of women, men were expected to treat her in some delicate fashion while what she really wants is the full force of passion.”<sup>23</sup>

Two recently published octavos capture the poignancy of this poem and the stark-

ness of its simple form. *I Am Not Yours* by Z. Randall Stroope, is set for unaccompanied mixed voices and was published by Walton Music Corporation in 2007. In 2004, using the same title, Santa Barbara Music Publishing released a setting for four-part women’s voices and piano composed by David Childs.

In Stroope’s setting, the intimacy and longing of Teasdale’s poem is effectively captured. The wistful pick-up rhythms, which distinguish the character of musical phrases accompanying the first two stanzas, embody Teasdale’s reflective mood, whereas resolute *marcato* quarter-notes assert the poet’s declarations in the closing stanza. Likewise, by framing the composition with a return of the opening material at the end, Stroope emphasizes the overall elusiveness of fulfilling that which the poet-narrator so sorely desires—a sense of completeness which is gained by way of total connection to one’s lover.

This opening and closing material (Figure 1) begins with the tenor part where Stroope simply compresses Teasdale’s first line (“I am not yours, not lost in you”) into “I am not lost in you.” Surrounded by the opening pick-up

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rhythms of the sopranos, altos, and baritones, the tenors steadily intone the compressed line at the tonic pitch symbolizing the poet's realization of her incompleteness. Addition-

ally, throughout the first two stanzas the composer requires staggered breathing, and by connecting four measure phrases of rich homophonic sonorities together, the

intensity of the poet's longing is emphasized. However, in the declarative closing stanza the musical phrases are set apart by short rests that emphasize the poet's shift of tone. The overall effect of resignation is achieved through Stroope's diatonic commitment to the tonic key of B Major; although harmonic sonorities are laced with ample doses of additive chords, the tonality remains stable as does the longing of the poet's heart.

Though the poet-narrator's unfulfilled yearnings were emphasized through phrasing and rhythm in Z. Randall Stroope's setting, in David Child's setting for women's voices, a quality of restlessness is exemplified in a lyrical, twisting melody and open harmonies. Melodic leaps of octaves and sevenths with sudden changes of direction distinguish the melodic shape, and the reiteration of dominant and leading tone pitches, rather than the tonic, creates a destabilizing sense that echoes the longings of the poet. Likewise, open fifth and first inversion harmonies in the accompaniment accentuate the idea of emptiness in the union between poet and lover. However, if the union is empty, then a general sweeping rhythmic energy underlies a sense of urgency with which the poet longs to be lost within her lover. Each of the three poetic stanzas is treated with new musical material, yet patterns of accompaniment, propulsive rhythmic motives, and an overall melodic elegance unify the work and reflect the enduring feminine longings of the poet.

#### "Barter"

Teasdale's "Barter" opened the collection of *Love Songs* published in 1917. With six reprints in the first year of publication, *Love Songs* was Teasdale's most popular volume of poetry. In 1918, it received the first American poetry prize to be awarded—The Columbia Poetry Prize (a forerunner of The Pulitzer Prize for Poetry). Reading the poem, one nearly forgets, amid the many beautiful sights, sounds, and fragrances cataloged by Teasdale, that she clearly spells out a market transaction in each of the three stanzas. Between the flowing iambic rhythms, recurring end rhymes (including a tidy rhymed couplet at the end of each stanza), and alliteration, one



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nearly misses the cost of the transaction that Teasdale states in the closing lines with no more sentimentality than one would bring to a business deal. That "white singing hour of peace" will cost "years of strife well lost," and for a mere "breath of ecstasy" the price tag is far greater—"Give all you have been, or could be."

In a setting by René Clausen, the promising possibilities of Teasdale's poem are given emphasis. His lyrical setting for SSA voices and piano was published by Santa Barbara Music Publishing in 2004. Clausen's *Barter* offers expressive melodies supported by a flowing eighth-note accompaniment of arpeggiated harmonies. The four-measure phrases are articulated by homophonic voices in lush harmonies that provide dimension to the catalog of goods which are inventoried in Teasdale's stanzas. A metamorphosis of gradually evolving harmonies evokes a dream-like state which envelopes the entire piece as though the prospect of so many beautiful things is truly possible.

Kirke Mechem's *Barter* for two-part treble voices, trumpet or oboe, and four-hand piano (published by G. Schirmer in 1995) captures particularly well the irony of Teasdale's metaphor while still clearly extolling the philosophy of *carpe diem* in the transaction. The broad 6/4 compound duple meter establishes a grand stage for bartering and, Mechem supplies the goods through churning eighth-notes for Piano I, a broadly arching melody for the solo trumpet, and homophonic vocal lines that stretch

**Figure 2.** Kirke Mechem, *Barter*, mm. 5–7.  
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and sustain pitches as though they are being held up for auction. Underpinned by Piano II, which accentuates the duple meter with eighth-note triplet figures in octaves preceding each beat, the exuberance of the entire affair intensifies the anticipation of the

unknown prospects associated with each bartering transaction. All of this reflects the possibilities held within the many "splendid things;" however, Mechem delivers an ironic turn at the close of each phrase in the piano accompaniment. Hidden below the final sus-



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tained syllable of the choir and the churning eighth-notes of Piano I, is the unmistakable reference to the carnival and its bartering atmosphere in the “oom-pah-pah” of Piano II (Figure 2). To close, imitative voices open the final stanza replicating the calls of the street vendors with “Spend all you have” and “Buy it, buy it,” but, in the end, a placid serenity overcomes the piano, the trumpet, and the voices as they gently intone the final cost.

### “There Will Be Rest”

The posthumous collection of poems in *Strange Victory* reflects Teasdale’s physical and mental state toward the end of her life. Carol Schoen explains that the poems “detailed with rare honesty the varied emotional responses that spring from the acceptance of the human condition and its inevitable ending in death.”<sup>24</sup> In December of 1932, Teasdale—not fully recovered from a serious bout of bronchial pneumonia—began accumulating sleeping pills and going through her notebook marking poems from the previous six years for a final collection that she titled *Strange Victory*. As December wore into January, her friends and family recognized a growing despondency within her, and then very early in the morning on January 29, Teasdale died after an overdose of the sleeping pills. *Strange Victory* was published in October of the same year.

Teasdale had left detailed notes regarding the publication of this final collection and had instructed that “There Will Be Rest” was to close the volume. In two quatrains of iambic verse with a single rhyme each, she eloquently and simply expressed the reassurance she had found in the eternalness of nature. Imbuing the natural world with religious imagery in phrases like “crowned with snow,” “reign of rest,” and “stillness holy and low,”

Teasdale affirmed a divine transcendence but recognized it throughout all nature—and in particular the stars as a divine force and giver of light. Passive and reflective no more, Teasdale actively chooses to join the eternal world in the second stanza; “I will make this world of my devising” and “I shall find the crystal of peace” express not just intent but

also acceptance.

In a setting by Dale Warland for mixed voices, harp or piano, and flute, Teasdale’s acceptance takes on an evocative nature. Published by G. Schirmer, Inc. in 2006, Warland’s *There Will Be Rest* suggests otherworldliness by way of harmonic clusters in the choral voices and pentatonic motives in the accom-

Figure 3. Dale Warland, *There Will Be Rest*, mm. 20–27.

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paniment. Transparent, sustained vocal lines glisten with dissonance at "The music of stillness, holy and low" where the upper and lower voices converge inward from a distance of two octaves to arrive at "low" with a radiant tone cluster of seven pitches (Figure 3). Reemerging from below the choral dissonance is the pentatonic motive in the harp evoking constancy in its recurrence and weightlessness in its avoidance of half-steps.

David C. Dickau published *Stars I Shall Find* for mixed voices and piano in 2003 with Walton Music Corporation. Focusing on the implicit expectations within the poem "There Will Be Rest," Dickau's title suggests that Teasdale's stars are beacons of hope, and in the inside cover to the octavo Dickau explains that, "the spirit of this piece celebrates those hopes and dreams, which inspire and motivate." In a Romantic wash of chromatic harmonies, *Stars I Shall Find* is divided into three sections: the text of Teasdale's first stanza is repeated once before the second stanza is presented. Dickau's harmonic treatment of Teasdale's first stanza and its repetition creates an aural sense of expectation which symbolizes the anticipation that accompanies hope. Opening in A-flat major, Dickau quickly tonicizes the dominant E-flat major in the piano introduction, and not until the close of the third choral phrase does one have a sense of closure in the tonic A-flat major. The following three phrases which complete the first stanza, again gravitate away from the tonic. At measure 36 (Figure 4), Teasdale's first stanza is repeated with the same musical material found at the beginning, except here it is treated with the expected tonicization of A-flat major. Although harmonic expectations have been met with this tonicization, the sense of arrival is short lived before the chromatic harmonies begin to gravitate away from A-flat major again and eventually modulate to E-flat major. Throughout Dickau's setting, the stars seem to be imbued with a literal gravitational

**Figure 4.** David Dickau, *There Will Be Rest*, mm. 33–37.  
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force that pulls the harmonies of any given key (the setting modulates frequently) away from the tonic and toward the dominant representing their divine power to inspire humanity's longing for eternal things.

### Conclusion

During her lifetime, Sara Teasdale was popular with audiences and critics; however,

her enduring legacy may be what Louis Untermeyer in *The New Era in American Poetry* notes is Teasdale's "genius for the song, for the pure lyric in which words seem to have fallen into place without art or effort."<sup>25</sup> Over seventy years after her death, as singers and conductors, we continue to appreciate that genius and anticipate that her direct use of language, her song-like verse, and the personal revelations of her lyric style will

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## Additional Choral Settings of Sara Teasdale Poems

- At Night*, Bruce Babcock, SATB unaccompanied, Santa Barbara Music Publishing, Inc., 2006  
*Buried Love*, Robert Baksa, SSA unaccompanied, Theodore Presser Co, 2001  
*February Twilight*, Daniel Shaw, SATB unaccompanied, Boosey & Hawkes, 2008  
*Four Lyrics of Sara Teasdale*, Phyllis E. Zimmerman, SATB unaccompanied, earthsongs, 2006  
*Give Me Your Stars*, Bruce Babcock, SATB unaccompanied, Santa Barbara Music Publishing, Inc., 2006  
*Life Has Loveliness to Sell*, Paul Carey, SSA and piano, Roger Dean Publishing Company, 2007  
*Life Has Loveliness to Sell*, James Quitman Mulholland, SSA or SATB with French horn and piano, Plymouth Music Co., Inc., 1993  
*Life's Loveliness*, David N. Childs, SSA and piano, Santa Barbara Music Publishing, Inc., 2004  
*My Sun and Stars*, Jonathan Adams, SATB and piano, Pavane Publishing, 2007  
*The New Moon*, David N. Childs, SATB div. and piano, Santa Barbara Music Publishing, Inc., 2007  
*Refuge*, Libby Larsen, SSAA unaccompanied, ECS Publishing, 1994  
*Stars I Shall Find*, Audrey Snyder, SSA and piano, Hal Leonard Corporation, 2007  
*Sweetly Sleeping*, Robinson McClellan, SATB and recorder, <www.robinsonmcclellan.com>, 2004  
*There Will Come Soft Rains*, Bradley Nelson, SATB with vibraphone and piano, Gladde Music Publications, 2007  
*There Will Be Stars Forever*, Lee Kesselman, 2-part treble voices and piano, Boosey & Hawkes, 2000  
*Three Teasdale Madrigals*, Howard Helvey, SATB unaccompanied, Oxford University Press, 2008  
*They Brought a Joyful Song*, Warren Benson, SATB unaccompanied, ECS Publishing, 1986  
*We Are Anghungered*, Paul Ayres, SATB unaccompanied, <www.paulayres.co.uk>, 2006  
*When I Think of You*, Laura Farnell, SSA and piano, Santa Barbara Music Publishing, Inc., 2007  
*The Winds of May*, Kirke Mechem, SATB div. unaccompanied, G. Schirmer, Inc., 1965

keep us singing her poetry for years to come.

### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *Contemporary Authors Online*, s.v. "Sara Teasdale," <http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/BioRC> [accessed March 17, 2008].
- <sup>2</sup> Carol B. Schoen, *Sara Teasdale* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986), 17.
- <sup>3</sup> *Contemporary Authors Online*.
- <sup>4</sup> M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, sixth edition, (Fortworth: Harcourt Brace, 1993), 108.
- <sup>5</sup> Tom Wine, ed., *Composers on Composing for Choir* (Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc., 2007), 6, 94.
- <sup>6</sup> Schoen, 5.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 33–34.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 16, 22.
- <sup>10</sup> Patricia Ondek Laurence, "Sara Teasdale," in *Critical Survey of Poetry: English Language Series*, ed. Frank N. Magill, vol. 7 (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Salem Press, 1982), 2855.
- <sup>11</sup> Marya Zaturenska, "Introduction," in *Collected Poems of Sara Teasdale*, ed. Marya Zaturenska (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1966), xxx.
- <sup>12</sup> Zaturenska, xxx.
- <sup>13</sup> Allen Tate, *Sixty American Poets, 1896–1944*, rev. ed., (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1969), 134.
- <sup>14</sup> William Drake, "Introduction," in *Mirror of the Heart: Poems of Sara Teasdale*, ed. William Drake (New York: Macmillan, 1984), xxxviii–xxxix.
- <sup>15</sup> Harriet Monroe, "Sara Teasdale," in *Dictionary of American Biography*, American Council of Learned Societies, 1928–36. Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2008. Reproduced in *Biography Resource Center*. <http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/BioRC> [accessed March 17, 2008].
- <sup>16</sup> Zaturenska, xxi, xxv.
- <sup>17</sup> Monroe.
- <sup>18</sup> Emily Stipes Watts, *The Poetry of American Women from 1632 to 1945* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977), 6.
- <sup>19</sup> Laurence, 2856.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 2856.
- <sup>21</sup> Laurence, 2857 and Watts, 140.
- <sup>22</sup> Monroe.
- <sup>23</sup> Schoen, 88.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.
- <sup>25</sup> Louis Untermeyer, *The New Era in American Poetry* (New York: H. Holt, 1919), 267.

