**Skipwith Cannell (1887-1957)**

Skipwith Cannell, an American modernist poet who was involved with the Imagist group in London and the *Others* group in New York, lived his writing life almost entirely in the pages of modernism’s little magazines. Born in Pennsylvania and educated in Lausanne, Switzerland and the University of Virginia, Cannell moved to Paris in 1911 to pursue a career as an artist, where he met his first wife, the American dancer and journalist Kathleen ‘Kitty’ Cannell, née Eaton. Cannell never brought a standalone poetry volume into print, but his poems were published in taste-making modernist vehicles such as *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, *The New Freewoman*, *The Little Review*, and *Others* between 1913 and 1917.

Cannell’s first published works reflect the aestheticist and symbolist proclivities of early European modernism, treating themes of spiritual pilgrimage and romantic love in dense language. The prose poem “Nocturne Triste,” for instance, shows Cannell’s early affinities with the Pre-Raphaelites and fin-de-siècle English decadents: “The iridescence of sunrise over the ocean gleams on the wings of a fly; and on the cheeks of a girl blooms the delicate flush of a peach: but the fly hovers above the refuse of the world, and at the heart of the peach gnaws a worm.” It was during these years that Ezra Pound made Cannell one of his many mentoring projects, editing Cannell’s poetry to conform to his nascent Imagist principles and securing a room for Skipwith and Kitty beneath his own in South Kensington. Cannell’s status in the literary avant-garde was secured when Pound included his poem “The Dance” in a series titled “The Newer Poetry,” which also included work by Richard Aldington, H. D., F. S. Flint, Amy Lowell, and William Carlos Williams, in the September 1913 issue of *The New Freewoman*, and printed Cannell’s “Nocturne” sequence in the first anthology of imagist poetry, *Des Imagistes* (1914).

After relocating to New York in the summer of 1915, Skipwith Cannell was a regular contributor to Alfred Kreymborg’s journal *Others*. Cannell’s *Others* poems differ markedly in tone and subject matter, as the allusiveness of his earlier work gives way to a direct, often violent, engagement with the conditions of modern urban life. “Ikons,” one of Cannell’s final poems to be printed, is a fragmentary, chaotic poetic manifesto that charts the poet’s felt need to self-modernize:

I am tired of old colors

and old sounds,

I will make new sounds with my mouth

and they shall be music.

Cannell’s New York poetry engages frankly and often self-reflexively with twentieth-century subjects, including capitalist exploitation, sex and sexuality, and urban squalor, in a distinctly modernist poetic idiom. By late 1918, Cannell had all but fallen from the literary scene, enlisting in the United States Army and eventually securing permanent employment with the US Government. Still, the poetic bug would not leave Cannell entirely: in 1936, he sent his old friend Williams a draft of “By the Rivers of Babylon,” a long epic poem of modern bureaucracy, capitalist economics, and industrial labor strikes written under the pseudonym “David Ruth.” Williams wrote an approving introduction to this poem, but was unsuccessful in his attempts to bring “By the Rivers of Babylon” into print.

Skipwith Cannell’s poetic output may have been minimal relative to a number of his imagist and *Others* contemporaries, but his work demonstrates an active, public engagement with the many redefinitions of transnational poetic modernism, from the Romantic and Symbolist themes of his early verse to the austere Imagism of his work in the mid-1910s, and finally to the socially-engaged proletarian poetry of the 1930s.

**List of Works Cited**

“Nocturne Triste.” *Poetry* 2.5 (1913)

“The Dance.” *The New Freewoman* 1.6 (1913)

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**References and Further Reading**

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