Lucy Larcom and the Time of the Temporal Collapse

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In March 1890, under the title “Two New England Women,” the Atlantic Monthly reviewed Lucy Larcom’s A New England Girlhood (1889) alongside a posthumously published collection of Louisa May Alcott’s autobiographical writing, Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters, and Journals (1889). The review notes the dramatic differences between the past and present as represented by Larcom’s autobiography and draws attention to her nostalgia for the antebellum past. Writing of A New England Girlhood, the reviewer speculates on the cause of this dramatic disconnect between Larcom’s childhood and the present moment:

Nothing brings before the mind so vividly the rupture between the New England of one generation ago and that of to-day as to read these pages, written by a woman in the vigor of her days, who is recalling both the circumstances of her own childhood, and an order of society which has been swept away, not by any cataclysm, but by the rapid movement of two forces, one from within and one from without. (418)1

The language used by the Atlantic reviewer flirts with a striking claim. In naming the transition from an antebellum to a fin de siècle America a “rupture,” this anonymous reviewer drives home the point that Larcom has lived through, experienced, and now documented in literary autobiography a radical break that far exceeds an everyday generational divide. The various social mechanisms—economic, political, technological, and scientific—by which US society noticeably reorganized itself after the Civil War has “swept away” the past and thus made it available for Larcom’s nostalgic recollection. But, as the reviewer notes, to access this past as an object of either longing or critique requires crossing a rupture.

In this essay I argue that A New England Girlhood demonstrates a potentially historically specific and marked ambivalence toward both the past and
the present that complicates autobiography’s conventional nostalgic impulses and produces scenes of what I call temporal collapse: the coexistence of two or more modes of time that resist the flattening, linear logic of progressive temporality. While Larcom’s autobiography provides an important case study for examining the (re)construction of nineteenth-century temporality, we do need to acknowledge that hers is a highly restricted case. Although her biography, her lived experience, and her published text share certain features with other authors and texts from this historical moment, her class, gender, and race limit claims to broader representativeness. As a white, educated, middle-class woman writing at the turn of the century about her childhood in antebellum America, Larcom experiences and articulates ambivalences resulting from what we might consider the vicissitudes of determining social privileges and restrictions. Thus my arguments about *A New England Girlhood* will be mostly phenomenological: Larcom’s text records and reproduces a highly personal experience of complex time.

Because her autobiographical essay “Among Lowell Mill-Girls: A Reminiscence,” published in the *Atlantic* in 1881, sparked a growing number of requests for her story, Larcom decided at age sixty-five to write a full-length autobiography. The resulting text, *A New England Girlhood: Outlined from Memory*, was published as the sixth volume under a new Houghton Mifflin imprint, the Riverside Library for Young People. By the time she wrote this autobiography of her childhood for children, Larcom was a well-known figure in the American literary scene; she had published several books, including a collection of her wide range of poems that had appeared in numerous monthly magazines, a guide to American poetry, and short-story collections; and she had been the editor of *Our Young Folks*, a monthly children’s magazine. *A New England Girlhood* narrates Larcom’s first nine years spent in the Massachusetts coastal town of Beverly through her removal to Lowell, where at the age of eleven she began working alongside her sisters in the famous textile mills of this riverside industrial town. Her father’s death and his substantial debts necessitated the family’s relocation and the subsequent employment of the young Larcom girls, and the move enabled Larcom’s mother to repay her debts by running one of the many large boardinghouses that accommodated the thousands of young female mill-workers in what was then known as the “Lowell System.” Lucy’s early employment enabled her, like many of the other young women alongside whom she would work, to assist in the financial support of her family. Her narrative ends abruptly at the beginning of another geographical movement typical of the 1840s: Larcom leaves Lowell and mill work to migrate along with her sister’s family to the West—to Illinois—where she became a teacher before ultimately returning to New England.
Larcom’s first published attempt at autobiography, “Autobiography No. II: Recollections of L. L.” (1845), was a two-part series for The Lowell Offering, which became the most famous of the mill girl magazines. Writing in the third person, a twenty-one-year-old Larcom imaginatively returns to “the birthplace and early home of the writer” to recount her early history, her introduction to poetry, and the founding of the magazine (211). This small narrative of her life to date represents her childhood experiences in roughly linear order and includes a few poems, short narrative sketches, and several age-appropriate platitudes. When much later in life she turns to write A New England Girlhood, she does not expand much beyond the period covered in her earlier autobiographical essays: it, too, contains only her first twenty years, with approximately two-thirds of the material recounting her early childhood years in Beverly and the remaining third covering the years spent working and writing in Lowell. The narrative form of A New England Girlhood, as Amy Kort argues, is fragmentary and truncated. Unlike her earlier antebellum attempt at autobiography, in this text Larcom frequently disrupts the norms of linear narrative, organizing her past according to the thematic concerns that she represents as ever-present within her history and ignoring chronological ordering. Thus, Larcom interrupts herself many times to suggest that her concerns do not belong solely to her past but also to her present moment. The formal complexity of A New England Girlhood results from the autobiographical necessity to posit a radical difference between the “then” and the “now”—without this difference there can be no childhood proper—leading to Larcom’s frustrated effort to render these two orders synchronic. Her attempt to yoke together narratives from the past and the present forms the very structure of her autobiographical project.

Narratives of progress, especially the prevailing nineteenth-century understanding of American modernity as heading to an ever more desirable and utopian future, both enabled Larcom’s literary project and served as the target of her criticism. A New England Girlhood fails to conform to the conventions of the linear and temporally progressive autobiography in part because of her inability to return to scenes of childhood experience rife with nostalgic sentiment. Signs and material figures for the future are always infiltrating the contents of her called-back pastoral imagination. The future instantiated by Larcom’s present social time precludes such imaginative, self-indulgent representations of her past. In A New England Girlhood, the future-as-present, so to speak, often takes one of two forms. As “good modernity,” it figures as liberty—positive, in the form of new opportunities, or negative, as in freedom from the constraints of childhood—or is expressed through the complex temporality of the autobiographical act itself, such as when as an adult narrator she interrupts and comments
on a recalled scene from her childhood years. At the same time, other kinds of ruptured linear narrative occur, stemming from what one might term a “bad modernity.” Thus, scenes featuring radically new technologies, such as the steam train or the industrial infrastructure of the Lowell mills, prevent her seamless integration of past narratives with those of the present. This overlaying of past and present results, as I will argue, in temporal incommensurability, in a complex temporality. Because Larcom incorporates these two forms of interruption, she refuses both modernity’s progress narrative and an idealizing nostalgia for a static past. Instead, she produces scenes of collapsed time: past and present standing side by side. In this essay I use good and bad modernity to name the vicissitudes of Larcom’s ambivalent response to the promise and consequences of the various intellectual and social projects emerging out of the Enlightenment. If at times Larcom participates in what Friedrich Nietzsche describes in *Twilight of the Idols* (1889) as the “criticism of modernity,” an understanding that “[modern] institutions are no longer any good” (66), she also recognizes the progressive possibilities of these same institutions.

**COMPLEX TEMPORALITIES**

Issues of temporality and the representation of the lived experience of time have long been of concern to literary critics working in the nineteenth century. Since its publication in 1983, Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, a classic work on the development and spread of modern nationalism, has provided the standard account of narrative time as unfolding simultaneously across geographical spaces, most importantly within national boundaries. Anderson’s understanding of temporal simultaneity draws on Walter Benjamin’s concept of “homogeneous, empty time” to refer to the sense of national belonging made possible by print capitalism and the imagined community of readers that unfolded in time and across time: “What has come to take the place of the mediaeval conception of simultaneity-along-time is, to borrow again from Benjamin, an idea of ‘homogeneous, empty time’ in which simultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfilment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar” (24). Anderson’s understanding of temporal simultaneity as occurring with an unfolding and shared present tense has recently been contested. Lloyd Pratt provides one such counter-history of American time, proposing that literature can offer an alternative conception of temporality, what he calls an archive of time. Pratt examines the temporal heterogeneity that nineteenth-century American literature both archives and brings into being. He draws on Anthony Giddens’s analysis of how sociological knowledge participates in a “mutually
constituting double hermeneutic” to argue that literature can be understood as “reconstituting . . . [its] reader’s understanding of time” (Pratt 14, 15). Autobiographies, and especially those autobiographical works book-ending two different temporal orders, seem like particularly good archives for examining the construction of temporal heterogeneity.

Critics such as Jennifer L. Fleissner have examined the important differences between how the narratives of women and men are ideologically figured and deployed within these various temporal schemas. Fleissner examines the gendered narratives of temporality in the late-nineteenth-century genres of naturalism and realism, literary forms appearing alongside *A New England Girlhood*, to argue that fin de siècle American writing has a tendency to align the modern woman’s story with a mode of temporality, the yet-to-be-realized horizon of futurity, that simultaneously represents the future and renders women temporally “stuck in place” (37). If women were understood as aligned with the future, Fleissner claims, men were frequently associated with a longing for the past. “[T]o the extent that we identify a sentimental nostalgia at work in the 1890s,” she writes, “it should be identified not with domestic New England writing, but with remasculinization itself” (17). Fleissner reorients our fin de siècle literary categories: literary naturalism and realism now appear to be more concerned with women and the future; men and depictions of a longing for the past belong to the sentimental tradition. Autobiography, however, is invariably nostalgic, so some of the nostalgia in *A New England Girlhood* can be the result of certain generic demands. But Larcom’s autobiography asks us to consider if women might also have an equally problematic relation to the past as Fleissner’s nostalgic men. Larcom offers both a nostalgic treatment of the past and what Fleissner calls a “stuck feminine story” (25). Although Larcom describes herself in terms that suggest a narrative trajectory similar to that of Fleissner’s fin de siècle modern women, she also maintains a degree of fondness—to be sure, an affective relationship—for the past that produces a sense of temporal ambivalence and a questioning of the progress narrative. My reading of Larcom’s autobiography suggests that women might also have an ongoing attachment to the past that, like Fleissner’s account of the narrative of the future-oriented New Woman of the 1890s, also results in a mode of temporal unmooring. But instead of a compulsive oscillation between two poles—Fleissner’s “stuckness”—Larcom preserves a partial attachment to the past as she gazes backward at her own girlhood.

Larcom was not alone in using formal experimentation to negotiate her complex relationship to both progress and nostalgia. Examining the autobiographical writings of “transitional” social reform authors Rebecca Harding Davis and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Lisa A. Long notes how these women find
the traditional, linear form of autobiography limiting to the project of individual reform (267). Long characterizes these authors as transitional because they are located between the dominant modes of antebellum writing—the romance and sentimental fiction—and the realism, naturalism, and regionalism of the postbellum period. By stringing together fragments of the past rather than producing a coherent life narrative, Long argues, both Davis, in *Bits of Gossip* (1904), and Phelps, in *Chapters from a Life* (1896), “emphasize the inadequacy of narrative to represent lives from which they remain estranged” (271). Long shows the extent to which these two writers work at the level of narrative form to “resist closure, stasis and definition” while writing autobiography (271). They do so, she argues, in order to question the project of re-forming the past and the self—and, I would add, to disrupt the false sense of completion found in the progressive autobiographical narrative that posits a knowing, stable, and self-assured “I” retrospectively taking stock of the past.

Like the autobiographies of Long’s reform authors, *A New England Girlhood* is especially concerned with time, temporality, and the progress narrative. Its interest in the composition of time and shifting understandings of tracking time, however, exceeds that of most autobiographies. It seeks to record and recount an early experience with a multiply layered temporality while fragmenting, reproducing, reconstructing, and experimenting with new temporalities through the formal composition of the book. What Larcom’s doubled relationship to temporality brings forward, then, is a doubling of the past and the present; it is a complex temporality that is at once enabling and damaging. The sense of damage comes from Larcom’s inhabiting an ambivalent, psychically divided position between two orders of time. The enabling mode of time is one that finds pleasure in nostalgia, anachronism, and being out of time. I call this temporal double vision the time of the temporal collapse.

Larcom’s ambivalence results from an American modernity that she sees as inextricably tied to notions of a progressive temporality, one that produces the future as an expectant horizon of something better to come and the past as obsolete, something to be overcome. The increasing speed with which the past was made obsolete by the present—especially troubling to Larcom was the increasing pace of the discoveries of sciences and the developments of new technologies—animated her doubts about modernity and her concern with what Max Weber has called the “disenchantment of the world” (13). Larcom describes this feeling of loss that accompanies the increased pace of modernization:

Things that looked miraculous then are commonplace now. It almost seems as if the children of to-day could not have so good a time as we did, science has left them so little to wonder about. Our attitude—the attitude of the time—was that
of children climbing their dooryard fence, to watch an approaching show, and
to conjecture what more remarkable spectacle could be following behind. New
England had kept to the quiet old-fashioned ways of living for the first fifty years
of the Republic. Now all was expectancy. Changes were coming. Things were
going to happen, nobody could guess what. (251)

In this highly ambivalent account of progress and modernity, Larcom characterizes the general attitude of people living in antebellum New England as an animated expectancy. Modernization, she claims, brought a sense of excitement and motivated the expectant look forward, but progress moving too quickly becomes a cause for concern.

Larcom depicts her New England childhood past as possessing several modes of layered complexity that she treats nostalgically. The two main modes of complexity that she sees as much more prevalent during the antebellum period are geographic and temporal. Like Sarah Orne Jewett, another so-called regionalist or local-color author, Larcom resists representing her locale as a mere closed space, an island community. As Larcom shows it, Beverly Farms contains no sealed borders. Despite its advertised investment in local topoi and regional specificity, A New England Girlhood does not seem particularly invested in offering a depiction of an isolated location. Rather, Larcom describes her childhood spent in this small, coastal New England town as both geographically, especially in terms of material culture, and temporally complicated. She demonstrates this complication through her use of the term “interblended” to refer to the admixture of elements, both objects and practices, originating in foreign cultures and circulating within her rural antebellum New England: “we breathed the air of foreign countries, curiously interblended with our own” (94). Foreign coins like the Russian kopeck and the British half-penny token, for example, circulated alongside American currency. She also offers evidence of the ongoing presence of Otherness—not limited just to objects, but to both humans and animals that function to the young Larcom as “living reminders of strange lands across the sea” (95). She describes these “wanderers from foreign countries” as living with and among the families of Beverly (96).

Like the “interblended” economy of exchange that finds foreign currency in circulation alongside the nascent American dollar and residual colonial currency, or the presence of people and objects from far-off lands, the persistence of the past within the present is recalled in Larcom’s text. The presence of these foreign elements suggests that this coexistence is less a temporal lag or sense of being out-of-date—one that might be associated with the rural backwater—than a multi-temporal and cosmopolitan mixture operating very much within the spirit of the time. Blending these multiple temporal orders, Larcom’s depic-
tion of antebellum New England culture shows that there never was a closed, coherent, and singular mode of temporality. This complex temporality contained competing methods of tracking and producing time as well as the sense of an identifiable tension between modern—in other words, contemporary—and “primitive” modes of everyday life:

Primitive ways of doing things had not wholly ceased during my childhood; they were kept up in these old towns longer than elsewhere. We used tallow candles and oil lamps, and sat by open fireplaces. There was always a tinder-box in some safe corner or other, and fire was kindled by striking flint and steel upon the tinder. What magic it seemed to me, when I was first allowed to strike that wonderful spark, and light the kitchen fire! (21)

Some older cultural practices, such as the use of oil lamps, belonged to the past and may have persisted longer in rural locations without modern municipal infrastructure, but Larcom describes these practices as existing alongside others that were quite contemporary.

Methods of timekeeping, for example, shifted throughout the nineteenth century, and the rhythms of various devices and markers continued to exist side-by-side. Larcom recounts how during her childhood the colorful trumpets of the “four o’clock flowers” announced the end of her school day: “among other old-fashioned flowers, an abundance of many-tinted four o’clocks, whose regular afternoon-opening just at the close of school, was a daily wonder to us babies” (39). These “old-fashioned” flowers are a marker of an earlier method of timekeeping—already old during her childhood—and, like Larcom’s use of the daily tidal rhythms elsewhere in A New England Girlhood, these flowers function as a natural and premodern form of marking time. Later, when Larcom enters into mill work, the “clangor of the bell” will mark the end of the workday as the flowers’ opening once marked the end of the school day (183). But even her rural Beverly was not void of mechanical clocks or other modern timekeeping devices. Larcom writes of watching time slowly pass from within the schoolhouse: “From the schoolroom window we could watch the slow hands of the town clock, and get a peep at what was going on in the street, although there was seldom anybody in sight except the Colonel’s gardener or coachman, going into or out of the driveway directly opposite. It was a very still street” (39).

Alexis McCrossen has called this transitional period of timekeeping, in which multiple modes of registering time existed side-by-side, the “public clock era” (6). There was no national accounting of time until 18 November 1883, when a system of time zones was created and national standard time established: “Until the 1880s, the American temporal system, if it could be called that, was built upon unsynchronizable and imprecise timepieces, in addition

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to indeterminate time standards. As a consequence, clock time during its formative years was chronically unstable” (12–13). This unstable time resulted in forms of heterogeneous temporality that Larcom’s autobiography fondly recalls, records, and reproduces. Thomas M. Allen regards these complex forms of temporality not as resistant to the sense of a national time but rather as the very “fabric of national belonging” (11). Allen reminds us that the discourse of nationalism is always one of negotiation and that the inclusion of diverse experiences of time is fundamental to the development of national identity.

**GOOD MODERNITY**

Larcom has an ambivalent relationship to the changes produced by historical progress. Her text constructs both a good and a bad modernity; these two orientations are not so easily unpacked and ordered. At times she represents herself as an enthusiastic participant in the progressive changes that have altered the social landscape, but on other occasions she recoils from signifiers of too-rapid change. These figures of excess, connected as they are to structures and movements with which she often aligns herself, continually interrupt her ability to tell a narrative that could lead her from her childhood past to the outcome of a good modernity; thus, in constructing her autobiography she cuts her narrative life short and rejects conventional linear narrative ordering.

Larcom joined a generation of young women from nearly every locale in New England in leaving their homes for work at the mills in towns like Manchester, New Hampshire; Biddeford, Maine; and Lowell, Massachusetts. The technologies borrowed from the textile mills in England and developed for those in Lowell and other towns were among the most advanced at the time. The mills represented a major shift in industrialization; production of textiles moved from an individual worker’s home to multistoried buildings filled with semi-automated looms and armies of young women. The Merrimack Mill and the company town of Lowell were understood by many, including Larcom, as an opportunity to earn money—it is important to remember that millworkers were paid in cash—and to break free from the cycles of poverty found in rural communities. For women the mills created new jobs that had not existed before, so many that by the end of the century women would become a full 20 percent of the American workforce. And, of special importance for our current reading, employment in the mills brought Larcom into contact with many young women with literary aspirations. Through her association with mill girl literary magazine *The Lowell Offering*, she was exposed to an influential reading audience and thus able to reinvent herself as a poet and eventually an editor.

Larcom’s representations of her time as a mill operative offer a strong cri-
tique of the conditions of the millworker both in the past and in the late nine-
teenth century, but they also depict her experiences as enabling in some fun-
damental way. Importantly, Larcom acknowledges the agency that she and her
associates possessed. The tension between these two possibilities within tech-
nological modernity—the enabling new experiences, independence, and roles
and the constricting, episteme-changing exploitation of young labor—thus
frames her ambivalent representations.11 Perhaps the most important aspect of
her entering into the world of mill work was the wide variety of young women
with whom she came in contact. She writes that the “throngs of unknown girl-
ish forms” introduced her to such a diversity of interests and types as would
not be available in small towns or even in cities and their associated traditional
social configurations (225). In particular, she claims that the independent
country girls from the New Hampshire hills served as models for her own life:
“I regard it as one of the privileges of my youth that I was permitted to grow
up among those active, interesting girls, whose lives were not mere echoes of
other lives, but had principle and purpose distinctly their own” (196). Larcom
represents the excitement of encountering these multitudes of unique young
women as a moment of pure potentiality. At this time Lowell was a town in
transition, and Larcom saw these first few generations of workers from rural
towns as coming together in a large social configuration that provided her and
the other young women with some benefits.

When Larcom describes entering the Lawrence Mills of Lowell, Massachu-
setts, and taking up the position of a mill girl, she shows how this new form of
work produced her as a new type, a modern woman. The mill’s new rhythms
of time were simultaneously constricting and freeing. If, on the one hand, the
well-regulated timekeeping involved in modern, sprawling enterprises like the
textile mills required young women to conform to rigid schedules and strictly
enforced standards of conduct, on the other hand, it also produced a sense of
independence, a freedom from the totalizing immersion into work demanded
by domestic labor:

We used sometimes to see it claimed, in public prints, that it would be better for
all of us mill-girls to be working in families, at domestic service, than to be where
we were.

Perhaps the difficulties of modern housekeepers did begin with the opening
of the Lowell factories. Country girls were naturally independent, and the feeling
that at this new work the few hours they had of every-day leisure were entirely
their own was a satisfaction to them. They preferred it to going out as “hired
help.” It was like a young man’s pleasure in entering upon business for himself.
Girls had never tried that experiment before, and they liked it. It brought out in
them a dormant strength of character which the world did not previously see, but now fully acknowledges. Of course they had a right to continue at that freer kind of work as long as they chose, although their doing so increased the perplexities of the housekeeping problem for themselves even, since many of them were to become, and did become, American house-mistresses. (199–200)

In a way, as one of the first sites of employment to become mechanized and thereby able to employ relatively unskilled workers, the mill created new categories of employment that were not yet fully understood. Entering this workforce brought new freedoms and, contra our expected narrative, may have actually given more free time to the young women who fled their failing family farms. Drawing our attention to the importance of leisure time as a source of pleasure, Larcom claims that despite the long days spent inside the mill, once the day was over these young women were able to make more decisions on their own than they would have if they had stayed on the farm or pursued the only other work available to these country laborers: traditional domestic labor. And within the mill, too, there were perhaps more options and types of work available than those found within the world of hired help. Larcom sees that leaving the rural farm to work enabled these “country girls” to have time of their own. These daily “few hours” of leisure were purchased at the cost of working within the impersonal machinery of the modern mill. In claiming some time as their own, these women embarked on what Larcom refers to as an “experiment.” This novel experience turned country girls into modern women.

At the same time, Larcom is ambivalent about the modern machinery used in the mills. Despite enjoying some aspects of being modern that came with this new form of work and life, she describes her relation not as one of union between machine and woman, but almost as subservience: “I contracted an unconquerable dislike to it; indeed, I had never liked, and never could learn to like, any kind of machinery. And this machine finally conquered me” (226). She describes leaving the work of tending machines in favor of another job that involved the final stages of production—folding, stamping, and baling the cloth to be sold—as presenting her with a different temporality, one that involved more free time: “at my new work I had hours of freedom every day. I never went back again to the bondage of machinery and a working-day thirteen hours long” (229).

While there is little doubt that there was much of the sort of alienation as suggested by Marxian theory involved in the type of work done in Lowell—these mills were, after all, explicitly intended to replicate the Manchester mills studied by Friedrich Engels—Larcom moves several times from one role to another. Women such as Larcom entered into employment with an expectation
that it would be temporary, either because they were enrolled in school or planning to enter into a school as soon as they were able to save enough money, or because many of the young operatives expected eventually to marry and leave their posts. While Larcom’s older sisters followed this latter model, Lucy did not. She left the mill to pursue another field of work: completing her schooling in Illinois, she eventually became a teacher and moved back east. Larcom’s understanding of this new temporality of labor comes close to matching our contemporary understanding of work. She desires that “girls would decline to classify each other by their occupations, which among us are usually only temporary, and are continually shifting from one pair of hands to another. Changes of fortune come so abruptly that the millionaire’s daughter of to-day may be glad to earn her living by sewing or sweeping tomorrow” (200). By becoming “temporary,” these female operatives were pushed ahead of a labor market that had not yet adjusted to the concept of multiple career changes or made available many other options. They thus felt modern in this experience and yet had few resources for articulating this feeling.

Larcom represents her younger self as at the very beginning of this process of becoming modern. Some aspects of what being modern might involve were appealing, and others were objectionable. She harbored doubts toward some innovations, and certain parts of the past were clearly preferable to others. She entered the mill at an early age, and to some degree she represents her ability to function in both worlds as being located within her body. Her body is always temporally in front of her, preceding her psychic movement to adulthood. In “Among Lowell Mill-Girls,” Larcom recalls her premature physical development as the reason she was sent to work young: “I, being larger for my years, and apparently stronger than my sisters nearest me in age, was taken from school and began to work in the mill in my twelfth year” (599). In A New England Girlhood, she indicates that she started at the mill a year earlier, at age eleven. When she recalls in this text a moment a few years into her work, she again shifts responsibility for her “too soon” development to her family: “I was as tall as a woman at thirteen, and my older sisters insisted upon lengthening my dresses, and putting up my mop of hair with a comb. . . . I felt like a child, but considered it my duty to think and behave like a woman”—so much so that she acts more mature than the oldest women working in the mill: “The associates I chose were usually grave young women, ten or fifteen years older than myself; but I think I felt older and appeared older than they did” (166). Larcom’s early entrance into the modern industrial system makes her feel more modern, and thus able to imagine herself as older than her coworkers.

However, the narrative at this point breaks down. An interruption appears when she attempts to tell this story of interrupted childhood; she begins by
describing her rapid transition from childhood to being “like a woman” and then halts to revise the direction of her narrative: “Childhood, however, is not easily defrauded of its birthright, and mine soon reasserted itself” (167). The narrative ordering of events shifts, time collapses, and she stops describing life in the mills and what she had been presenting as a linear progression from childhood to adulthood to return to describing earlier scenes of play. Her narrative has, like the story she tells of herself, moved too quickly, and this requires her to double back and reinvoke her childhood.

The text’s anxiety about the very real possibility of a too-rapid forward temporal movement and Larcom’s sense of feeling out of time originate in two figures of discontinuity: the first, signified in the above passage as the reassertion of childhood, is the result of Larcom’s ambivalence toward modernity that results from a return of the repressed elements of her past; the second is due to the incommensurability of, on the one hand, her nostalgic desire as an autobiographer to have a seamless transition from past to present, and on the other hand, the scenes of rupturing change that she depicts. These major social and cultural shifts radically transformed the New England landscape of her childhood from a loosely connected set of small rural towns into a highly connected and urbanized modernity. Many of these changes occurred during a gap between the moment of composition, the late 1880s, and the moment narrated, the 1840s. To demonstrate these rupturing changes, she uses familiar symbols and metaphors that are most apparent in her representations of the shift from a slower, less punctual system of time to the tightly orchestrated mode of temporality she finds active in the factory system.

As might be expected, Larcom’s tightly orchestrated factory, with its “regularity enforced by the clangor of the bell,” represents a temporal mode that she ultimately rejects (183). While the figure of the mill’s “paymaster” may function partly as the modern, secular double of her grandfather’s authority as time-keeper of Beverly during her earliest years, he participates in an altogether different temporal logic (228). When Larcom gives notice of her intention to find another job, she recalls that the paymaster questioned her reasons for leaving. Believing that she must be departing for a better-paying job, he inquires, and she replies that she is “going where I can have more time” (228). With his enthusiastic and misunderstanding response of “Ah, yes! . . . Time is money,” she represents this middle manager as able to think only in terms of the capitalization of time.12 When she writes that “time is education . . . for that was what I meant it should be to me,” she means, of course, that in another line of work she expects to have more time to learn and to read and write poetry, but this might also suggest that she desires a mode of temporality that has an excess or surplus of time from which she might be able to learn (228). Like her “country
girls” who gained a few satisfying hours of leisure by entering into the workforce, Larcom gained some time of her own and turned to literature as a space through which she could better manage time.

BAD MODERNITY

While *A New England Girlhood* represents many aspects of what I am calling a good modernity, there is an equally present bad modernity that intrudes into her narratives of the past and her childhood. Like the narrative breakdown that occurs when she realizes that she too quickly brought her childhood self into the mill and into adulthood, these moments tend to halt temporal progress and are thus responsible for a large part of the text’s fragmentation. These scenes most often occur when, after the introduction of some troubling aspect of modernity, Larcom attempts to reintegrate her narrative. She especially recoils from signifiers that represent an excess of change or too rapid a change. The steam train and other large, hard-to-grasp technologies frequently serve as such signifiers. While the waterwheel, which she describes as “something of the awe . . . of the great Power which keeps the mechanism of the universe in motion” (155), represents such a technology, its slower speed and mysterious, cyclical movement made it far more appealing than the steam train.

In one early passage Larcom refers to the scarcity of unmodernized and unmanaged physical spaces remaining in the late nineteenth century. She claims that “the windsy crest of Powder House Hill” was the only space of play from her childhood “left to the children and the cows just as it was then” (91). In this passage she aligns the cyclical nature of the weather and the sea with this “windy crest” populated by children and cows. Significantly, no adult figures are present; the children and the cows, if not owners, at least exercise some sovereignty over this space. She claims that there would be some sense of continuity between her present moment and the “then” of her childhood if more such spaces were available. Passages such as this demonstrate that the spaces that made her childhood possible have been almost completely displaced. These spaces have been turned into managed playgrounds, another feature of fin de siècle America, or replaced completely by new structures and institutions.

In what might be one of the best-known scenes from *A New England Girlhood*, Larcom imaginatively returns to one of these lost spaces in order to reconstruct it as a scene of trauma. She leaves little room for doubt that this particular space is not “as it was then”:

The cars rush into the station now, right over our riverside playground. I can often hear the mirthful shout of boys and girls under the shriek of the steam
The sheer speed, the very “rush,” of the railroad cars represents what she understands as the limit, or perhaps even the flip side, of a progressive modernity to which she has become attached. This is the too-fast movement of a bad modernity. She begins with her present, the now of her moment of composition, and a preexisting scene of temporal collapse. Two voices speak simultaneously in this passage; she can hear doubled calls of both a technological modernity, the “shriek of the steam whistle,” and the premodern and nostalgic intonation of the past, the “mirthful” boys and girls from her childhood in Beverly. Larcom allows these voices to coexist, although the children’s voices are muffled by the train whistle. The complex rendering of the present into the past signifies a moment of collapse that disrupts her ability to narrate seamlessly the flowing of her past into the present. Instead, her narrative breaks with an abrupt return to the past in order to stage a reinterpretation of that moment through the present, through the new representational language of modernity. She figures the group of running children as a “wild train.” They simultaneously exist as both natural elements at home in this premodern scene—figured here as the “young colts”—and unmistakably tied, or bound, to their own footsteps, which lead, not unlike the train tracks, directly to the now of the present. The children run “homeward,” yet there is pathos in the realization that they have no choice but to head into the twilight, up the narrow path that resembles a railroad bed. Having no other way of rendering her past than in the very metaphors of a technological modernity, Larcom’s narrative turns on itself; unable to decide if the very rupture that effectively ended her childhood could have been avoided, she brings her two figures, her two voices, into the same frame.

The railway train was one of Larcom’s favorite figures for representing modernity and the related, but not necessarily identical, concept of progress. In a paper titled “American Factory Life—Past, Present and Future” that she delivered in 1882 in Saratoga, New York, at the annual meeting of the Social Science Association, Larcom deploys this figure in her critique of the idea of industrial progress: “It is not impossible that much of our boasted advancement may be that of a railway train with its passengers left behind” (141). The above passage from A New England Girlhood refers to the lost space of childhood and revises an earlier poem in which she offers a nightmare rather than a dream of the railroad to suggest that progress has done more than leave its passengers behind. With less ambivalence toward technology, this fascinating poem,
“What the Train Ran Over,” articulates frustration and even an uncharacteristic rage toward modernity. It opens with a scene of decapitation and an insistence that she should be recognized as a first-person witness to the multiple temporal orders invoked by the poem:

When the train came shrieking down,
Did you see what it ran over?
I saw heads of golden brown,
Little plump hands filled with clover. (lines 1–4)

Through these lines she attempts to turn her lost riverside space of play into a scene through which she can return to the past, but her nostalgic gaze is turned away: it has been blocked by the sudden presence of the train. “What the Train Ran Over” turns the intersection of the train with the playground into a scene of graphic violence; Larcom imagines the arrival of the train as dismembering her ghostly children. The tracks and the train slice through her past and leave a collection of remaindered part-objects: hands, heads, and clover flowers. Her poem fails to reproduce the closed and isolated world of childhood, and thus we have a scene of temporal collapse.

This scene of the “shrieking” railroad entering into the “garden” of an Edenic childhood seems almost too familiar; after Leo Marx, our reading of these scenes is overdetermined. We can see that she believes her rural Beverly has been smashed by the incursion of history in the form of precarious capitalist relations requiring the Larcom household to be relocated and young Lucy too soon put to work. But she does not represent herself solely through the usual trope of a childlike, passive defender of the pastoral; she simultaneously has placed herself in the playground past, in the present reflecting back on the changes brought by the modernity, and, most surprisingly, on the train itself: “From the windows of the train / I could see what they were doing” (9–10). She thus establishes three positions for herself within this scene of heterogeneous temporality.

The poem needs to preserve these positions as it also invokes both premodern and modern modes of temporality in order to hold on to aspects present in both phases of Beverly’s history. The “small tide-river” that flows alongside her former playground—no doubt a smaller and slower-moving double of the Merrimack River, the source of power for the Lawrence Mills—represents, with its current flowing toward the sea, an alternative representation of temporality to the synchronized clock time required by train travel: “we watched the white boats go / Up and down the small tide-river” (35–36). At the same time, Larcom represents herself—unlike her friends and acquaintances—as ready for the coming changes that would render her small town of Beverly forever trans-
formed once brought into modern temporality: “I wonder / Why I never was afraid / Of the coming railway-thunder” (22–24). Larcom represents herself as unafraid of this symbol of futurity as she, as we have seen, willingly embraced and was even enthusiastic about certain features of modernity. This state of being unafraid marks Larcom as separate from her peers, those who, as she wrote in “American Factory Life—Past, Present and Future,” were the “passengers left behind” (141).

In “What the Train Ran Over,” Larcom’s absent anxieties are displaced onto the second-person addressee, whom she figures as a child:

What! your eyes with tears are filling
For my pretty playmates gone?
Child, I am to blame for chilling
All your warm young fancies so:
There are real troubles, plenty! (42–46)

An excess of nostalgic sentimentality, through the representation of dead or otherwise lost children, has chilled the “warm young fancies” of her youthful listener. Here Larcom argues that the sentimental mode has the very real danger of producing morbid children. These lines introduce into the poem an autocritique of her own poetic practice; she suggests that the nostalgic remembrance found in some of her work is too sentimental and might prematurely chill her child reader. Larcom then leads us, in her final stanza, to the conclusion that this scene of temporal collapse produced by her poem has trapped her:

And those children,—I was one,—
Busy men and women, wander
Under life’s midsummer sun.
One or two have gone home yonder
Out of sight. But still I see
Golden heads amid the clover
On the railway-track; to me
This is what the train runs over. (49–56)

While the others have moved on, Larcom remains at this scene of temporal collapse with the ghosts of her “pretty playmates”: “But still I see / Golden heads amid the clover” (53–54). Her ongoing observation here, “But still I see,” suggests her double vision and attachment. The point to which she remains attached, the site of her child-self and the former play space that has been over-
run by the train tracks, holds together these two figures of the past and the present. Her psychic investments in both progress and modernity have made it impossible for her to believe in the closed world required by the nostalgic gaze. By necessity, then, Larcom must hold on to both the order that has passed and the new, complex order, which, as I have argued, contains both good and bad elements. We should at the same time understand this new order as establishing a ruptural break that has rendered the first order a thing of the past.

My essay strives to take seriously the ambivalences visible at this point of conjunction between longing and hope, for Lucy Larcom’s *A New England Girlhood* posits a complex relation to an American modernity that itself is composed of multiple and competing temporalities that, when taken together, produce a whole host of ambivalent affects. In my reading of Larcom, these affects are made to linger rather than to fade. Because the author of autobiography is also its subject and therefore keenly aware of the stakes of chronological ordering, of saying that the past is truly a thing of the past, autobiography might be the privileged genre for recovering such historical affects. Larcom refuses to ignore the hard fact that when we commit to modernity as a mode of unquestioned chronological progress leading forward, we must necessarily designate the past as passed and give up our hope in these affective attachments.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For her always brilliant and insightful advice and for her continued support of my work and this project in particular, I’d like to thank Jennifer L. Fleissner. I would also like to thank the anonymous readers for their many helpful suggestions and clarifications.

NOTES

1. This review was most likely written by Horace Scudder, editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* at the time and frequent correspondent with Larcom.

2. I make some similar claims about the formal aspects of Mark Twain’s interminable and notoriously nonlinear *The Autobiography of Mark Twain* in relation to modernity’s culture of obsolescence in my essay “Mark Twain, Memory, and the Failures of Historicism.”

3. Marchalonis is the standard source for Larcom’s biography.

4. That Larcom’s text appears fragmented has been noticed by most of the small number of contemporary critics who have written on her work. Kort argues that we should read Larcom’s formal construction of *A New England Girlhood* as an aesthetics
of “strategic obscurity”: “Larcom unveils herself to her reader piecemeal. She reveals fragments of her life, but never offers a full portrait of her experiences and beliefs aligned against the background of history” (26).

5. Egan argues that autobiographers like Larcom were aware of the stakes of writing history—both their own and that of the nation—in the fin de siècle moment. Thus, each of these autobiographers “creates autobiography not as memoir (suggestive of an established context that defines a public self) but as history in the making, with the self, in varying degrees of objectivity, as participant” (71).

6. On the “utopian promise” of nineteenth-century American modernity as producing “spatial and temporal intelligibility for the nation” (28), see Berlant 28–32.

7. Evans’s conception of what he calls the fin de siècle “circulating culture” provides a useful lens for examining the depiction of this type of exchange in realistic fiction. He argues that there was a widespread circulation of various folklore objects, from regions within and without the United States, which we might understand as demonstrating that there were no truly “closed” regional locales (109–11).

8. Stowe’s local-color touchstone *The Pearl of Orr’s Island: A Story of the Coast of Maine* suggests that the sense of decay and stopped time associated with regional spaces might have been caused by national interests that had sought to curtail the international trade originating on the shores of coastal New England: “The celebrated embargo of Jefferson stopped at once the whole trade of New England, and condemned her thousand ships to rot at the wharves, and caused the ruin of thousands of families” (194). See also Jewett’s famous depiction of the stopped time of Deephaven: “It seemed as if all the clocks in Deephaven, and all the people with them, had stopped years ago, and the people had been doing over and over what they had been busy about during the last week of their unambitious progress” (87).

9. On the everyday economics of mill work and the experiences of the workers, see Schlereth 33–34.

10. Despite the rather small distribution of *The Lowell Offering* (1840–46), which many critics have noted, the appearance of Larcom’s poems there garnered attention that in some cases resulted in their reprinting in other, more popular venues.

11. For a careful and nuanced analysis of the sources of some of working-class women’s ambivalence toward factory system labor, see Zonderman 87–90. Compare with Kasson’s history of Lowell, in which the young female operatives who founded, edited, and contributed to *The Lowell Offering*—he especially singles out Larcom for criticism—are relegated to the status of an ideological mouthpiece—in his words, the “house organ” (95). Kasson accuses Larcom of writing *A New England Girlhood* with “memories tinged by the nostalgia of old age,” thereby discounting her representations of workers and the mill system as both a young mill girl and as a reflective older woman (77).

12. For the classic critique of clock time in relation to labor, see Thompson 79–86.
13. On the use of the image of the train in relation to nineteenth-century modernity and "complex pastoralism," see Marx 27–32.

WORKS CITED


