

A Great Desire: Autobiography in Louise Talma's *Three Madrigals*

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American composer Louise Talma's compositions are highly autobiographical, concerning, among other subjects, her conversion to Catholicism (*Hound of Heaven*, 1938), her frustration with teaching and the limited career choices available to women of her day (*The Alcestiad*, 1961), milestone events in her life and in those of her friends (*Ave Atque Vale*, 1989), and her reaction to the Vietnam War (*Voices of Peace*, 1973). In this article I examine ways in which Talma's very early secular vocal works likely refer to another aspect of her life, namely, her love and desire for an erotic relationship with Nadia Boulanger. To that end, I read the music and text of Talma's *Three Madrigals* (1929, texts by Sir Thomas Wyatt), and, lacking scores, the texts of her songs "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" (1929, John Keats), "Late Leaves" (1934, Walter Savage Landor), and "Never Seek to Tell Thy Love" (1934, William Blake), as a non-traditional form of autobiography, or what Caren Kaplan calls an "out-law genre" (Kaplan 1992:122).

Talma was born in 1906 to opera singer Alma Cécile Garrigues Talma in Arcachon, France. The two came to the United States when Talma was a child, and "Cécile," as her mother was known, established a voice and piano studio in New York (*U.S.S. Niagara*). First studying music with her mother, and later attending the Institute for Musical Art (which would become the Juilliard School) for her undergraduate studies, Talma gave her first public New York recital in March 1925. Around the same time she began teaching theory at the Neighborhood Music School and piano privately (*New York Times*). Talma began to compose in 1921, taking lessons and writing at least one song for voice and piano before 1925, and in 1926 both she and her mother enrolled at the Conservatoire Américain in Fontainebleau. Although Talma enrolled in order to study piano with Isidor Philipp, she also studied harmony with Nadia Boulanger, who encouraged her to focus on composition rather than piano performance (Jory 1967:1). Talma followed this advice, becoming a composition student of Boulanger at the Conservatoire Américain the following year, and she remained focused on composition for the rest of her career. Eventually becoming the first female winner of two back-to-back Guggenheim Awards (1946, 1947) and the first female winner of the Sibelius Award for Composition (1963), Talma was also the first American woman to have an opera premiered in Europe

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(1962) and the first woman elected to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters (1974).

Little research has been published on Talma to date. The bulk of her scores and papers are held by the Library of Congress in the Louise Talma Collection, which contains recently processed materials including manuscripts, printed scores, correspondence, and reviews. Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library holds in both its Thornton Wilder Collection and its Louise Talma Collection materials relating to Talma and Wilder's collaboration on their opera *The Alcestiad*. While a great deal has been written about Boulanger, very little of that deals directly with her relationship with Talma. However, with the materials from the Library of Congress now available, if not completely catalogued, it is possible to study this relationship in more depth. Talma's extant letters to and from Boulanger begin in 1929, but their frequent referencing of past events, meetings, and conversations also provides insight into the women's earlier interactions.

Before further considering Talma's life and compositions, it is important to establish some theoretical underpinnings of this analysis. Of women's autobiography, Julia Watson writes that "many fictions of female development structure the incorporation of sexuality as the internalization of the only sexual identity to be spoken—that of female heterosexuality defined as the other of heterosexual masculinity. In autobiography, which as a genre has functioned as the keeper of the 'law' of patriarchal identity, women's sexuality has usually been presumed as heterosexual except when spoken otherwise" (Watson 1992:140). Sidonie Smith further notes that when women set aside the "sanctities of official narratives," which would have included personal writing such as journaling, and instead chose to write their lives through other forms, they were able to "evade narrative fixture in official scripts of the universal subject or embodied subject" (Smith 1993:23). Smith defines the "autobiographical manifesto" as follows:

A public performance, the manifesto revels in the energetic display of a new kind of subject. The manifesto engages directly the cultural construction of identities and their sanctioned and legitimated performances, engaging the ideological systems pressing specific identities on specific persons. It takes a public stand on behalf of purposeful deflections, intervening in oppressive identity performances, troubling cultural authorized fictions. Historicizing identity, the autobiographical manifesto implicitly, if not explicitly, insists on the temporalities and spatialities of identity and, in doing so, brings the everyday practices of identity directly into the floodlights of conscious display. (Smith 1993:161)

The manifesto need not be all-encompassing, nor a complete philosophical account of the writer's life or beliefs. Rather, in the terms of autobiographical

theory, it may be any statement about a narrator's self that aids in the construction of the narrator's identity, and can be as limited or as extensive as the writer chooses.

I propose that much of Talma's compositional oeuvre is such an autobiographical manifesto. Additionally, her early works may be understood in terms of Kaplan's concept of the "out-law" narrative, a non-traditional autobiographical genre that "renegotiate[s] the relationship between personal identity and the world, between personal and social history" (Kaplan:130). While journal and diary-keeping was common among women who lived in the early and mid-twentieth century, pursuing a career as a composer was not. The realm of the composer remained, with a few notable exceptions, that of men. Thus, by writing her life through music, Talma created works that in both the medium (of a male-dominated art form), and the message (a declaration of same-sex love) function as out-law narratives. In these pieces, a narrator, whose role is assigned to female singers, addresses her unrequited desire for a woman, and laments the cruelty of the woman who spurns her. By setting multiple texts traditionally associated with a male narrator for a woman, Talma establishes an identity outside of the heteronormative orthodoxy presumed by society and negotiates her own personal and social history. Reading Talma's early compositions in this manner, we may, as Watson puts it, "trace a trajectory of naming an unspeakable," namely, same-sex love and desire among women (140).

Talma and Boulanger's relationship began as that of student and instructor, a dynamic that, as Marjorie Garber points out, is rife with erotic possibility. Countless lesbian and bisexual narratives relate the phenomenon of a female student's "crush" or "flame" for an older female teacher (Garber 2000:330). Numerous characteristics of these "flame" relationships described by Garber correspond almost exactly to Talma's actions during the first several years of the women's relationship. As Garber states, "The list is worth scrutinizing because it is a typology of love—any love, but especially what we call 'romantic.'" The list includes:

the extraordinary frequency with which, even by means of subterfuges, the lovers exchange letters; the anxiety to see and talk to one another, to press each other's hands, to embrace and kiss; the long conversations and the very long reveries; persistent jealousy, with its manifold arts and usual results; exaltation of the beloved's qualities; the habit of writing the beloved's name everywhere; absence of envy for the loved one's qualities; the lover's abnegation in conquering all obstacles to the manifestations of her love; the vanity with which some respond to "flame" declarations; the consciousness of doing a prohibited thing; [and] the pleasure of conquest, of which the trophies (letters, etc.) are preserved. (2000:304)

Talma's relationship with Boulanger demonstrated nearly all of these aspects with the exception of physical contact, which Boulanger kept to a minimum—at least in public—and which Talma craved beyond all else. During the early years of their relationship, spanning the late 1920s, the two women spent considerable time together during Talma's summers in France at the Conservatoire Américain. Boulanger invited Talma to live in her Paris home and at her summer home in Gargenville. Ethel Chapman, a close friend of Talma at the time, described the early relationship between mentor and pupil: "all the intimacy of those early years, the walks along the Seine, the times at her summer place, and on and on" (Chapman 1964). Their relationship at this time may be characterized as what Lillian Faderman calls "romantic friendship." Faderman describes this kind of relationship as a passionate and devoted union that, while couched in the language of lovers, was nevertheless "not genital" (Faderman 1981:18). That the relationship excluded sexual activity is seemingly indicated in Talma's letters which testify—with great pain and longing—to Boulanger's inability to engage in physical affection. Boulanger's affections could be variable, and she made it clear that she preferred working with male students over female ones (Leonard 2007:46). Nonetheless, Talma pursued Boulanger's affection, while at the same time beginning to compose her *Three Madrigals*—love songs whose texts speak of a lover's despair over the beloved's mixed messages and fickleness. Talma's manuscripts indicate that the *Madrigals* were composed in New York, and performances of them took place there, but it is unknown whether Boulanger ever saw or heard them. While Talma was more experimental in her early works—abandoning stable key areas and meter—the *Madrigals* are written using common-practice period harmonic and rhythmic conventions, adoptions Talma made only after studying with Boulanger, possibly in an attempt to gain her teacher's approval. Nonetheless, Talma uses several of her common compositional hallmarks, including non-developmental blocks to structure a piece; minor and/or major seconds to indicate emphasis, often distress; and a distinct practice of dis/continuity, in which continuity is maintained through certain compositional elements while discontinuity is simultaneously created with others.

During the 1930s, the period in which the love songs were written, when Talma was away from Fontainebleau she would write to Boulanger up to several times a week. These writings include long letters, postcards, telegrams, and missives passed on by friends. Additionally, Talma wrote to friends of Boulanger's greatness, overlooking any human foibles that she might display (Chapman 1969). Writing to Boulanger in 1933, Talma expressed her sincere devotion to her teacher. She writes, "You know that the smallest word from you is more to me than all the volumes of the world"

(Talma, May 26, 1933). In a later letter recalling the ceremony in which she converted to Catholicism with Boulanger as her godmother, Talma couched her conversion ceremony as a wedding to Boulanger as much as to the Church: “we stood together before God’s altar. That was the most joyous day of my life” (Talma, July 4, 1941). She further wrote of the ceremony, in which Boulanger presented her with a ring:

My most dear one, you cannot fully realize what this so exquisite ring means for me. It is the one thing which I have really desired with a great desire—that I might wear a ring given me by you. You must have seen the wish in my eyes that I might at some time be so privileged as to have upon my finger a ring of yours. (Talma, July 1, 1935)

However, Talma would continue to desire to live with or close to Boulanger, and to have some kind of physical involvement. In 1935, she wrote to a mutual friend about the end of the summer in France:

It was terrible, leaving her [Boulanger]. I hardly knew what I was saying that last night with her, and there was so much that had to be said, and finally I left in a wave of despair without saying any of it. As for her—I do not know whether she feared that weakening effect on me of any softness on her part, or whether she just cannot bring herself to it, or whether it is absolutely against her principles, but she let me go without one gentle caress . . . And yet I know she loves me well. (Talma, 1935)

Boulanger replied frequently to Talma’s letters, but the majority of the extant responses, even those from the late 1920s, show her to be cool and detached, stating only in closing lines, alongside passages from Scripture, that she was thinking of Talma. Despite the intimacies they apparently shared, and Boulanger’s seeming encouragement of Talma’s romantic pursuit that took place in person in France during the mid-1920s, it is clear from Boulanger’s letters at the end of the decade and into the next that she was not willing or able to openly reciprocate Talma’s feelings, eliminating any possibility for romantic development.

Following Talma’s 1934 conversion, Boulanger, who was slowly becoming increasingly distant in her letters, took to signing them “Marraine [Godmother],” as if to emphasize the necessity of keeping any emotions she had for her godchild repressed or secret. Talma seems to have accepted the reality of the situation: that Boulanger would not be her lover in the future, whatever had taken place in the past. The tenor of Talma’s letters changed drastically, and she begged Boulanger for forgiveness for any inappropriate overtures she made:

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I have only an immense sorrow that I can bring you nothing, and remorse without name that I have on the contrary given you, my most dearly beloved friend on earth, than to serve whom I can, I can think of no greater joy, I would wish to do nothing but that which could be of some good to you, so many painful hours with my sad, terse countenance and my selfish thoughtlessness and lack of restraint—and what is terrible is to have been for so long blind to this, and to know that no amount of regret can undo those hours. (Talma, August 4, 1935)

Talma later re-emphasized her anguish over the situation, writing:

I am not yet accustomed to living with this being I am finding myself to be—so weak, so poor, so lost, whose relationships are all distorted . . . I cannot even arrive at the peace of communion, and I need it so greatly. It is easy enough to confess fault, but it is horribly difficult to put into words intangible mental states which are as sinful as if not more so than actions.” (Talma, August 9, 1935)

Following this outpouring, Boulanger’s only response, a month later, was a telegram stating that she had not wished to “renew painful emotions of the heart,” signing it “Tenderly, Godmother” (Boulanger, September 4, 1935). Despite this response, Talma still struggled with her feelings for Boulanger. Only a month later she wrote, “I cannot envisage the thought of living permanently away from you . . . I am so lonely and so unhappy away from you! I dream about you and that I am near you with such startling vividness, and I wake up with infinite sadness to realize it was only a dream and that this damned boat is taking me every hour further from you” (Talma, September 1935). Later she wrote that, “when all my thoughts should be directed towards home and the problems of the immediate future I cannot keep them from turning constantly towards you and towards means of returning to you.” Talma’s friend and fellow Boulanger student Marie Brodeur frequently consoled Talma, advising her in a letter, “Do not let Nadia hurt you. If she wants to remain frigid you cannot force her” (Brodeur, letter written to Talma, 1930s).

Talma devised methods of worshipping her beloved from afar by wearing jewelry Boulanger had given her and creating shrines in her home:

That you should bestow upon me these things so treasured to you, and thereby even more precious to me, is more than wonderful . . . My room is filled with your presence. When I go to bed your cross which is with me all day hangs upon the wall above my head, and sends its blessings upon me throughout the night. In the morning when I awaken the first thing my eyes behold as they open is your beloved countenance looking down

from the wall beside me out of four of the seven pictures I have of you (the other three are by the piano, so that you are beside me everywhere when I am at home). (Talma, January 2, 1936)

In May 1941, however, Talma's attitude towards Boulanger changed. Shocked by Boulanger's anti-Semitism, Talma wrote to her, eschewing the lavish language of the earlier letters. It is "very bewildering and sad," she wrote. "Perhaps you can enlighten me on how an expression of hatred can mean its opposite. Meanwhile I know that my doctor, who is Jewish, treats me with more, I notice, understanding and humanity than do you, my godmother. It's sad, but all this changes nothing to my love for you which remains as always" (Talma, May 6, 1941). Boulanger claimed not to understand what Talma was upset about: "I continue not to understand you, but I don't doubt your sentiments" (Boulanger, May 30, 1941). Boulanger later wrote that, out of respect, Talma should allow her to think what she liked, stating, "do not try to reform me" (Boulanger, June 21, 1941). This rebuke did little to assuage Talma, who, two months later wrote, "The day I heard you with your anti-Semitism deny the first principle of your faith—our faith—was the saddest." In a line, crossed-out in the draft, Talma goes on to write, "because then I lost my most cherished possession—my respect for you." She continues, "My only consolation is to remember that Peter also denied his Lord. But love you with all my heart I do, and that is why the anguish is so great" (Talma, July 4, 1941). On Good Friday of the following year, Talma returned to Boulanger the ring and baptismal cross Boulanger had given her upon her conversion. While they would remain in touch almost as often as before, and Talma would struggle with her need for Boulanger's approval and attention throughout her life, their relationship was unalterably changed, and Talma's uncritical adulation of Boulanger and her desire for their relationship to be openly romantic had ended. Talma stopped setting works of romantic text and began to focus more intensely on religious and spiritual materials and forms.

After her failed relationship with Boulanger, Talma retreated from seeking or sustaining many close personal relationships. She maintained a non-romantic friendship with Marie Brodeur throughout their lives, and, later in life, an intense romantic friendship with another woman,¹ both of whom had also been Boulanger students at the Conservatoire Américain. There is no evidence of a physical element in her relationship with this other former Boulanger pupil, but the epistolary documentation indicates that the woman felt considerable physical desire for Talma. As Talma once wrote to Boulanger, so this woman writes to Talma:

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I committed myself to you long ago—with apprehension, that is true, but I did it anyhow, with full knowledge of my own responsibility to that commitment—knowing myself so well—knowing that once I turn loose of my heart it can never be mine again—knowing my vulnerability—knowing that every joy has a pain that is the price—knowing how lonely I get for the people I love—knowing the disparity of our own personalities, knowing the differences in the way we live . . . I stood behind you, and held you in my arms, with my heart beating against your shoulder blade, your hand in mine . . . (Name redacted, February 6, 1965)

The woman found the relationship difficult, and cites Talma's tendencies to pull away or to turn unexpectedly cold (January 1965), bringing them both pain and causing the woman to equate Talma's behavior with Boulanger's of many years earlier. In addition, this woman, a Catholic convert like Talma, clearly agonized over the appropriateness of their situation, writing at one point, "I love you, Louisa, were though I wish with *all* my strength that I didn't" (February 1965). Talma's responses to these letters have not been discovered. Nonetheless, it appears from the letters that they maintained this relationship for several years from the mid-1960s through at least the early 1970s. In no case did Talma replicate the kind of relationship she had with Boulanger with any of her own students, who recall her mostly as "cold," (Powers 2009) and "gruff" towards them (Atlas 2009).

Between meeting Boulanger and converting to Catholicism, Talma wrote several songs for women's voices or solo voice and piano, as well as her first orchestral composition, *Isabeau Poème* (1927–28), a work based on French–Canadian folksongs and written for a Canadian contest. Apart from the contest piece, the majority of these works address unrequited or impossible love: *Three Madrigals* (1929, texts by Sir Thomas Wyatt); "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" (1929, John Keats); *Five Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1934, Elizabeth Barrett Browning); "Late Leaves" (1934, Walter Savage Landor); and "Never Seek to Tell Thy Love" (1934, William Blake).

The first of the songs, composed in 1929, is the cycle *Three Madrigals*, a setting of three poems by Sir Thomas Wyatt. These poems, "The Appeal: An Earnest Suit to his Unkind Mistress, not to Forsake him," "Revocation," and "The Careful Lover Complaineth and the Happy Lover Counseleth," present a narrator who continually asks the beloved to affirm her loyalty and desire and implores her to deny that she has rejected the narrator. Ultimately the narrator finds the lover cruel. Talma set the songs for women's voices and string quartet, changing the narrator's gender from male to female while retaining the female gender of the beloved. She also arranged the songs for women's voices and piano for performances in which a string quartet was not available.

The narrative suggested by the ordering of songs in this cycle corresponds to Talma's responses regarding her relationship with Boulanger. Just as Talma felt confused that their early intimate period together was followed by contradictory messages from Boulanger and finally a withdrawal from intimacy, the narrator of "The Appeal" is perplexed that the beloved, whom the lover has "loved . . . so long/In wealth and woe among," has begun to cast off the lover by denying attention and affection: "wilt thou leave me thus, / And have no more pitye / Of him that loveth thee? / Alas, thy cruelty!/ And wilt thou leave me thus?" The lover entreats the beloved to change her mind, repeatedly pleading, "Say nay! say nay!" The text ends with the relationship unresolved: the narrator yearns for the beloved, who returns no encouraging response; indeed, there is no response at all.

And wilt thou leave me thus!
Say nay, say nay, for shame!
— To save thee from the blame
Of all my grief and grame.
And wilt thou leave me thus?

Say nay! say nay!

And wilt thou leave me thus,
That hath loved thee so long
In wealth and woe among:
And is thy heart so strong
As for to leave me thus?

Say nay! say nay!

And wilt thou leave me thus,
That hath given thee my heart
Never for to depart
Neither for pain nor smart:
And wilt thou leave me thus?

Say nay! say nay!

And wilt thou leave me thus,
And have no more pitye
Of him that loveth thee?
Alas, thy cruelty!
And wilt thou leave me thus?

Say nay! say nay!
(*Oxford Book of English Verse*, 1919)

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The musical score is for a vocal piece in 2/4 time. It features four staves: two Soprano parts, two Alto parts, and a Piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: "And wilt thou leave me thus! Say nay, for shame! To Say nay, say nay, say nay, for shame! Say nay, say nay, say nay, for shame! Say nay, for shame!" The piano part provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords and moving lines in both hands.

Example 1: "The Appeal," mm. 1–8.

While "The Appeal," with its emphatic cries of "say nay!" could be set in a declamatory manner, a musical interpretation of the text that might suggest that the narrator is chastising the beloved and ordering her to deny or reverse her rejection, Talma sets the text as a lament, signified by the slow tempo (*Andante non troppo*; eighth note = 100) and the quiet dynamic indications. Despite the exclamation points that follow each "nay," the choruses of "say nay" are set to falling major seconds and always marked with diminuendos from "say" to "nay," negating the emphasis given by the poet and creating a textbook example of a musical "sigh" as used from Bach to Mahler (Gritten 2006:51). Talma's use of the "sigh" to indicate emotions of sadness, loss, and despair can be observed in her very first works, dating from at least as early as 1925.

"For shame" is set identically to "say nay" in the inner voices; again, rather than serving as a rebuke, it sounds almost wistful, as if to echo Talma's dismay over Boulanger's lack of warmth. The "shame" is that the relationship is not proceeding, rather than that the beloved should be ashamed for her actions. Nonetheless, the lover holds out some hope: in contrast to the inner voices, the outer voices crescendo slightly on "for shame," and the questions asked by the narrator end on rising tones, just as genuine questions do in speech, whereas rhetorical questions move down in pitch. "And wilt thou leave me thus?," which rises through each iteration to *forte*, is repeated, as if to counter disbelief, the question pushed over and over in long, slurred lines. Contrasting modalities suggest an ambiguous outcome to the lover's

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Soprano
Soprano
Alto
Alto
Piano

f
mf And wilt thou leave me— *f* will thou leave me—
p And wilt thou leave me thus? *f* will thou leave me
And wilt thou leave me— *f* will thou leave me—
And wilt thou leave me— *f* will thou leave me—
cresc.
f
8va

22 *rit e dim.*
S. thus? *dim.* Say nay! *p*
S. this? Say nay! *dim.* Say nay!
A. thus? *dim.* Say nay! *p*
A. this? Say nay! *dim.* Say nay!
Pno. *rit e dim.* *p a tempo* *poco rit.* *a tempo*

Example 2: "The Appeal" mm. 16–27.

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question. The song initially outlines the Phrygian mode in the outermost voices and the melody. At measure 21, the voices state the query together at *forte* and the preceding tonality, centered around E, abruptly shifts with the introduction of B \flat , a contrast to the repeated B-naturals of the previous measures. Thus briefly suggesting a Lydian relationship based on the enharmonically spelled augmented fourth of E–B \flat , Talma then cadences on an FM7. This tonal and modal discontinuity creates a harmonic instability in the work that is resolved only with a formal change of key at measure 27 from E Phrygian to F \sharp minor.

The F \sharp -minor section begins with an extended passage on C \sharp m7, further creating a sense of harmonic instability before finally cadencing on F \sharp eight measures later at measure 35. Although it begins with a repetition of “And wilt thou leave me thus?” this section, marked *Poco piú mosso*, soon takes up the second stanza: “That hath given thee my heart / never for to depart / Neither for pain nor smart.” The slightly faster tempo here suggests that the lover makes one last urgent attempt to convince the beloved that the lover remains true, but the *ritardando* at measure 43, which leads to a transition back to Tempo I and a modulation back to E Phrygian by again using the B \flat /Bb dichotomy, indicates that this plea has not been successful, as Talma’s continued pursuit of Boulanger was also unsuccessful.

The climax of “The Appeal” arrives at measures 55 and 56. After several measures of singing at *piano*, submissively asking for pity from the beloved, the lover at last proclaims the beloved’s cruelty in a dramatic crescendo to *forte* that occurs over three measures, Talma all the while continuing to include the sigh motif before finally cadencing on E and A in the voices and an FM7 in the piano. This dissonance signifies the emotional tenor of the work and the anguish on the part of the lover.

Except in cadences, all of which land on the first beat of a measure, Talma usually avoids using the fifth of any chord on a strong beat, preferring to add it in only fleetingly on an off-beat either in a single voice or the accompaniment. This coyness in establishing a tonal center may reflect Talma’s own sense of unease regarding the unresolved situation with Boulanger; the root and third are present, but the fifth, which would help confirm the tonality/modality, is persistently absent. In the song’s coda, marked *Poco a poco piú lento sino alla fine*, there is a strong return to the E pentatonic of the opening, which, along with the inner voices singing “say nay” on descending minor seconds, suggests that the emotions of the narrator have come full circle. “Nay” is the final answer.

“A Revocation” continues the narrative of “An Appeal,” expressing the lover’s anger at rejection, coupled with musical reminders of the previous song, including the use of the descending minor second sigh and swiftly

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Soprano
thee? *mp* A - las, thy cru - el - ty! And

Soprano
tye? *p* *cresc.* A - las, thy cru - el - ty!

Alto
tye? *p* *cresc.* A - las, thy cru - el - ty! thy cru - el - ty!

Alto
thee? *p* A - las, thy cru - el - ty! thy cru - el - ty!

PIANO
p *f*

Example 3: "The Appeal," mm. 52–56.

shifting tonal centers. The text suggests that the lover and the beloved have exchanged meaningful words and promises to one another, but that the beloved has not been true to those assurances.

What should I say?
—Since Faith is dead,
And Truth away
From you is fled?
Should I be led
With doubleness?
Nay! nay! mistress.

I promised you,
And you promised me,
To be as true
As I would be.
But since I see
Your double heart,
Farewell my part!

Thought for to take
'Tis not my mind;
But to forsake
One so unkind;

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And as I find
So will I trust.
Farewell, unjust!

Can ye say nay
But that you said
That I alway
Should be obeyed?
And—thus betrayed
Or that I wist!
Farewell, unkist!
(*Oxford Book of English Verse*, 1919)

Concepts of betrayal and doubleness run throughout the poem, and Talma represents this in her setting. The narrator asks, “Should I be led/ With doubleness?” in the first stanza, and then repeats the conceit in almost every stanza following, citing the beloved’s “double heart,” calling her actions “unjust,” and decrying acts that caused the narrator to be “betrayed” by her. The lack of physical contact between the lover and the beloved is made abundantly clear and emphasized in the final stanza, in which the narrator abandons hope of reconciliation with an abrupt, “Farewell, unkist!” As in “An Appeal,” the lover brands the beloved cruel, here calling her “unkind” and “unjust.” The song is structured in four blocks, each with a contrasting texture in the piano while the voices provide continuity through their use of a rising three-note motif. Although in “The Appeal” each voice was treated equally, in “A Revocation,” Talma singles out the second alto—her own preferred voice part (Talma, 1961)—for special treatment; aside from the introduction, it always enters before or after the other three voices and usually provides contrasting melodic and rhythmic motion.

In contrast to the pleading quality of “An Appeal,” “A Revocation” is angry. The introduction, set in E major at a quick tempo, is emphatic and marked *forte deciso*. It quickly establishes the key, a tendency to modulate to the dominant, and the motif, after which the vocalists enter together with the first stanza’s series of rhetorical questions: “What should I say?” Voices are frequently doubled in this A section, both in rhythm and in pitch, before launching into counterpoint and coming back together again for “Nay! nay! mistress.”

A more lyrical B section in C major follows, starting at measure 17. Accompanied by a rocking tonic-dominant line in the piano, the narrator recounts the promises she and the beloved have made one another. The key change may represent a different time and space, and the top three voices, in rhythmic unison, the close relationship of the narrator and the

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Musical score for Soprano, Alto, and Piano. The score is in 2/2 time and F# major. The Soprano and Alto parts are currently silent, indicated by horizontal lines. The Piano part begins with a *f deciso* dynamic. The piano accompaniment features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes in the right hand and chords in the left hand.

Musical score for Soprano (S.), Alto (A.), and Piano (PNO.) with lyrics. The score is in 2/2 time and F# major. The Soprano and Alto parts are marked with a *f* dynamic. The lyrics are: "What should I say? Since Faith is dead, and" (Soprano); "What should I say? What should I" (Alto); "What should I say? What should I say? Since" (Alto); "What should I say?" (Alto). The piano accompaniment continues with a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes in the right hand and chords in the left hand.

Example 4: "A Revocation," mm. 1-11.

10

S. Truth a - way from you is fled? Should

S. say? Since Faith is dead? Should

A. Faith is dead? Should

A.

PNO.

Example 4 (continued): “A Revocation,” mm. 1–11.

woman she loves. However, the second alto trails behind the top three and is more independent, providing motion when the top voices hold pitches, a reluctant echo like the lone ascending voice that hopes against hope in “An Appeal.” As the text moves from the narrator’s recollection of promises to her realization of the beloved’s doubleness and the necessity of bidding the beloved farewell, the key modulates to G major and then back C major, perhaps indicating that the narrator’s resolve to depart has grown and that her anger has returned. The B section cadences in C major, but the piano line descends chromatically, dragging the work into a short C section in F minor, although using D–naturals throughout to continue the major–second motif of the previous section. This stanza, too, ends with farewell; “farewell” and “unjust” are positioned against one another on a ii–I cadence that indicates that the narrator, while wishing to be finished, is not quite done addressing the beloved; an emphatic cadence is avoided.

Talma modulates from F minor through $A\flat$ major back to E major over the course of two measures, returning to the material of the A section and ending the song with emphatic statements of “Farewell, unkest!” and an affirmative V/V–V–I cadence in the piano. If “A Revocation” stands as a declarative document of Talma’s own narrative, supported by the epistolary evidence, her disappointment and anger over her treatment by Boulanger are plainly in view here, emphasized by the often separate voicing of the second alto.

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Soprano
Fare - well, fare - well my part, fare - well!

Soprano
Fare - well my part, fare - well!

Alto
Fare well my part, fare - well!

Alto
well my part!

PIANO

Detailed description: This system contains the first four staves of the musical score. The top two staves are for Soprano voices, the next two for Alto voices, and the bottom two for Piano. The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and the time signature is 3/2. The lyrics are: 'Fare - well, fare - well my part, fare - well!' for the first Soprano; 'Fare - well my part, fare - well!' for the second Soprano; 'Fare well my part, fare - well!' for the first Alto; and 'well my part!' for the second Alto. The piano accompaniment features a rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes in the right hand and a steady bass line in the left hand.

39

S. *mp*
Thought for to take. Tis not my

S. *mp*
Thought for to take. Tis not my

A. *mp*
Thought for to take. Tis not my mind;

A. *mp*
Thought to take. Tis not my mind;

PNO.

Detailed description: This system contains the next four staves of the musical score, starting at measure 39. The top two staves are for Soprano voices (S.), the next two for Alto voices (A.), and the bottom two for Piano (PNO.). The key signature remains three flats and the time signature is 3/2. The lyrics are: 'Thought for to take. Tis not my' for both Sopranos; 'Thought for to take. Tis not my mind;' for both Altos. The piano accompaniment continues with a similar rhythmic pattern, featuring a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. A dynamic marking of *mp* (mezzo-piano) is present above the vocal staves.

Example 5: "A Revocation," mm. 35-51.

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44

S. *leggiere*
 mind; _____ And as I find So will I trust. Fare-

S. *leggiere*
 mind; _____ Fare - well, un-just! Fare - well,

A. *leggiere*
 But to for - sake one so un - kind; So, So will I trust.

A. *leggiere*
 But to for - sake one so un - kind; So, Fare - well

NO. *leggiere* *leggiere*

48

S. well, un-just! Fare - well, un-just!

S. Fare - well, un-just! Fare - well!

A. Fare - well, Fare - well!

A. Fare - well, Fare - well!

NO. *cres-* *cen-* *do*

Example 5 (continued): "A Revocation," mm. 35-51.

“The Careful Lover Complaineth and the Happy Lover ConsoletH” is the last of Talma’s *Three Madrigals*. Spurned, the careful lover tells the happy lover of her beloved’s unfaithfulness: “My Lady is unkind, perdie! She loveth another better than me, And yet she will say no,” the poem reads—a line applicable to the inconsistent Boulanger, who chose and discarded pet students with regularity and at times seems to have delighted in the despair of struggling students who nonetheless admired her. The lover tells her happy friend, who is lucky in love, and experiences “no such doubleness,” to be wary, for “women’s love is but a blast / And turneth like the wind.” In this song, Talma selects a text that may be understood to depict her own path from being Boulanger’s would-be happy lover to being a resigned, hurt, and careful lover. Rather than addressing the beloved directly, “A Careful Lover” explores the idea of discussing the failed romance with a third party. However, the careful lover deems the happy lover naïve and deluded in the ways of women’s love, and insists on women’s faithlessness. Talma’s setting of the poem as a sung conversation between women could be read as a warning to women new to Boulanger’s orbit of the teacher’s habit of playing favorites, her prioritizing of men over women (while encouraging women to marry and raise their sons to become great musicians), and finally her inability to commit to a relationship.

“The Careful Lover” begins with a dotted rhythm in the piano, representing the light heart of the happy lover. The second soprano and second alto, jointly serving as the happy lover, call out salutes to “Joly Robin,” but their warm greeting ends abruptly with the entrance of the first soprano and first alto, who voice the role of the careful, disappointed lover. At the entrance of the careful lover, the tempo slows from quarter note = 100 to 76, and Talma effects a sudden chromatic shift from G Mixolydian to distant G# minor. Where Talma gave the happy lover short phrases with articulated notes, the careful lover’s text is set in long, slurred sighs of unhappiness. The happy lover responds with a slurred line, echoing the despair of the careful lover, albeit in her previous mode. The exchange continues in these contrasting modalities, and the careful lover has the last say, set by Talma with basic text-painting techniques: the second time the careful lover sings “turneth like the wind,” the melody is an inversion and transposition of the original statement. The careful lover, embodied in Talma’s own vocal range, knows her beloved to be untrue.

These three songs, composed for public performance and consumption, constitute a significant document signifying Talma’s relationship with Boulanger. The consistency of expression between these works and Talma’s correspondence of the same period indicates that the songs were written with Boulanger in mind and as a manifesto in which the composer could voice her desire for Boulanger and her despair over the relationship’s failure to become a committed and physical one.

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Soprano

Soprano *p*
Ah! Ro-bin! Jo-ly Ro-bin! Tell me how thy Le-man doth?And

Alto
Jo-ly Ro-bin! Tell me how thy

PIANO

16

Meno mosso ♩ = 76
mf

S.
"My La-dy is un-kind, per-die!"

S.
thou shalt hear_ of mine. A -

A.
"My La-dy is un-kind, per-die!"

A.
Le-man doth?And thou shalt hear of mine. A -

PNO. **Meno mosso** ♩ = 76

Example 6: "The Careful Lover," mm. 11–22.

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Molto meno mosso $\text{♩} = 60$

Soprano *p* Thou art hap-py While that doth last, *mf* But I say as I

Soprano

Alto *p* Thou art hap-py While that doth last; But

Alto

PIANO *p*

Molto meno mosso $\text{♩} = 60$

45

S. find: That wo-man's love is but a blast, And tur-neth like the wind; That

S.

A. I say as I find: Wo - man's love is but a blast,

A.

PNO L.H. L.H.

Example 7: "The Careful Lover," mm. 39-55.

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50

S. wo-man's love is but a blast, And tur-neth like the wind.

A. And tur neth, tur-neth like the wind.

PNO. rit. pp

Example 7 (continued): “The Careful Lover,” mm. 39–55.

For the *Five Sonnets from the Portuguese*, Talma set sonnets XXI, “Say Over Again”; VII, “The face of all the world is changed”; XII, “When our two souls stand up”; I, “I thought once how Theocritus had sung” and XXXIII, “Yes, call me by my pet name!” Each of these is an address from lover to beloved in which the beloved is implored to confirm her love and devotion. Like the *Three Madrigals*, the *Five Sonnets* were composed for women’s voices and piano. Talma’s choice of setting “I thought once how Theocritus had sung” further suggests an intention for the works to represent same-sex desire. Theocritus was well-known for his love poetry addressed to other men, and his bucolic poems focus on lovers remaining faithful to their beloveds, though they may be manipulated by the gods to love others or renounce their love.

The rest of these early works, for which the scores are missing, likewise share themes of cruelty and rejection. In Keats’s “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” (1929), the narrator recounts a conversation with a knight dying for his love of a cruel (and older) faerie woman who has used and discarded him. In a vision, he sees the truth of his beloved: “I saw pale kings and princes too, / Pale warriors, death-pale were they all: / They cried, ‘La belle Dame sans Merci / Hath thee in thrall!’”

Landor’s “Late Leaves” (1934) is a statement of resignation and regret for a love that will never be truly reciprocated or consummated, with lines that must have resonated strongly with Talma, who particularly felt the pain

of separating from Boulanger at the end of each summer in France: “And spring and summer both are past, / And all things sweet.” There is a final paroxysm of desperate hope, or perhaps resigned regret, in Blake’s “Never seek to tell thy love” (1934). The early lines hold out some hope for the relationship, reading, “Love that never told can be; / For the gentle wind does move, / Silently, invisibly;”—perhaps a gesture from Talma to Boulanger indicating that even if their love could not be publically acknowledged, she was willing to be a discreet party to a secret relationship. But in the end, the beloved is repulsed by the lover’s desire and desperation and rejects the lover, leaving her bereft: “I told my love, I told my love, / I told her all my heart; / Trembling, cold, in ghastly fears, / Ah! she doth depart.”

Indicated by the epistolary correspondence between these two figures, the connection between these texts and Talma’s own desire for Boulanger seems clear. During the period in which she composed the *Five Sonnets*, Talma repeatedly promised Boulanger that her devotion had not faded, and writes, “As for you, you are enshrined in the inmost sanctuary of my heart where neither Time nor the vicissitudes of life can make the smallest change” (Talma, August 1935). The *Five Sonnets* were, like the *Three Madrigals*, composed for women’s voices and piano. They were premiered at a League of Composers concert on February 23, 1936, a highly publicized and public setting. Like the *Three Madrigals*, the *Sonnets* function as public statements of a woman expressing her love for another woman.

Conclusion

In these works, Talma was able to take what Smith calls a “public stand on behalf of purposeful deflections,” and thus “interven[e] in oppressive identity performances, troubling cultural authorized fictions” (Smith:161). Composing works that expressed her own sexual identity and desires, Talma created an autobiographical manifesto. Her works set aside traditional women’s narratives of love for a man and instead represented a woman’s desire for another, ultimately unattainable woman. By setting these texts for female voice, with several emphatic sections set in her own voice range, Talma identified herself with the narrators of these texts and addressed those emotions and desires chronicled in her epistolary correspondence with Boulanger. Throughout these works, she used harmonic and melodic materials consistently, developing a compositional language in which the “sigh” motif and chromaticism indicated suffering, and in which rapidly changing moods signified changes in persona or emotion.

Talma’s decision to compose works that contained explicit autobiographical elements was set for the rest of her career. Her archived materials from this period contain copious sketches for other works focusing on

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themes of destined love and thwarted love, many of them echoing her letters to Boulanger, including settings of sonnets by Shakespeare, Marlowe's "A Shepherd to his Love," and texts from Antoine Saint-Exupéry's *Le Petit Prince*, but none of these were completed. After her break with Boulanger in the early 1940s, Talma moved to radically different texts that dealt with her religious beliefs. The majority of her works immediately following the break are based on liturgical texts or poems by other adult converts to Catholicism. These texts often reflect anxiety, fear, remorse, and inwardness, and as such may be seen to mirror Talma's emotions as her relationship with Boulanger crumbled and was rebuilt from a position of wariness, and as Talma explored more deeply her own personal religious convictions. Moreover, in setting these works, Talma assigned the voice parts to the "proper" gender of the narrator. She did not seek further performances or publication of the love songs. In a sense, Talma appears to have, at least for a time, "take[n] up the sanctities of official narratives" described by Smith (Smith 1992:23). She had come to the realization that not only was Boulanger cruel to those she encouraged to love and worship her, but that she had other serious flaws that could not be overlooked. In focusing almost exclusively on religious works, Talma appears to have sublimated her past desire for Boulanger, invoking a realm of religious separateness, the love for and of a deity, in place of erotic love. It was not until 1973, when she set bisexual poet Jean Garrigue's (no relation) poem "Rain Song," as a memorial to the poet, that Talma engaged again with texts that hinted of same-sex desire. During the intervening years, she had worked to establish herself as a sexless, devout vehicle for composing religious works and taught much in the model of Boulanger's public pedagogic persona. She appears to have succeeded in burying her personal life—her students knew nothing of her life outside of the classroom (Powers 2009, Atlas 2009), and she made a name for herself as a prickly, difficult woman (Donadio 2006:7). Nonetheless, as Havelock Ellis has observed, "Every artist writes his own autobiography" (Ellis:186). Talma's early songs were her first step in constructing a body of work in which she could represent herself as both person and composer.

Notes

1. Although this correspondence is archived and publicly available, I withhold the name of the woman at this time.

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