

An Agreement with Reality:
The Poetry of Logical Modernism

by

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INTRODUCTION

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Agreements with Reality: Towards a Theory of Logical Modernism

Logic is the study of the forms of complexes.

Complex is primitive: opposite of simple.

The form of a complex is what it has in common with a complex obtained by replacing each constituent of the complex by something different. What two such complexes have in common is of course a problem—a problem for logic.”

—Bertrand Russell, “What Is Logic?” (1912)

*“Part of it was crawling, part of it
was about to crawl, the rest
was torpid in its lair.” In the short-legged, fitful
advance, the gurgling and all the minutiae—we have the classic
multitude of feet. To what purpose! Truth is no Apollo
Belvedere, no formal thing. The wave may go over it if it likes.
Know that it will be there when it says,
“I shall be there when the wave has gone by.”*

—Marianne Moore, “In the Days of Prismatic Color” (1919)

Logical Modernism

Begin with the days of prismatic color, with Marianne Moore’s dragon, who drank the river dry.

Begin with the “blue-red-yellow band/of incandescence that was color,” “complexity . . . committed to darkness,” the “fitful advance,” the “gurgling,” the “minutiae,” the “classic multitude of feet” (CP 41). Begin with her unicorns of sea and land, her “polished garlands” of agreeing difference” (“Sea Unicorns and Land Unicorns” CP 77). Begin with that “first telecolor-trove—/illogically wove/what logic can’t unweave” (“Logic and “The Magic Flute”” CP 170). Begin with her octopus and its

“[r]elentless accuracy,” its marvelous “capacity for fact” (“The Octopus” 76). Begin with the facts. Begin with the truth, which is “no Apollo Belvedere, no formal thing” (*CP* 41). Begin with that.

*

This dissertation is about a phenomenon called logical modernism, which compasses the encounters, crossings, conversations, quarrels, allowances, embraces, and resistances that bind together modern poets, critics, and philosophers—particularly the early analytics. *An Agreement with Reality* defines logical modernism by three related characteristics:

- 1) A preoccupation with the limits of literary truth as “agreement with reality,” particularly when it comes to the privileged relationship between poetry and truth. (Agreement, in this sense, means correspondence and “reality,” for the most part, designates a realist relation between subjective and objective.)
- 2) An engagement with post-Kantian aesthetics, which is to say post-Romantic, discourse as filtered through the work of the Cambridge Apostles and other engineers of logical positivism.
- 3) Concerns about whether it’s possible to achieve a theory of everything, a reconciliation of the truths of aesthetics with the truths offered by science and philosophy.

In the early twentieth-century, philosophers and poets share the question of what it meant for being, belief, language, meaning, and action to “agree with reality”—a phrase that appears (among other places) in the writing of William James, G.E. Moore, Bertrand Russell, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. The poet Wallace Stevens lifts this expression from the philosophical discourse to define poetic truth as “an agreement with reality brought about by the imagination” (*The Necessary Angel* 54). By the standards of modern philosophy, whether pragmatist or proto-analytic, agreement with reality is the major criterion for determining the truth of a given proposition. If the proposition agrees with reality, it is true; if it disagrees, false. If it neither agrees nor disagrees then it lies beyond the reach of logic.

Agreement with reality constitutes a more capacious variant of the correspondence theory of truth, which argues, roughly, that truth is a correspondence to a fact. This idea about the nature of truth flowered along with the rise of logical positivism in the early twentieth century. I contend that, in fact, the development of modern logic and the development of modern poetry do not possess entirely separate intellectual histories. Because the question of what kind of truths poetry might have to offer mattered intensely to modern poets and critics, they grappled with the terms of the correspondence theory that also animated enlivened philosophical discussion. What modern writers and readers of poetry made of “fact,” “reality,” “truth,” and “agreement” (important words, all, for a certain strain of modernism) they devised in dialogue with ideas about truth and language advanced by squabbling pragmatists and Cambridge philosophers. This story is the one my project tells.

An Agreement with Reality was born from a nagging suspicion that logic might have something to say to literature—nagging because I began with an entirely different question about aesthetics and the modern sensorium, full of delightful particulars, dates and names, messy metaphors, and a tangle of qualia to play with. But as the project sharpened and narrowed, I was left with a few, bare, gossamer abstractions like “truth” and “form” and “fact” and “poetry” that needed to be arranged in a useful constellation before I could answer the question I began with. They will have to suffice. I will appeal to the concrete where I can.

Traversing an historical arc that stretches, roughly, from 1900 to 1950, and sailing from one side of an ocean to another, the chapters that follow chart Transatlantic exchanges about the nature and significance of poetic truth. Poetry furnishes the primary material for my case study because of its traditional relationship, sometimes vexed, often privileged, to constructs like “form” and “truth.” When it comes to modernist poetry and reading, I contend, these debates about poetic forms and poetic truths take their color—sometimes by way of absorption, sometimes by way of critique—from contemporaneous philosophical arguments about truth and falsehood. A corollary to this claim

is the one that what comprises the “real” in modern poetry often depends on the conditions for reality set by, for example, Fregean logical realism.¹ From the early versions of close reading developed by William Empson, Laura (Riding) Jackson, I.A. Richards, and others to Gertrude Stein’s preoccupation with “exactitude” in the description of reality to Wallace Stevens’s “worlds of logic in their great tombs,” I reveal a counter-history of literary truth and literary form to which early analytic philosophy—with its fixation on the objectively (and as Stein said William James said “abjectly true” [*Everybody’s Autobiography* 242]) matters as much as do the pragmatist and Continental strains of philosophy.²

Moreover, I suggest, the dated feel of the term “literary truth” signals a humiliation well worth examining. Similarly embarrassing words like “affect,” “aesthetics,” and “formalism” have recovered their fortunes in recent scholarship and they have done so in part *because* of the shame that accompanies their invocation. It is gauche to talk of truth and objectivity or it is dangerous, possibly both. But it would be ridiculous to believe that these terms never mattered to literary discourse simply because they do not signify the same way now. My goal, here, is not necessarily to valorize any narrowly defined essence of poetic truth or poetic fact but, rather, to investigate how iterations of these concepts have historically informed cultural production.

My work suggests, furthermore, that questions of literary truth still matter to poetic practice and to criticism. Scholars often protest, for instance, that some readings are right—or at least righter than others—and the conditions for these assertions often imply an unspoken theory of truth that draws more from the tenets of logical modernism than it does from the Foucaultian model of truth described in “Truth and Power” as a “regime” to be understood as a system of ordered procedures .

¹ This is not to deny the importance of pragmatist ideas about reality to poetic discourse, only to say that pragmatism, though it exerted great influence, was not the only active species of philosophy to which modern aesthetic experiments responded; the “realism” of realist fiction might present another avenue for the study of logical influence, resonance, and application.

² In the period about which I’m writing, the division between analytic and Continental modes of philosophy had not yet hardened and so, where possible, I avoid these anachronistic terms.

. . linked in a circular relation with the systems of power which produce and sustain it” (*The Foucault Reader* 74). In this sense, *An Agreement with Reality* might be read as a literary transposition of Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison’s *Objectivity* (2007), which argues that the objective is not a stable, ahistorical concept but one that fluctuates in response to a variety of cultural, technological, and economic pressures. This dissertation is also an answer to Ann Banfield’s claim that “[a]lthough entirely distinct from logical philosophy, literature cannot, any more than philosophy, remain ignorant of the world of science if it aspires to modernity” (*The Phantom Table* 55). I am not proposing an identity between the methods and goals of modern logic and those of modern poetry but, rather more modestly, the idea that the history of the latter can be read—and read profitably—in the context of the former.

Positioned at the interstices of theory, literary history, and analytical approaches to aesthetics, this project may, at first, look strange to twenty-first century literary critics. But, in fact, recent trends in literary studies, particularly the archaeology of aesthetic theories and (to use Marjorie Levinson’s terminology) the new formalist turn with which the discipline is currently grappling, demand that we account for the effects of historical conceptions of aesthetics on poetic practice. The return to aesthetics as a discourse relevant to literature is partially motivated by the worry that historical and ideological critiques leave out experiences fundamental to literary encounters, among them the spectrum of affective-aesthetic responses that literature makes possible and that critics often interrogate through the practice of close reading. (Among the most skillful of the books that frame a version of this argument is Rita Felski’s *Uses of Literature* [2011].) Meanwhile, following Franco Moretti, critics have dealt with, in the words of Frances Ferguson, sought a “methodological response” to the difficulties of conceiving all literature as a sort of unified field, an account that, in Ferguson’s view, places at odds “the writing of literary history and the reading of individual texts” by means of close reading (“Planetary Literary History” 657-58). For my purposes,

this debate may be divided into two sub-arguments. The first concerns the relationship (if, indeed, there is one) between the kinds of knowledge about literature that historical and ideological critiques provide and the ones that more formalist approaches offer. The second is methodological and deals with how certain forms of critique (distant reading among them) have been positioned as a mechanism of empirical knowing and how certain forms of close reading have come to represent a mystical attempt at paraphrasing the conditions of an aesthetic encounter with a text.

An Agreement with Reality examines the modern roots of these contemporary problems in critical reading and argues, moreover, that what makes them possible as problems is the influence of early twentieth-century theories of aesthetics and the conceptions of truth (often scavenged from the analytic discourse) that those theories incorporate. While I don't claim to offer a developed solution to the fetishization of literary history and formalism as oppositional, I do suggest that the way out will almost surely involve reframing the issue in light of its antecedents in modernist aesthetic debates. For, as scholars working in the tradition of Lawrence Rainey's persuasive *Institutions of Modernism* (1999) have argued, networks of patronage, often located in institutional power structures, worked to coproduce and classify the canon of texts we now think of as modern. Responsible modern scholarship would, then, be wise to read texts in conjunction with the institutional incitements and interpretive apparatuses that contributed to their making. Moreover, scholars including David M. Earle, Amanda Golden, and Jennifer Wicke have noted that, as Golden states the case, modernism is "a discourse formed in academic institutions" ("John Berryman at Midcentury" 508).³ And, as foreign as it may look to us today, the discourse of analytic aesthetics—whose practitioners were usually housed in philosophy and literature departments in the twentieth-century university—numbers among those that scholars should seek to understand if we hope to

³ See also Wicke's "Appreciation, Depreciation: Modernism's Speculative Bubble," *Modernism / Modernity* 8 (2001): 389–403 and Earle's "MySpace Modernism," *Modernism/modernity*, Volume 16, Number 3, September 2009, pp. 478–481.

know something of how aesthetic objects functioned in their respective cultural moments and also how our own critical lenses (which we often retroproject onto texts that precede them) evolved from these early debates about literary aesthetics and, in special, the nature of the truth at stake in literature and literary criticism.

My dissertation makes visible the rudimentary skeleton of a field we might call historical aesthetics, a reckoning staged between cultural production and the metacultural fixtures and processes that we classify as aesthetic when we consider how they charge the processes of poetic making. Recent works of criticism have refocused our attention on the historically determined evolution of aesthetic language and deployments—Jennifer Doyle’s *Hold It Against Me* (2013), Jacques Rancière’s *Aisthesis* (2013), and Sianne Ngai’s magisterial *Our Aesthetic Categories* (2012) among them. The range of examples in these works is often eclectic, whereas my study restricts itself to the reading and writing of modern poetry in an attempt to define the parameters of a localized historical aesthetics that combines the temporal sensitivity of the works I’ve named above with a serious attempt to understand how modern poetry scripted itself in its own cultural moment. That is, for purposes of my scholarship, poetry and the uses of poetry are as much constructs under pressure as aesthetics. While a pure recovery of the poem in its original network of sociocultural filaments is never wholly possible, we may learn much from an attempt at approximation, not least the extent of what’s not possible to say about it.

Why did the concept of literary truth matter to modern poets and critical readers—and does literary truth, however unfashionable the term, still matter to contemporary scholars of literature? In confronting these questions, my dissertation not only challenges the truism that Continental philosophy is the only philosophy of relevance to the study of literature, it also gives shape to undertheorized conversations between modern and Romantic aesthetics. With reference to twentieth-century experiments in the reading and writing of poetry, I recuperate the significance of modern

philosophical form—and particularly the forms of logic developed by Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, and Ludwig Wittgenstein—to aesthetic discourse.

This introduction contextualizes the chapters that follow by offering an explanation of my methodology as well as an attempt to define what kind of entity I mean by the phrase “logical modernism.” Following this narrative of my terminology, which also establishes the stakes of the project, I map each chapter in the dissertation, registering its individual contributions to the arc of the whole. Finally, I circle back to the epigraph from Marianne Moore’s “In the Days of Prismatic Color” with which the introduction opens, and this reading elaborates a primer on the lexicon of logical modernism as wielded by that most precise of poets.

Truth in the Singular, Truths in the Plural

While the pragmatist “talks about truths in the plural” because she is “uncomfortable away from facts,” William James writes, the rationalist logician is comfortable only in the presence of “abstractions . . . non-utilitarian, haughty, refined, remote, august, exalted” objective truth (*Pragmatism* 38). As it happens, facts matter both to the pragmatist and the “rationalist” (James’s veiled allusion to Bertrand Russell’s Cambridge philosophy), only they disagree about what a fact really is. The literary implications of that disagreement have not yet been fully examined, though works like Marjorie Perloff’s *Wittgenstein’s Ladder* (1999) and Russell Goodman’s *Wittgenstein and William James* (2002) have opened the topic to scholarly debate. While a panoply of recent critical works has taken up the question of modernism’s relationship to the doctrines of pragmatism, comparatively little contemporary scholarship has addressed the ways in which the conception of

logical truth, born from the intellectual revolutions of the long nineteenth century, informs the artistic experiments that developed alongside these philosophical sea-changes.⁴

My study shifts the emphasis to that other, sterner truth, the noisome abstraction that Jamesian pragmatism deplors. This shift is by no means evaluative; I do not in any way diminish pragmatic thought by suggesting that it tells only part of the story. By delineating a logical modernism, I hope to rejuvenate the issue of how absolute truth matters to modern poetics. And I begin my inquiry with poetry in the spirit of Oren Izenberg's argument that [p]oetry is not always and everywhere understood as "literary project," "special verbal artifact," or even "aesthetic project" but as, instead, for "certain modern poets," the name of an "ontological project" (*Of Being Numerous* 1). For Izenberg, this project has to do with the desire to revalue personhood and the sociality that derives from it. I propose here a complementary ontological agenda: poetry as a means, for certain modern critics and readers, of imagining a relationship to an actually existing reality independent of any individual mind, a reality that connects person to people but also people to objects, experiences, concepts, and states of affairs whose reality does not require the unit of the person in the slightest.

Agreement with Reality, Kant in the Hospital, and Einstein's Brain

I have defined logical modernism as a set of intersecting concerns about truth as "agreement with reality," as the adaptation of Kantian aesthetics for modern poetic practice, and as an anxiety about whether poetic truth might ever map onto the absolute truth that science and philosophy seem to promise. Though they often cluster together, the presence of even one of these criteria in any given artwork is enough to signal its participation in the central problems of logical modernism. Brief

⁴ See, for instance, to name just a few such pragmatically-concerned works, Jonathan Crary's *Suspension of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (2000), David Kadlec's *Mosaic Modernism: Anarchism, Pragmatism, Culture*, (2000), Louis Menand's *The Metaphysical Club* (2001), Liesl Olson's *Modernism and the Ordinary* (2009), Siobhán Phillips's *The Poetics of the Everyday: Creative Repetition in Modern American Verse* (2010), Bryony Randall's *Modernism, Daily Time, and Everyday Life* (2008), Joan Richardson's *A Natural History of Pragmatism: The Fact of Feeling from Jonathan Edwards to Gertrude Stein* (2007), and Lisi Schoenbach's *Pragmatic Modernism* (2012).

elaborations of each of these conditions will go some distance towards establishing the kind of analysis a logical modernism might facilitate.

The first premise, the negotiation of an agreement with reality, presumes, in the case of pragmatists, correspondences between, as James states it, “conceptual parts of our experience to sensational parts” (*The Meaning of Truth* 51). Meanwhile, for logicians, agreement with reality means correspondence between subject and object, perception and external fact, mind-independent realist truths rather than harmony among faculties. The poetry of William Carlos Williams expresses a decidedly pragmatic sympathy when it comes to correspondence: “a pencil sharpened at one end dwarfs the imagination, makes logic a butterfly” (*Imaginations* 81), he writes in *Kora in Hell* (1920). On the other hand, Laura (Riding) Jackson abandoned poetry, in the end, because she felt it incapable of fact-based correspondence between language and the things of the world, an extreme case, to be sure, but, placed alongside other poetic experiments with truth-telling, a testament to the close relationship of philosophical truth to poetic truth in the twentieth century.

Logical modernism’s second premise, the revival of a Neo-Kantian poetics, reflects the pervasive influence of the philosophy of Immanuel Kant on the circle of Cambridge philosophers that included G.E. Moore, C.K. Ogden, F.P. Ramsey, and Bertrand Russell.⁵ In the essay “Modernist Painting” (1963), the American art critic Clement Greenberg describes Kant as the “first modernist” because the philosopher “used logic to establish the limits of logic,” thus foreshadowing the recursive, self-critiquing aspects of abstract, modern visual art (*Art Theory and Criticism* 111). Meanwhile, Ezra Pound’s *Cantos* tell of the English critic and poet T.E. Hulme, another intimate of the Cambridge Apostles, who, not long before his death during the First World War, “read Kant in the hospital, in Wimbledon/in the original,/And the hospital staff didn’t like it” (XVI).

⁵ And, intermittently, Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Peter Lévy writes that the language of Cambridge philosophy consisted of a “neo-Kantian argot” (*G.E. Moore and the Cambridge Apostles* 66) and, as Andrew McNeillie helpfully explains in his essay on Bloomsbury and Virginia Woolf, works like Roger Fry’s “The Nature of Judgment” (1912), a preface to the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition, and Desmond MacCarthy’s “Kant and Post-Impressionism” (1912) explicitly linked modern art and neo-Kantian aesthetics in contexts that spoke to the literary experimentalists of the Bloomsbury Group. McNeillie stresses Kant’s importance to “Romanticism and the formation of subsequent aesthetic theory” and points out that the Kantian revival of the early twentieth century suggests a wealth of powerful “connections between modernist and Romanticist aesthetics and subjectivities” (*The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf* 10).

An Agreement with Reality takes this suggestion seriously, pursuing several key concepts from Kantian aesthetics as they manifest in modern reading and writing: subjective universality as it operates in early, Transatlantic close reading (Chapter One), Gertrude Stein’s critique of a Kant-like conceptless beauty (Chapter Two), and Wallace Stevens’s struggle to conceive a modern *sensus communis* (Chapter Three). Kantian philosophy often marks, in modernist projects, the places where the discursive provisos of philosophy bleed into those of art—as well as indicating continuities between modern poetics and Romantic ones. For modernism had to invent a Romanticism to throw itself against—and the strength of this invention often obscures the linkage between their complex logics.

As to the third premise, a theory of everything capacious enough to negotiate an agreement between subjective truths and objective Truth, Roland Barthes, writing in the aftermath of Einstein’s death in 1955, clothes this holistic desire in gray matter. According to Barthes, Einstein’s brain incarnates the myth that

[t]here is one secret in the world, and this secret resides in a word, the universe is a safe whose combination humanity is looking for . . . in [the

myth of Einstein] can be perceived all the gnostic themes: the unity of nature, the ideal possibility of a fundamental reduction of the world, the aperient power of a word, the age-old struggle of a secret and an utterance, the notion that total knowledge can only be discovered all at once, like a lock which suddenly yields after a thousand ineffectual attempts. The historic equation $E=mc^2$, by its unexpected simplicity, nearly embodies the pure idea of the key, naked, linear, made of a single metal, opening with utterly magical facility a door mankind had struggled with for centuries. (*Mythologies* 101)

In so many words, this passage diagnoses the knot of yearning, suspicion, and grief that coalesces in the dream of “total knowledge” that haunted modern intellectuals. This ambivalence is visible in Stein’s desire (and subsequent turn away from) totalizing description after the composition of her monumental novel, *The Making of Americans*, which tries—and fails, in the end—to describe every kind of human personality—and visible, too, among other sites, in Wallace Stevens’s ambivalent pursuit of a supreme fiction.

A Problem for Logic

“I can’t get on with “what is logic?”, reads a letter from Bertrand Russell to Lady Ottoline Morrell, “the subject is hopelessly difficult, and for the present I am stuck. I feel very much inclined to leave it to Wittgenstein” (*Logical and Philosophical Papers, 1909-13* 54). For Russell, intent in 1912 on popularizing philosophy and science for audiences outside the university setting, the difficulties he encountered in talking about logic were particularly galling. His notes for a paper, never completed, called “What is Logic?” reveal the trouble he had in establishing an origin point for his question, a firm foundation from which to begin working out the answer (still a relevant quandary for would-be scholars of logic). “Logic is the study of the forms of complexes,” he began

Complex is primitive: opposite of *simple*.
The *form* of a complex is what it has in common with a complex obtained by replacing each constituent of the complex by something different. What two such complexes have in common is of course a problem—a problem for logic.” (55)

The notes trail off several pages later with the words “endless regress,” a suggestive phrase given

Russell's expressions of frustration with the topic, a frustration which often had to do with his attempts to divorce logic from the metaphysical and epistemological claims about truth and reality that had so preoccupied Frege and Husserl. Indeed, the trouble with logic in the early twentieth century often came down to the questions of what to say about the study of form ("logic is the study of the forms of complexes") and how to say it. Moreover, for modern logicians and theorists of art alike, issues of form often seemed bound to those of totality, that is, questions of form often became questions of total or ultimate form.

As yet, contemporary literary scholarship has not yet fully accounted for the way this fantasy of, to return to Barthes's words about Einstein's brain, "the ideal possibility of a fundamental reduction of the world" suffuses modern poetic forms and practices, partly because criticism has yet to absorb the idea that the history of modernism in objectivity and the history of modernism in subjectivity must be told together. For the story of modern logic is largely the story of the quest to establish mathematics on a firm logical footing (i.e. the construction of logical proofs for mathematical statements like $1=1$ or $1+1=2$) and secondly the development of a formal language resembling mathematics that would picture the truth of the world in a way natural language could not, the "dream of a universal language," in the words of Leila Haaparanta (*The Development of Modern Logic* 230) or, to be precise, the dream of a universal metalanguage.⁶ This latter project, I suggest has special resonance for modern poetry in the echo of the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé's injunction to give "un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu" (*Poems* 88), to "purify the language of the tribe."

The search for an ideal formal language—a language better than language—is one with a long history. A few examples include the mystical *Lingua Ignota* of Hildegard von Bingen, which was meant to give directly onto the divine; the language of truth enthusiastically embarked upon by John Wilkins, in which each word would be so precise that none could be a synonym for any other,

⁶ The idea that there might be a *single* logic, a sole universal metalanguage, is one that distinguishes modern logic from contemporary variants (deviant logic, fuzzy logic and other forms of multimodal formal language).

and the *characteristica universalis* or alphabet of thought, Leibniz’s dream of an ideal language, which would fix unerringly the right and true patterns of reason. The stage for the twentieth century’s quest for an ideal formal metalanguage—a language capable of describing how natural language and cognition work, as well as securing the foundation of mathematics (the logicist project)—was set by a confluence of material and ideological factors.

The logical revolution began at the dawn of the nineteenth century with the overthrow of transcendental Kantian and Hegelian logics. Ian Hacking has written of the “avalanche of printed numbers” (*The Taming of Chance* 3) that overtook Europe and the newly formed United States in the aftermath of the Napoleonic era—census records, taxes, average income per capita, suicide rates in London and Paris. In other words, the nineteenth century saw the development of diverse cultural practices in which numbers were widely and actively deployed for the purpose of creating a picture of social reality and disseminating that picture to the public. The deluge of figures, now naturalized due to our saturation in the numerical, was, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, still a novel phenomenon in print culture.

The foundation of the Analytical Society in 1812 (only a few years before the period covered by Hacking’s study) marked an acceleration of mathematical development in Britain. But, more than this, it functioned as a symbol of the officially sanctioned role of numbers in the social life of the country. One of its founding members, Charles Babbage, best known as the inventor of the difference engine,⁷ a forerunner of the modern computer, made an exemplary proposal several times throughout the late 1820s and early 1830s. “Amongst those works of science which are too large and too laborious for individual efforts, and are therefore fit objects to be undertaken by united academies,” Babbage writes, “I wish to point out one which seems eminently necessary at the

⁷ and the collaborator of the programmer Ada Lovelace

present time . . . It ought to contain all those facts which can be expressed by numbers in the various sciences and arts” (“On Tables of the Constants of Nature and Art” 289).

Babbage’s recommendations for kinds of “constants” that science ought to keep track of were, to say the least, comprehensive: astronomical motions, the atomic weights of bodies, lists of metals, specific gravities, refractive indices, polarizing angles, angles formed by the axes of double refraction in crystals, known species of mammals, birds, reptiles, fish, mollusks, worms, crustaceans, insects, zoophytes (with further subdivisions), height, length, average weight, weight of skeleton of all known classifications. And then, of course, there were his suggestions about the human things: average weights and heights from infancy to adulthood, mortality rates by region, average duration of monarchical reign, proportions of sexes born in prosperous years and lean, proportion of marriages in same, amounts of air breathed per hour, quantity of food requisite each day, average rates of sickness broken down by disease...

It was a Causobonesque endeavor, certainly but, as Hacking’s work tells us, hardly an isolated twitch. Babbage’s key to all taxonomies is symptomatic of a movement: a desire to account for the whole of things and a belief that numbers will help us to do that. So it was into this scene of numerical zeal that the new logic was born, not principally as a rival to older philosophical logics, but as a solution to questions of abstract mathematics and their concrete cousins in the realm of social statistics.

Interest in abstract mathematics was one causal factor in the reform of logic. Another was the modish fascination with probability. As mid-century approached, the statistical theories of Adolphe Quetelet, popularized by in Britain by polymath John Herschel, garnered significant interest, not only for their abstract significance, but because Quetelet used his ideas to ask “what specific laws govern people?” (Hacking 105). By 1850, the link between mathematics and moral science (formerly the purview of philosophy alone) had been well-established, even if the

quantifiable particulars of such a system were still muzzy. The new logic gathered force alongside these interlaced tendencies towards formalization so that, by the turn of the twentieth century, philosophical logic—especially as exemplified in the work of Frege, Russell, and the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*—usually meant *mathematical* or *formal* logic. And it was a methodological commitment to formal logic, with its dedication to mind-independent truths, that would define much of early analytic discourse.

First published in 1910, Russell and Whitehead's *Principia Mathematica* made a comprehensive effort at solving the *bête noire* of the logicians—the foundational crisis of mathematics—with special reference to Frege's logical theories and the problems of paradoxical sets. Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead (the heirs to nineteenth century English logicians like George Boole, William Stanley Jevons, and Augustus de Morgan) absorbed and augmented the logical work produced by continental philosophers like Gottlob Frege and Edmund Husserl. And the Cambridge philosophy advanced by Russell helped to shape the practice of philosophy and science both at home and abroad.

The Vienna Circle, for example, an influential group of thinkers first convened by Moritz Schlick in 1922, traced its intellectual heritage directly to Russell and to Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), who studied with Russell for a time. This loose confederation of intellectuals—which counted among its participants figures like Ernst Mach, Ludwig Boltzmann, Rudolf Carnap, Otto Neurath, and Kurt Gödel—formulated in a manifesto from August, 1929 a “scientific conception of the world” that operated on assumptions adapted directly from Russell and Wittgenstein's work, logical atomism and logical positivism foremost among them. The former, best expressed by a proposition of the Tractarian Wittgenstein (“The world is the totality of facts, not of things” [§1.1]), grounded the Vienna Circle's commitment to a particular brand of scientific empiricism while the latter explained the uses of a “totality of facts.”

The dream of a unified field—a theory of everything—looks a lot more distant to scientists and philosophers in the contemporary moment than it did to early twentieth-century intellectuals of the positivist persuasion.⁸ Modern thinkers were, after all, still grappling openly with the remnants of the deterministic tradition delineated by the Enlightenment philosopher Pierre-Simon LaPlace:

Given for one instant an intelligence which could comprehend all the forces by which nature is animated and the respective situation of the beings who compose it—an intelligence sufficiently vast to submit these data to analysis—it would embrace in the same formula the movements of the greatest bodies of the universe and those of the lightest atom; for it, nothing would be uncertain and the future, as the past, would be present to its eyes. The human mind offers, in the perfection which it has been able to give to astronomy, a feeble idea of this intelligence. Its discoveries in mechanics and geometry, added to that of universal gravity, have enabled it to comprehend in the same analytical expressions the past and future states of the system of the world. (*A Philosophical Essay on Probabilities* 4)

Although inflected for the moderns by the shocks of Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle and Gödel’s work on incompleteness, LaPlace’s demon, as the omniscient “intelligence” of this passage would come to be known, ghosted the modern intellectual landscape in the form of a preoccupation with a unified explanation for the mechanical workings of the world as well as their causes and

⁸ The physicist Stephen Hawking offers an aporetic view on the Theory of Everything in a lecture entitled “Gödel and the End of Physics”: “Up to now, most people have implicitly assumed that there is an ultimate theory, that we will eventually discover. Indeed, I myself have suggested we might find it quite soon. However, M-theory [has made me wonder if this is true . . . M theory, is not a theory in the usual sense. Rather it is a collection of theories, that look very different, but which describe the same physical situation. These theories are related by mappings, or correspondences, called dualities, which imply that they are all reflections of the same underlying theory. Each theory in the collection, works well in the limit, like low energy, or low dilation, in which its effective coupling is small, but breaks down when the coupling is large. This means that none of the theories, can predict the future of the universe, to arbitrary accuracy. For that, one would need a single formulation of M-theory, that would work in all situations. Maybe it is not possible to formulate the theory of the universe in a finite number of statements. This is very reminiscent of Goedel's [sic] theorem. This says that any finite system of axioms, is not sufficient to prove every result in mathematics . . . In the standard positivist approach to the philosophy of science, physical theories live rent free in a Platonic heaven of ideal mathematical models. That is, a model can be arbitrarily detailed, and can contain an arbitrary amount of information, without affecting the universes they describe. But we are not angels, who view the universe from the outside. Instead, we and our models, are both part of the universe we are describing. Thus a physical theory, is self referencing, like in Goedel's [sic] theorem. One might therefore expect it to be either inconsistent, or incomplete. The theories we have so far, are both inconsistent, and incomplete.” See Hawking’s *The Grand Design* (2010), co-authored with Leonard Mlodinow, for elaborations on M-Theory and the receding possibility of a unified science. See also “A Theory of Everything Won’t Provide All the Answers,” an instructive interview with physicist Lisa Randall published by *The New Scientist* in January, 2013.

effects.⁹ The Vienna Circle Manifesto is one of the strongest statements of this preoccupation but it is hardly an isolated instance.

It's easy from a twenty-first century standpoint to dismiss the modern fixation on the development of a single theory of everything as fanatical, naïve, or ethically insupportable. But modern philosophers, scientists, and artists were, themselves, aware of many of these difficulties, which is why this aspect of logical modernism often expresses itself through the impulse to elegy. And, moreover, to gloss over the prevalence of this ideal impulse across empirical discourses as well as aesthetic ones is to ignore the real question and all the force that lies behind it: why did modernity require the revenant of a theory of everything in the first place? One possible answer to this question is the tautological but (nevertheless) apposite truism that modernity itself generates a kind of totalizing representational impulse. But, in this case, to trace a logical modernism is to put pressure on the conditions of its inscription in the discourse.

In an interview that appeared in 2012, the cultural critic Joshua Clover proposes a relationship between totality and the language we use to talk about totality:

Capital totalizes, power totalizes, and one has to have ways of describing that. If, at the exact moment that the world is being totalized – because that is what the process of globalization and financialization is, the totalizing of the world along the axes of space and time by capital – the issue of whether you or I *want to totalize* doesn't matter. There's this thing out there that totalizes and we have to have the language to describe it. (“On poetry, politics, a palindrome and perfection”)

While Clover is speaking primarily about the current historical moment, his words reverberate: he might just as easily be trying to explain the climate of the early twentieth century. The totalizing forces of power and capital might seem to be, at present, uniquely comprehensive in scope. But these phenomena have hereditary precedent in the technological, political, and economic flux of

⁹ See *Otto Neurath: Philosophy Between Science and Politics* (1996) by N. Cartwright, J. Cat, L. Fleck and T.E. Uebel, Cambridge University Press (1996) for a good discussion of the Vienna Circle discourse of scientific unity.

twentieth-century modernity—and the attempt to develop a language to deal with totalizing phenomena was, for the modern moment as well as the contemporary one, a matter of great urgency. How did this urgency manifest for poets?

Poetry and The Whole of Anything

When Marjorie Perloff makes a distinction between the “discontinuous encyclopedic form” of Pound’s *Cantos* (*The Dance of the Intellect* 16) and the form “full, sphere-like, single” beloved of Yeats (Yeats qtd. in Perloff viii), she sums up two different modern avenues for pursuing completeness within the space of the poem. But, as she notes, one of the better points of the *Cantos* lies in its acknowledgment of its own incompleteness. No matter how massive the project, how broadly its citations intimate the presence of “other cultures . . . other times, other places, other people, other attempts to find significance and value in human life” (19), the poem will never represent the whole of anything. And in the poem’s recognition of how it falls short of totality, Perloff locates its ethics, a mingled delight and despair in partiality.

Meanwhile, she finds in Wallace Stevens’s devotion to the First Idea a variety of Yeat’s organic, “sphere-like” form that replaces history with myth-making so as to create an ersatz, autonomous holism in which the imagination covers over the junk-shop of history.¹⁰ For Perloff, thus, Stevens’s modernism is really Romanticism with a difference while Pound’s modernism makes a more satisfying rupture with Romantic forms. And yet, both Pound’s *Cantos* and Steven’s poetry enact a logically modern relationship to totality—in search of forms to describe the totalizing conditions of modernity, forms to refuse them, and forms to grieve the lack of, in Barthes’s words, “the pure idea of the key, naked, linear, made of a single metal, opening with utterly magical facility a

¹⁰ Although, as I show in Chapter Three, “Wallace Stevens and His Worlds of Logic,” Stevens’s seeming formal holism is often at odds with his sense that poetry can only represent the unrepresentable by mourning the partiality of language, indicating the intangible whole by what is necessarily fragmentary.

door mankind had struggled with for centuries” (*Mythologies* 101).

Snowflakes & Snowdrops

In describing a logical modernism, I am taking care to honor this strange mourning for the possibility of holistic, universal knowledge in its historical context. This, perhaps, is why my close readings in the chapters that follow tend to center on large swathes of single poems rather than aerial views of many. I want to know the poem as a world that cannot help but express history but expresses, too, its own peculiar reflexive tendencies—I want to know in it the way it looks towards holism or dismisses the ideal definitively. For logical modernism is, in the end, neither a form nor a genre, nor even (strictly speaking) a reading practice. It is, instead, after Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison’s usage of Foucault, a complex of epistemic virtues.

An epistemic virtue, in Daston and Galison’s conception, is a “norm . . . internalized and enforced by appeal to ethical values, as well as to pragmatic efficacy in securing knowledge” (40-41). In the course of investigating the vast corpus of scientific images that serve as their primary case studies, Daston and Galison identify a shift in epistemic virtues: a movement from the smoothed, refined ideality-from-particularity they call “truth-to-nature” to the “mechanical objectivity” that “repress[es] the willful intervention of the artist-author” (*Objectivity* 121)—and then to “trained judgment,” which emphasizes the “necessity of seeing scientifically through an interpretive eye” (311). For Daston and Galison, these epistemic virtues don’t cancel one another out; rather, the complex relationships among them wax and wane under historical pressure.

These theorists of objectivity pay special attention to Richard Neuhauss’s late nineteenth-century microphotographs of snowflakes, which offered a visual counterpoint to the text of Gustav Hellmann’s *Schneekristalle: Beobachtungen und Studien* (1893):

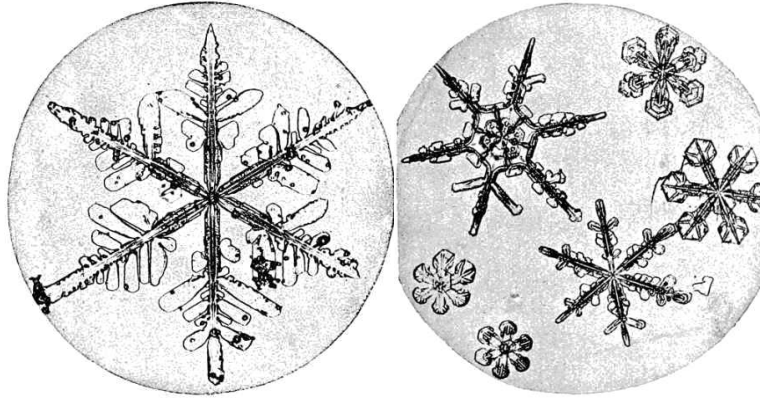


Fig. 0.1 Two photographs of snowflakes from Hellmann and Neuhaus's *Schneekristalle*

What startled the readers of Hellmann and Neuhaus's work were the irregularities of the crystalline structures under observation. Although accounts of the configuration of snowflakes had, before the advent of microphotographic technology, marveled at the formal regularity of the hexagonal snowflake, the analytical eye of the camera—an avatar of mechanical objectivity in Daston and Galison's taxonomy—disrupts the narrative that flawless symmetry predominates among snowflakes. It's not, of course, that photographic technology entirely erases the intercession of the human observer but rather that the epistemological ideal towards which it tends privileges a version of knowledge that weeds out, as much as possible, subjective corrections of particular truths. What matters about Hellmann and Neuhaus's snowflakes is that they are *this* snowflake or *that* snowflake rather than *any* snowflake or *the* snowflake.

Whereas mechanical objectivity describes the reduction of subjective interference that allows specific, irregular truths to make themselves known, truth-to-nature describes a movement in which the observing mind abstracts a perfect, universal form from decidedly imperfect examples. Imagine, for instance, an artist at work on an illustrated botanical dictionary. In order to render a drawing of snowdrops, she ventures outside with her sketchbook in early spring and is lucky enough to discover a glade filled with blossoms.

One plant is slightly speckled with an indeterminate fungus. Another droops more dramatically than its neighboring blooms, whose leaves, in turn, look slightly chewed. Each of the snowdrops is unspeakably beautiful—and, unfortunately for the artist’s purpose—resolutely, ineluctably singular. A faithful portrait of any one snowdrop, if it values representational particularity above all else, is unlikely to convey the gross features a reader of the dictionary might need in order to recognize snowdrops in the wild. The illustrator’s task, then, will be to synthesize from her glade of snowdrops a simplified image of the flower—a composite that abstracts the most salient shared qualities of individual snowdrops so that the result is a drawing resembling the form of “snowdrop” rather than *this* snowdrop or *that* snowdrop.

We might, elaborating on Daston and Galison’s conception of truth-to-nature, turn from snowdrops back to snow. In Johannes Kepler’s Latin treatise, “Strena Seu de Nive Sexangula” (1611), it is the ideal form of the snowflake that matters to the astronomer (rather than the particular snowflakes revealed by Hellmann and Neuhauss’s book). Framed as an epistolary essay to Kepler’s patron, Lord Matthäus Wacker von Wackenfels, “A New Year’s Gift of Hexagonal Snow” rests on the conceit that Kepler is searching for an appropriate present for his benefactor: “I am well aware how fond you are of Nothing . . . Thus, I can easily tell that a gift will be the more pleasing and welcome to you the closer it comes to Nothing” (*The Six-Cornered Snowflake* 25). After discarding Epicurean atoms, dust, sparks of fire, wind, smoke, water droplets, and small animals as a little too much something “for you, who take such great delight in Nothing” (29), Kepler describes how a scattered fall of snow surprised him on a bridge. A few of the flakes adhered to his coat:

all six-cornered with tufted radii. By Hercules! Here was something smaller than a drop, yet endowed with a shape. Here, indeed, was a most desirable New Year’s gift for the lover of Nothing, and one worthy as well of a mathematician (who has Nothing and receives Nothing) since it descends from the sky and bears a likeness to the stars. (33)

Punning on the fortuitous coincidence between the Latin *nix* (a nominative, third declension noun meaning “snow”) and the German *nix* (a colloquial version of *nichts*, meaning “nothing”), Kepler declares the snowflake a perfect gift for the lover of nothing. And a proximity to nothing gives, in this case, onto a preoccupation with with the abstraction of form. For that word form, as Angela Leighton writes, “is something and nothing, and both of those matter” (*On Form* 261). While Hellmann and Neuhauss focus on the irreducible thingness of individual snowflakes, Kepler concerns himself with a question that illustrates the generalizing formal tendency of Daston and Galison’s truth-to-nature designation: why are all snowflakes hexagonal?

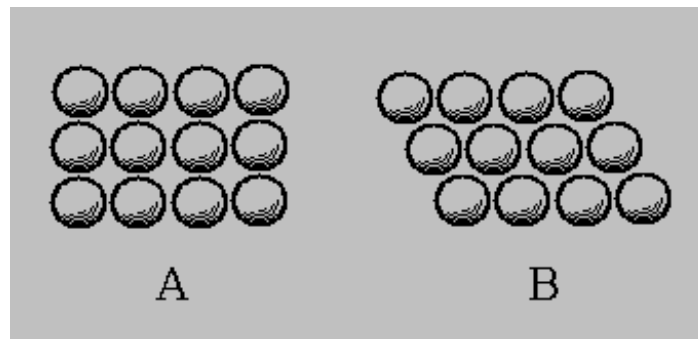


Fig. 0.2 Diagrams of snowflakes from Kepler’s *Strena Seu De Nive Sexangula*

Kepler ponders a number of possible causal reasons for the snowflake’s six-cornered appearance, proposing analogues in the structure of honeycomb cells and the way pomegranate seeds are packed together. What’s striking about Kepler’s thought (and the set of images that accompanies it) is the way in which activates the question of how close it’s possible to get to the nothingness of form, “the nothing that is not there,” as Stevens writes in “The Snow Man,” “and the nothing that is” (*CP* 10).

Although his ostensible gift to his patron is the near-nothing of the snowflakes dissolving on his winter coat, Kepler’s real gift, as he acknowledges is the near-everything of his meditation on the causes of the ideal form of the snowflake:

But I am getting carried away foolishly, and in attempting to give a gift of almost Nothing, I almost make Nothing of it at all. For from this almost Nothing I have very nearly recreated the entire universe, which contains everything! And having before shied away from discussing the tiny soul of the

most diminutive animal, am I now to present the soul of that thrice greatest animal, the orb of the earth, in a tiny atom of snow? (99)

For Kepler, the problem of almost-nothing is that it always threatens to transform to a microcosm of nearly-everything, the world in a grain of sand, so that an appeal to ideal form necessarily threatens a claim about a complete metaphysical system. In that sense, Kepler's concern with the particular and the universal is not unlike the conundrum of the theory of everything that troubles modern intellectuals (How to fit that great animal, the earth, into a mote of snow? How to be, after Isaiah Berlin, the fox of many ideas trailing after the hedgehog, who has only one?). But I am getting carried away foolishly.

When I call logical modernism a complex of coexisting epistemic virtues, I refer primarily to the implications of the first premise—from which the others follow—logical “agreement with reality,” which is to say the “realist” conception of the truth-relation as correspondence that comprehends the subject and entities beyond or outside the subject. And logical modernism entails a constellation of epistemic virtues enabled by “agreement with reality”: “exactitude,” as Gertrude Stein puts it, “in the description of inner and outer reality” (*The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* 210) or the “precision” of Marianne Moore, or even the modern suspicion of transparent verisimilitude, which, as Jacques Rancière puts it, “sets up a double game . . . mak[ing] ‘nature talk’ in the language of natural signs that enable it to be truly recognized” but bringing those signs into play on condition of going against nature” (*The Politics of Literature* 154). Part of the impetus for the development of new forms, by this logic, owes to the necessity of inventing defamiliarizing linguistic uses that seem “natural” in order to strengthen connections to an underlying reality.

“Epistemic virtues,” Daston and Galison write, “earn their right to be called virtues by molding the self” (*Objectivity* 41) and, from one angle, belief in realities that exist independent of the self is a compelling way of defining “self” against what “self” demonstrably isn't. And if epistemic virtues are “norms” that depend on an “appeal to ethical values,” then a realist agreement with

reality qualifies in that it enforces (or should enforce) an anti-solipsistic ontological commitment to the authenticity of other minds and to the non-human. This is not to say that logical modernism is inherently ethical, only that it *appeals* to this ethical ideal; epistemic virtues are, after all, unevenly distributed and practiced, though ideals of knowing and knowledge acquisition may be derived from an account of their disparate manifestations.

Nonetheless, these manifestations lead, inductively, towards a way of accounting for the significance of poetic truth to critics and writers of poems in the first half of the twentieth century. For poetic truth's importance owes largely to the rise of science and its interest in objective truth. Seeking to value literature in the terms of science, modern artists think in terms of the truth-criteria that derive from and shape the practices of analytic logic. And if this, too, is a part of the phenomenon of modern agreement with reality, then Daston and Galison's second requirement for an epistemic virtue, "pragmatic efficacy in securing knowledge" (41), is fulfilled, because, in this case, the forms of thought suggested by early analytic philosophy provide the language for crucial procedures of self-fashioning and understanding in modern poetics and close reading, especially those that employ the romance of fact.

Mapping an Agreement with Reality

Having set out some of the central themes and terms that inform the project, I outline, here, some of the major texts active in each chapter and the way each section of the project functions in the whole. Chapter One, "The Clumsy Attempt: Modern Criticism and the Beauty Truth Equivalence," delineates the logical modernism implicit in the efforts of critics William Empson, Robert Graves, I.A. Richards, and Laura (Riding) Jackson to make sense of the most famous English-language framing of the relationship of conceptual knowledge to aesthetic experience, the finale of John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn": "Beauty is truth, truth beauty."

I demonstrate how modern readers absorb the binary between subjective and objective truth implicit in post-Kantian aesthetics and how this absorption informs their reading of the beauty-truth equivalence as (in the words of Robert Graves and Laura (Riding) Jackson) “a clumsy attempt at a serious proposition in logic” (*A Pamphlet Against Anthologies* 82). The foundations of modern close reading, I suggest, depend on theories of truth that draw on and react to early analytic models of truth-as-agreement-with-reality. Certain new approaches to literary studies, especially Franco Moretti’s distant reading, which theatrically rejects the utility of close reading as contemporary method, stem, I theorize, from a similar desire for an objective form of reading.

Chapter Three, “The Logic Problems of Gertrude Stein” begins with a “long dull” poem (*The Language That Rises* 493) called *Stanzas in Meditation* (1932) in which, I claim, Gertrude Stein mediates modern theories of truth. Via a strategy of multiple reference, she negotiates a position that rejects both the absolute logical truth of Cambridge rationalism and the pluralist agreement with reality advanced by American pragmatism. My reading helps to redirect a pressing question in Stein criticism about the degree of determinacy in her writing. That is, I examine Stein’s deployment of “truth,” and “exactitude” as aesthetic terms in order to intervene in recent critical debates about how far it’s possible to read Stein’s writing as determinate. I also situate *Stanzas* in the tradition of long, English-language philosophical poems and Transatlantic modern debates about the nature of truth as framed by William James, Bertrand Russell, and Alfred North Whitehead.

The chapter proceeds, then, to an investigation of multiple reference as a way of “nam[ing] without naming” (*Lectures in America* 235) in a piece called “I Can Feel The Beauty” (1918). How, I ask, would we read Stein differently if we took seriously the premise that Stein’s writing features actually identifiable unnamed names? Tracking Stein’s intricate dialogue with the poetic discourse of the ode, I recommend a literalist-of-the-imagination mode of interpretation that, while it may contravene Stein’s own desire to see her works as entirely autonomous, honors her passionately

specific historical engagements. This doubled mode of reading tells a story in which the sensuous structures of the writing run parallel to the narrative of its allusions and adaptations of inherited poetic form.

“Wallace Stevens and His Worlds of Logic,” Chapter Four of the project, explores, via Kant’s formulation of the *sensus communis*, the “bad aesthetics” of a miscellaneous war-poem called “Esthétique du Mal” (1944). Simultaneously repulsed by and nostalgic for Romantic “worlds of logic in their great tombs” “Esthétique” suggests a poetics animated, all at once, by the longing for a unified field of knowledge and the conviction that modern poetry’s role is to teach us how to mourn the impossibility of that desire’s fulfillment. This elegiac coincidence of the ideality of fact with the fact of feeling embodies, I conclude, a sort of poetic truth, a poetic agreement with the “pressure of reality” (*The Necessary Angel* 13)—and in this encounter it is possible to discern those things that logic has to say to literature and also those things of which it must be silent.

In the Days of Prismatic Color

In an effort to balance the general with the particular—to show the lexicon of logical modernism in action—I return now to the epigraph from Marianne Moore’s “In the Days of Prismatic Color” with which I began the chapter. As Natalia Cecire has noted, “precision” and “exactitude” are “commonplace[s]” of Moore criticism (“Marianne Moore’s Precision” 83). (We might also add that “fact,” “accuracy,” “neatness,” “logic,” and “truth” are commonplaces of Moore’s poetic vocabulary.) “Modernist writers sought to create a literature that constituted real knowledge,” Cecire writes, “knowledge in a strong sense, of which scientific knowledge was, at the turn of the twentieth century, the gold standard” (83). Cecire stresses Moore’s “accountability to reality,” troubling, at the same time, the notion of Moore’s precision, which has been wielded both as an epithet of praise for the poet and also against her, as an indication of finicky preciousness (83).

My reading follows Cecire's in that it underlines "accountability to reality," a phrase that has the ring of the correspondence theory of truth, as a topic under pressure throughout "In the Days of Prismatic Color." The poem begins before the Fall, with Adam, the first man, amidst the "originality" (40) of "[un]modif[ied]" color, which is notable for its clarity and directness, "plain to see/and to account for." The Fall falls, as Falls will, and the movement in the poem is from lucidity to intricacy: "complexity is not a crime, but carry/it to the point of murkiness/and nothing is plain" (40). Finally, at peak "sophistication," an odd, composite creature comes on the scene:

"Part of it was crawling, part of it
was about to crawl, the rest
was torpid in its lair." In the short-legged, fitful
advance, the gurgling and all the minutiae—we have the classic
multitude of feet. To what purpose! Truth is no Apollo
Belvedere, no formal thing. The wave may go over it if it likes.
Know that it will be there when it says,
"I shall be there when the wave has gone by." (*Collected Poems* 40)

The poem purloins its dragon, the crawling-almost-crawling-torpid beast advancing towards us in the last stanza of the poem, from an anonymous fragment in the *Greek Anthology* (1917), in which the thirsty creature drains the river Cephisus, much to the chagrin of the local nymphs (67). In Moore's hands, the animal becomes a figure for modern poetry, "sophistication," the poem tells us, "at the antipodes from the initial/great truths" (40). The "classic/multitude of feet" (also the "feet" of verse and the *-podes* of *antipodes*) draw attention to the poem's "fitful advance" in a jagged syllabic meter. But, Moore suggests, for all its strange rhythms and irregular encrustations—all this torpor and crawling and threatening-to-crawl—modern poetry at its strangest may also be modern poetry at its most active and intentional. The interjection "[t]o what purpose!" followed by an exclamation mark rather than a question mark, is very nearly admiring.

What purpose, indeed? "Truth is no Apollo/Belvedere, no formal thing," says the poem. By implication modern poetry's purpose has something to do with truth, though Moore's paratactical strategy renders the relationship between "purpose" and "truth" elliptical. Apollo, after all, is a god

of oracular things, though it's not Apollo Loxias, patron of obliquity, that Moore is invoking here, but Apollo Pythios, slayer of the serpentine Python. For Apollo Belvedere is a marble copy of a lost Greek bronze, recovered in the fifteenth century. The sculpture portrays the god in the posture of an archer, an arrow just loosed from his bow. Despite its formal balance, the statue was considered treacly and insipid by most twentieth century art critics and, significantly for Moore's purposes, formally monotonous.¹¹ Truth, in her poem, is "no formal thing," a phrase that connotes, rather than formlessness, forms that look haphazard, casual, and various.

The contortions of the ill-assorted reptile in Moore's poem possess, in their way, much more staying power than the shallow symmetries of the Apollo Belvedere—moreover, the poem argues that the dragon-millipede poetry derives its resilience from a relationship to truth. The god may have emptied his quiver but the serpentine thing in the cave persists, in spite of arrows, patiently sipping the water or the wave.

Truth is no Apollo
Belvedere, no formal thing. The wave may go over it if it likes.
Know that it will be there when it says,
"I shall be there when the wave has gone by."

Truth, the "it" the wave may go over, persists in many forms, the text implies, maybe even regardless of form. But although it is "no formal thing," truth's persistence owes to its thingness, its factuality, which, even buried in water, resists alteration. Moore's truth is an inelastic truth, an *objective* truth in the sense that inheres in an object, a changeless thing; our perspectival relationship to it is what actually changes. If truth is static, then what changes here is the level of the water that obscures it. Poetry is the uncouth dragon that reveals truth, probably inadvertently, draining the riverbed just

¹¹ Praised by Johann Joachim Winckelmann and spirited away to Paris by Napoleon in the eighteenth century, disparaged by William Hazlitt and John Ruskin in the nineteenth, Apollo Belvedere had entered the realm of public replication by the twentieth. The statue was reproduced and displayed in venues across Europe and America—especially schools, an association that may have informed Moore's linking of the statue to an arid, academic formality.

to quench its thirst. The dragon in the tale isn't after truth, it just wants enough water so it will stop wanting.

We should know the truth will be there, rock-like, “when it says,/ “I shall be there when the wave has gone by.”¹² *When it says*. The poem ends with an envoi to the reader, the imperative “know” that also enfolds its own negation visually (“no”) and doubles for it sonically (“know” and “no”). This ambiguity might urge us to a little caution regarding the endurance of truth. The poem tells us we will know that truth persists when it speaks to us directly—only it doesn't here—it is, rather, the poem that speaks for mute truth, imagining into the future its declaration to us. That “when” speaks volumes. Waves have gone over theories of literary truth as well. To say you will know the truth when it speaks to you is also to say we may be waiting a long time.

¹² Much like the scarred cliff in Moore's poem “The Fish,” which the sea batters but cannot destroy (*CP* 32).

CHAPTER ONE

*

The Clumsy Attempt: Modern Criticism & the Beauty-Truth Equivalence

*In setting up my brass plate as a critic,
I make no claim to certain diagnosis,
I'm more intuitive than analytic,
I offer thought in homoeopathic doses
(But someone may get better in the process).
I don't pretend to reasoning like Pritchard's
Or the logomachy of I. A. Richards.*

—W.H. Auden, “Letter to Lord Byron,” *Letters from Iceland* (1937)

As for Keats, the equation between Truth and Beauty, together with the conclusion, is just a clumsy attempt at a serious proposition in logic.

—Laura (Riding) Jackson & Robert Graves, *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies* (1928)

Reading Truth

For Cleanth Brooks it was a “bold equation” (“History Without Footnotes: An Account of Keats’ Urn” 90). For Kenneth Burke it was “an abolishing of romanticism though romanticism” (“Symbolic Action in A Poem by Keats” 447). For T.S. Eliot it was “a serious blemish on a beautiful poem” (*Selected Essays* 270). For William Empson it was a “gnomic A is B” (*The Structure of Complex Words* 363). For John Middleton Murry it was “the direct and enigmatic proposition” (*Studies in Keats* 73). For I.A. Richards it was neither false nor true but perfect pseudo-statement: “the expression of a certain blend of feelings” (*Practical Criticism* 180). For Laura (Riding) Jackson and Robert Graves, it was simply a “clumsy attempt at a serious proposition in logic” (*A Pamphlet Against Anthologies* 82):

“ ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty—, that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.’ ” (*The Collected Poems* 346)

The conclusion of Keats’s “Ode on A Grecian Urn” haunted twentieth century critical readers, who puzzled over the poem’s equation of beauty and truth at length and with great intensity. Could you make sense of it, à la Brooks or Burke, as a kind of drama or dramatic utterance? Did it exist asymptotically to reason in the way Empson and Richards supposed? Was it, as Eliot and Murry thought, merely evidence of a poem disintegrating in philosophastic involutions? What made the lines a *modern* problem in the first place?

These troubled readings of the beauty-truth equivalence tell us more, perhaps, about the critics who rendered them than they do about Keats’s poem. Indeed, the modern difficulty with the beauty-truth equivalence is worth heeding entirely for this reason, not merely because it articulates a distressed relationship to the tenets of Romantic poetry (though it does do that in ways that this chapter will later take up) but because it also hints at a problem that drives the invention of early models of close reading: the puzzle of whether literature makes valid truth-claims and whether paraliterary articulations of those truth-claims and their implications, articulations we might call “readings,” may be true or false, right or wrong.

The kinds of close reading developed by Graves, (Riding) Jackson, Empson, and Richards demonstrate the major tenets of logical modernism. They manifest an entanglement with post-Kantian aesthetic discourse (derived from the Cambridge Apostles and their circle) and an anxiety about the terms of truth in literature (especially truth in poetry) relative to the terms of truth laid out by logical positivism. Furthermore, this disquiet culminates in worries about whether the truths of aesthetics and the truths of science and philosophy and those of literature might ever be reconciled in one complete theory of everything.

In an essay written in 1951, when New Criticism was near its height, Cleanth Brooks maintains that correct criticism assumes an “ideal reader,” that the ideal reader is a fiction, and also that “the practicing critic can never be too often reminded of the gap between his reading and the “true” reading of the poem” (“The Formalist Critics” 23). Brooks reveals by his language a debt to his precursors ([Riding] Jackson et al.), who remained suspicious of the discourse of objectivity given to them by logical positivism, even as they struggled to systematize reading practice so as to produce a limited range of standard readings and, through them, a kind of standard humanizing force for which the abstraction of poetry was meant to be the driver.¹

Brooks swaddles the “true” of ““true” reading” in quotation marks, punctuation that suggests, in this case, a degree of definitional uncertainty rather than pure irony. For Brooks, “standard readings” are not only possible, they are both defensible and desirable (24). “ ” presents a speaking frame for the adjective “true.” The quotation marks speak not to skepticism but to a shared failure of imagination. True readings exist but we cannot know them. So the reader of poetry acts on the text from a necessarily weak position: aware that she is not (and will never be) an ideal reader but taking as articles of faith the idea that her reading will seem to her true and the idea, too, that in some inaccessible place a reading exists that would be equally true for everyone, a hermeneutics of the unified field.

The extremes of New Criticism amplify the double-bind of early close reading, in which, as John Ransom Crowe writes in “Criticism, Inc.” (1937), it is desirable that readings of poetry be, paradoxically, “scientific . . . precise and systematic” without being “exact science” (“Criticism, Inc.”). Each poem ideally possesses a “distinguishable . . . logical object or universal” embedded in a “tissue of irrelevance from which it does not really emerge” and the critic’s task is to “uncover” that

¹ The methodologies of early close reading—in part because of the texts they valorize, in part because of their dependence on assumptions of certain “common-sense” affective formations and cultural capital—raise serious ethical questions about the ethics of aspiring to the “ideality” of the critical reading subject, traditionally economically privileged, white, Western, and male.

logical object through attention to the poem's "objective" features ("Criticism, Inc."). W.K. Wimsatt, echoing Crowe's endorsement of literature as the site of a détente between relative truth and absolute truth, conjectured in 1954 that "literary art is in some peculiar sense a very individual thing or a very universal thing or both" ("The Structure of the Concrete Universal" 40) and achieves, in itself, what attempts to paraphrase or explain it cannot, the reconciliation of the subjective and the objective.

Meanwhile, in *Aesthetics* (1958), Monroe Beardsley, in search of a "logic of explication" for poetry, defines "logic" as a method that "issues in a claim to truth" (130). "It may seem strange," he tells us,

to apply to poetry the cold machinery of formal logic [,] [b]ut poetic statements, like all statements, have a logical form, and . . . it is just their peculiarities of logical form on which their poetic power depends. (140)

In other words, Beardsley is claiming for poetry a relationship to logical form and for reading practice a method and an aim: a "nonrelativistic logic of explication" (134) that results in some kind of truth-claim, even when (maybe *especially* when) the poem in questions depends on "logical absurdity" (138) to achieve its results.

Under this rubric, it is precisely the places where poetic logic agitates prose logic that force readers to generate "higher-level" meaning (140) from poems, so that even ambiguous poems, though they may have "no single correct explication," have instead a "limited number of equally correct ones" (145). The relationship of the critic to the poem, in Beardsley's model, precludes a perfect paraphrase that might capture all possible permutations of significance in a single reading. For as a paraphrase becomes more and more exact, it "converge[s] upon the poem" (436) so that all interpretive acts are necessarily partial. Nonetheless, for an "empiricist" criticism to exist, all it needs to contend is that any given predication in the poem may be "extracted and made explicit and its truth—its empirical truth . . . investigated" (436). And so, for Beardsley, both readings and poems

possess some kind of dialectical relationship to “empirical” truth and much of the task of criticism lies in discovering, through the logic of explication, the limits of that relationship.

What we can learn from these very unfashionable forms of approaching literature is something about how the paradox of close-reading-as-logic operates in subtler ways—even in recent works of scholarship that disavow New Critical and pre-New Critical variants of close reading practice. When we understand a certain reading as true, do we understand certain other readings that contradict it as less relevant or less true? And do these understandings require the mysterious ideal of a True Reading at which, nonetheless, we are never in any danger of arriving?

Close reading has lost its nimbus. Here in the future, we know (after Wittgenstein, after Foucault) that truth is a regime of power, a function of discourse, a language game. We know that a responsible reading practice directs attention to the connotations most significant and relevant to the work of any given critical argument rather than making outsized claims about what the text “truly” (to borrow Ransom’s quotation marks) means. But do we really? This chapter contends both that literary studies has been, since its inception, a hungry discourse—and that its engagement with modern logic marks a particular kind of hunger for empirical ways of reading and for interpretations that might turn out to have some claim on objective truth. Nor is contemporary scholarship free of the desire to adapt positivist methodologies and goals in order to provide new perspectives on literary objects and experiences. Certain iterations of cognitive theory and digital humanities, for example, resurrect this interest in the status of truth and the discourse of objectivity in literature and literary studies.² I note these tendencies not to condemn them outright but to spark a conversation about why early literary criticism had a stake in the dialogue about absolute truth and

² The “crisis in the humanities,” as it’s usually termed, owes much (everything, in some accounts), to the ravages of late capitalism, which demands that humanistic scholarship justify itself in terms legible to the market, which often means borrowing the languages of applied science and technology, disciplines that “translate” in an economic sense. My study makes possible economic analyses of the phenomenon I’m defining as logical modernism but does not address these issues at length.

why modern and contemporary interchanges about subjectivity often founder on the difficulty of relating the aesthetic and the objective in a satisfactory way, despite their professions of having abandoned this binary.

Literary discourse is a hungry discourse and also one that enjoys abstractions: the abstraction of poetry, the abstraction of close reading, and (more recently) the abstraction of data. Each of these varicolored abstractions allows us to ask different kinds of questions—and literary discourse proceeds on the strength of them. In many ways, this chapter is a selective history of the inquiries each makes possible and visible. Early twentieth-century readings of the final lines of Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” form my test cases. (I refer to these lines, for reasons that should become clear, as the “beauty-truth equivalence.”) My concern, throughout, is what these interpretations tell us about how poetry and modern experiences of it illumine the instant of readerly conviction in which a singular perception of beauty may be mistaken for universal truth.

The chapter begins with a short analysis of Kenneth Burke’s systematic reading of the lines, which demonstrates both a complicated construction of Romanticism and also the modern tendency to interpret the beauty-truth equivalence in light of logical discourse’s conceptualizations of truth. Building on this example, I trace Laura (Riding) Jackson and Robert Graves’s disparaging comparison of the equivalence to a “serious proposition in logic” in one of their early tracts on the close reading method. This discussion makes possible a consideration of truth in the poetic practice of (Riding) Jackson, the self-professed “witch of truth” (*Collected Poems* 130). Her poetics dramatize the complicated entanglement of Kantian aesthetics and its aspirations to objectivity, a knot of feeling and knowing that this chapter addresses via *The Critique of Judgment* (1790) and the insights of Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison’s *Objectivity* (2007).

“The Clumsy Attempt” proceeds, after this discussion of aesthetics and objectivity, to W.H. Auden’s good-natured skepticism of interpretive acts that aspire to objectivity. And this exploration

lays the groundwork for analyses of the versions of close reading and poetic truth advanced by I.A. Richards in *Science and Poetry* (1926) and *Practical Criticism*—and by William Empson in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) and *The Structure of Complex Words*. Richards claims for close reading the potential to bring the mind of the reader and the mind of the poet into a kind of intersubjective equivalence—the end result of the perception of a “pseudo-statement,” a poetic statement that is true without possessing truth-value. Empson, meanwhile, develops a psychologically pragmatic account of truth that renders the experience of reading a poem an exercise in thinking through emotion rationally. The interplay of these views of close reading as applied psychology is nowhere more visible than in Richards’s and Empson’s respective readings of “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” to which the chapter turns near its close. A brief conclusion speculates on the role of logical modernism’s conceptions of truth-in-reading in the contemporary context, particularly in the aspiration to a “falsifiable” literary scholarship sketched by Franco Moretti’s data-driven alternative to close reading, “distant reading.”

Essential Words

Modern responses to the Keatsian beauty-truth equivalence reveal a deep-seated ambivalence towards the forms and conventions of Romantic poems and also to those of twentieth century theories of truth, particularly those associated with modern logic. In the case of the former, anxieties about poetry’s sensual effects bleed over into more generalized anxieties about the powers and limitations of aesthetic experience. In the case of the latter, the propositional forms of the new logic present special epistemological problems, in part because of the conditions they set for poems that appear to contain logical propositions, truth-bearing entities that are either completely true or completely false.

“[T]he purpose of a ‘theory of truth,’ ” A.J. Ayer opines in *Language, Truth, Logic*, a book that popularized the logical empiricism of the Vienna Circle in the English-speaking world, “is simply to

describe the criteria by which the validity of the various kinds of propositions is determined” (87). Truth under the stricture of Ayer’s verification principle means that any given sentence is “factually significant to any given person, if, and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express.” In other words, a person may consider a proposition verifiable if she can imagine the kinds of observations that would, conditionally, allow her to accept the proposition as definitively true or reject it as definitively false. Meanwhile, according to Ayer, the criteria of truth and falsehood can have no bearing on questions of metaphysics and aesthetics, which (pace Wittgenstein) are meaningless by philosophical standards. And yet, Ayer concedes, bending his gaze on poetry,

[i]n the vast majority of cases the sentences which are produced by poets do have literal meaning . . . it is, in fact, very rare for a literary artist to produce sentences which have no literal meaning . . . If the author writes nonsense, it is because he considers it most suitable for bringing about the effects for which his writing is designed. (44-45)

In Ayer’s estimation, unverifiable poetic propositions tend to be exceptions rather than the rule, given that more lines of poetry possess “literal meaning” than “no literal meaning” (We might speculate that the implied sample consists mostly of pre-twentieth century poetry that values the unit of the sentence.) And, even then, poetic “nonsense” hardly diminishes the value of the artwork, which, for Ayer, depends primarily on “emotive” effects rather than on the “expression of true propositions” (44). However, what Ayer’s assessment of poetic truth does *not* account for is the moment of encounter: the moment or series of moments when the reader takes in a poetic proposition and responds to it (regardless of whether it is actually verifiable) as if it possessed objective truth.

Modern responses to the beauty-truth equivalence almost invariably take up that caesura of excess, the moment where a mind-dependent truth seems, for a moment, to possess an independent, universal truth-value. The end of Keats’s ode vivifies that pause, not merely because of its terms—

“beauty” and “truth”—but also because of the propositional form that holds them in relation, encouraging readers to confuse the forms of poetry with those of philosophy and then—in the aftermath—to mourn them as irreconcilable components of a field never to be unified.

As Ann Banfield writes, “the formalism of modern art, if not necessarily the result of the influences of formalism in mathematics and logic, was nonetheless a phenomenon in some way possible and explicable only as part of the intellectual history that produced Cantor and Frege, Peano, Whitehead and Russell” (*The Phantom Table* xii). And a tendency to dwell on the final tautology of Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” indicates, in modern texts, a more voluminous suspicions about the right uses of inherited poetic and philosophical forms—what they allow us to know and what limits they place on the possibility of knowing anything at all.

In a sense, the moment of confusion about which I’m writing—in which a personal truth looks very much like one that ought to be universally true—is something like the opposite of, or else the preparation for, another particularly Keatsian doctrine: negative capability, the faculty of “being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason . . . let[ting] go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery . . . remaining content with half knowledge” (*The Complete Poems* 539). Early twentieth-century explications of the beauty-truth equivalence privilege the desire for certitude in ways that often make them look like missed opportunities for the exercise of negative capability. But it is exactly the puzzlement in which they usually culminate that sets the stage for the revival of a negatively capable reading practice in which any given interpretation must, strangely, position itself against an absolutely true reading that remains helpfully beyond the reach of paraphrase.

For the purposes of the modern architects of close reading, content and form in the beauty-truth equation converge to an unusual degree. The final lines of the Keatsian ode explicitly collapse the aesthetic category of the beautiful and the epistemological abstraction of the true, a collapse that

raises serious questions about whether it's possible to access philosophical truth through an affective experience of art; meanwhile, the equation that allows this collapse casts doubt on whether philosophical forms can ever serve the ends of poetry. For modern readers, with reference to the "is," often translate the end of the poem into an equation, a form with special status in modern formulations of logical truth, where the equals sign (=) is used to indicate the identity of truth-values, frequently called logical equivalence, logical equality, or (in special cases) logical identity. For a statement of equality to be valid, according to Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead's *Principia Mathematica*, it must possess "the three properties of being reflexive, symmetrical, and transitive" (§152;159) and it is an assumption of equivalence similar to this one that animates modern readings of the end of the "Ode."³

Kenneth Burke's "Symbolic Action in a Poem By Keats," first published in 1943, articulates an opposition between art and knowing in strong terms and, moreover, takes seriously the idea that Keats's statement about beauty and truth makes an effort at logical equivalence:⁴

"Truth" being the essential word of knowledge (science) and "beauty" being the essential word of art or poetry, we might substitute accordingly. The oracle would then assert, "Poetry is science, science poetry." It would be particularly exhilarating to proclaim them one if there were a strong suspicion that they were at odds . . . It was the dialectical opposition between the "aesthetic" and the "practical," with "poetry" on one side and utility (business and applied science) on the other that was being ecstatically denied. The *relief* in this denial was grounded in the romantic philosophy itself, a philosophy which gave strong recognition to precisely the *contrast* between "beauty" and "truth." (447)

For Burke, whose critical project at the time was the development of a structural system for interpreting literature, the finale of "Ode on a Grecian Urn" represents the intersection of two modes of linguistic usage:

³ For mathematical purpose, equality is generally thought of as a specialized instance of equivalence, though I'm using them (somewhat disingenuously, perhaps) as roughly (well) equivalent terms.

⁴ Though Burke later qualifies the definitions of those terms.

language as a means of *information* or *knowledge*, employed
“epistemologically, semantically, in terms of “science” and also
language as “a mode of *action* . . . ‘poetry []’ for each poem is an act,
the symbolic act of the poet who made it—an act of such a nature
that, in surviving as a structure or object, it enables us as readers to
re-enact it. (447)

His rendition of the beauty-truth equivalence attempts to “attain a level where “poetry” and
“science” cease to be at odds . . . translating the two terms into the “grammar” that lies behind
them” so that

“beauty” equals “poetry” equals “act”
“truth” equals “science” equals “scene” (460)

The mechanism that allows Burke to make this grammatical translation lies in that word “equals.”
For it is, in the end, the underlying “grammar” of the equation that remains intact. The literal
inscription of “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” as equation draws a fermata over the predicative “is,”
elongating the moment of identification between the two terms, prolonging the time in which they
seem to map onto one another without inconsistency.

In Burke’s translation, the “is” of “beauty is truth” becomes the copula of identity, which
expresses the idea that both subject and complement refer to the same entity or concept. He need
not have chosen this particular interpretation of “is.” You could, after all, read the “is” of the ode’s
conclusion as a copula of membership (“The owl is a nocturnal creature”) or else, tendentiously,
perhaps, as a copula of relation (“The owl is astonished.”). “Is” turns out to be as ambiguous as the
terms to which it’s yoked—beauty and truth. Through this ambiguity, the copula of the phrase
becomes, arguably, one of the terms of the equation in its own right and a powerful appeal to a
readerly practice that dwells in the moment before a perception of beauty reveals itself as partial and
contingent truth rather than a complete and essential one.

Burke is not alone in his treatment of the copula of “beauty is truth” as the copula of
identity. This tendency to read the beauty-truth equivalence *as* an equation is one that had particular

appeal for modern readers, who had to contend with the status of the equation as a propositional form as well as a poetic one.⁵ Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, for instance, accentuates the strangeness of equivalence:

[W]hat is essential about equation is that it is not necessary in order to show that both expressions, which are connected by the sign of equality, have the same meaning: for this can be perceived from the two expressions themselves. (6.232)

The identity of the meaning of two expressions cannot be *asserted*. For in order to assert anything about their meaning, I must know their meaning, and if I know their meaning, I know whether they mean the same or something different. (6.2322)

As long as we know we cannot excavate every single connotation of the words related by an equation, we must take the equals sign on faith. And thus, if modern critics translate the beauty-truth equivalence as an equation, it is this implicit act of faith that allows them to mistake the quantity of “beauty” for the quantity of “truth”—a special animation of the delights (and the interpretive difficulties) of propositions in poetry and the effects of early close reading’s absorption of the conditions of modern logic.

Indeed, for modern critics, the problem of language’s communication of identity and likeness—and of what concepts words might express—gives onto an array of questions about equivalence in poetry—and about truth in reading. Is what we experience of the world the same thing as what we know of the world? Does what we know of the world match what the world actually is? (“But isn’t the same at least the same?” Wittgenstein asks elsewhere, as if in anguish [*Philosophical Investigations* §215].) Can the word become the thing, the aesthetic the analytic, the part the whole, the subject the object, the affect the concept? And can particular intuitions open a window to absolute truth? In early twentieth-century criticism, these philosophical inquiries persist alongside those more

⁵ Dries Vrijders’s “History, Poetry, and the Footnote: Cleanth Brooks and Kenneth Burke on Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” offers a helpful comparison of the ways in which Brooks and Burke employed the poem in the service of different visions of literary history. See *New Literary History*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Summer 2011).

particular to poetic discourse, for (as we'll see later) modernist readings of the beauty-truth equation also turn on the question of what kind of Romanticism modernism needed.

Beauty, Truth, Logic

“As for Keats,” write Laura (Riding) Jackson and Robert Graves in *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies* (1928), “the equation between Truth and Beauty, together with the conclusion, is just a clumsy attempt at a serious proposition in logic.” For (Riding) Jackson and Graves, the contrast between a logical equation and a couple lines of poetry isn't, although dismissive, entirely flippant. In fact, the duo goes on, in the succeeding sentence, to literalize the difference:

Compare [the equation between Truth and Beauty] with these two inspired formulas by Mr. W.E. Johnson:
“The factual universal may be expressed in the form
“Every substantive in the universe of reality is Q if P”” while
the assertion of law assumes the form
“Any substantive in the universe of reality would be Q if it
were P.”’

One thing that bothers (Riding) Jackson and Graves is the abstraction of the beauty-truth equivalence as a stand-alone maxim; indeed, *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies* argues that the excerpting of poems and sections of poems reduces them to ahistorical, aphoristic fragments suitable for little else besides opportunistic quotation. (Riding) Jackson and Graves are firstly concerned with preserving poetry's “handwriting quality” (81)—a quality legible only to readers who encounter poems with some sense of their original temporal and material contexts. So one possible solution to the trouble with beauty and truth might be, in the critics' paradigm, merely to read the end of “Ode on a Grecian Urn” in conjunction with the rest of the poem—and preferably alongside a number of works by Keats and his contemporaries.

But this solution, while it does much to contradict the idea that autonomy rather than intertextuality has dominated close reading practice from its earliest days—doesn't explain the

authors' pointed resort to logical discourse in disavowing the lines as they stand alone.⁶ For (Riding) Jackson and Graves were hardly the only modern readers to perceive a mismatch between the first forty-eight lines of the poem and the last two. T.S. Eliot typifies this impulse to extract the ode's conclusion for special censure in his insistence, in an essay on Dante from 1929, that the beauty-truth equivalence is "a serious blemish on a beautiful poem" either because Eliot "fail[s] to understand it" or because "it is a statement which is untrue" (*Selected Essays* 270). Notice that Eliot draws special attention to the ineffectiveness of the beauty-truth equivalence as a logical proposition.

For (Riding) Jackson and Graves, the truth-value of the lines, read as a proposition, proves likewise problematic. If we take the critics at their word—if we perform the rather provocative comparison they suggest between Johnson's logical propositions and Keats's poetic equivalence—we arrive at an understanding of why they found the latter so troubling, especially divorced from the context of the ode. As their footnote to the quotation acknowledges, (Riding) Jackson and Graves encountered Johnson's formulations of the universal of fact ("Every substantive in the universe of reality is Q if P.") and the universal of law ("Any substantive in the universe of reality would be Q if it were P.") in an article by R.B. Braithwaite that appeared in the journal *Mind* in January of 1928.⁷

⁶ (Riding) Jackson and Graves can't properly be considered New Critics as the appellation postdates the publication of *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies*. But their work is, arguably, the first systematic application of a methodology that would become central to the New Critical model of close reading. They were, that is, the first close readers. The publication of William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* in 1930—two years after *A Pamphlet* and three after *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, the prior Graves-(Riding) Jackson collaboration—built on the close reading methodology articulated in those texts. And, indeed, the question of the degree of Empson's debt to those influential works would later be the source of some bitterness between the writer of *Seven Types* and (Riding) Jackson.

⁷ Braithwaite's piece, in essence a defense of Hume's theory of causality, explores the principle of necessary connection, which states that our belief that one event causes another is grounded in our habitual experience of the conjunction of the first event with the second rather than in pure reason. Consider for example, the narrator of *Swann's Way*, who, in describing Swann's attraction to Odette, observes that early experiences of love involve the desire to "possess[] the heart of the woman with whom one [is] in love" while the more jaded lover feels that "possess[ing] a woman's heart may be enough to make one fall in love with her" (270). The cause of Swann's love for Odette, inasmuch as it can be adumbrated in this brief passage, is the association of necessity he has formed between two events: possession of a woman's heart and the advent of reciprocal affection. His belief that Odette has given him her love is therefore enough, given his past experience—Swann is a bit of a rake—to give rise to the second half of the necessary connection: his belief that he is in love with her. (The Humean model of causality offers a rubric for predicting the behavior of several varieties of Swann.) Proust reinforces this conjunctive vision of causality by providing Swann with an objective correlative, a "little phrase" (291) by the composer Vinteuil, which, when he hears it played, never fails to remind Swann of his love for Odette, even long after the association becomes a source of torment rather than pleasure.

Both are propositions having to do with causality, specifically with the concept of conjunction—the associated occurrence of events, qualities, or predicates. Translated from the formal language, the universal of fact says, simply, that all observed Qs have been P. So, for instance, one might substitute cygnets for symbols and say something like “all the swans there were black.” The universal of law, meanwhile, expands the range of the universal of fact to all possible states and worlds. It renders the factual universal *predictive*: since all observed Qs have been P, any given subject *would be* Q assuming it’s P or “all possible swans are black.”

Braithwaite’s article actually offers a subtle critique of Johnson’s propositions, extending the reach of the universal of law even further into possibility. (“[T]he black swan knows how to break/Through expectation,” James Merrill writes [*CP* 3].) In order to make convincing claims about causation, Braithwaite endorses the Humean strain of empiricist thought, contextualizing it with reference to the mathematical logic developed by Frege, Russell, and Wittgenstein—a project typical of the breed of early twentieth-century philosophy known as logical empiricism. The philosopher is particularly concerned with recuperating Hume’s account of causality, which theorizes that it is only our habitual experience of events occurring in conjunction, our experience of their “necessary connection,” that leads to our belief that one thing causes another: so, for example, our observation that the vibrations of a plucked string produce sound. In mounting a defense of Hume’s experiential model of causality, Braithwaite ultimately wants to satisfy “the problem which is before every philosopher, to distinguish what is due to the world of nature from what is due to the spirit of man” (72). His article seeks to understand whether and how it’s possible to pass from non-psychological universals of fact to universals of law, which, he concludes, always involve some element of uncertainty and thus some psychological element of belief.

Humean causality matters to Braithwaite because he also wants to anchor universals of law—the laws of nature as derived by scientific method, that is—to our epistemological and

linguistic limits. In the end, his acknowledgment of those limits leads him to reject the idea that our reasons for believing in inductive propositions as we draw them from our experience are of the same kind as those “for our belief in a valid syllogism” (71). The inductions of the scientific method will never “satisfy a logician” or “form part of any formal system of deductive logic” (71) because our inductive inferences are based on the habits of experience, which are, of necessity, always subject to a degree of uncertainty. And yet, Braithwaite admits, factual universal assumptions are often of great practical use in dealing with both the possible and the actual: “[i]f I see an object which I mistakenly believe to be a lighted bomb,” he writes, I behave as if the causal law that lighted bombs explode applied to this particular case” (67).⁸

What do the universal of fact and the universal of law mean to (Riding) Jackson and Graves? And, moreover, what do they mean for the critics as they dismiss the finale of “Ode on a Grecian Urn?” Why call these propositions “inspired?” After all, it might be argued that, taken out of context, Johnson’s symbolic statements are just as obscure in meaning as the beauty-truth equivalence, although, unlike the poetry, they make no pretense at courting the understanding of the uninitiated.

Imagine, for a moment, that (Riding) Jackson and Graves take “beauty is truth” to be a “clumsy attempt” at a factual universal, a statement of conjunction or coincidence: “wherever there is beauty, there is truth.” Imagine, in other words, that the critics see a *formal* resonance between the

⁸ In an essay from 1928, the philosopher F.P. Ramsey—a close friend of Wittgenstein and his first translator—gives rueful voice to Braithwaite’s doubts about the epistemological gap between universals of fact and those of law while, at the same time, reserving the problem for “philosophers,” “systematizers,” and “emotionalists,” a disreputable crowd, to be sure:

[W]hen we use the notion of a law as in a statement of causal implication, we do not say anything about a grand deductive system. The answer is that we do do this so soon as we pass beyond the mere material or formal implication. But that the important part of statements of causal implication is always just the material or formal implication which has no reference to system. It is only the philosopher or systematizer or emotionalist who is interested in the rest. All the practical man wants to know is that all people who take arsenic die, not that this is a causal implication, for a universal of fact is *within its scope* just as good a guide to conduct as a universal of law. (“Universals of Law and of Fact” 144)

logical metalanguage and the poetic utterance and it is solely in the matter of form that any comparison is possible. Now, return to the question of Braithwaite's lighted bomb. If the factual universal is a helpful practical guide to conduct (i.e. it's a good idea to believe that objects resembling lighted bombs tend to explode and to act accordingly) and the universal law is a helpful predictor ("All lighted bombs are bound to explode."), then how might the beauty-truth equivalence, considered as a statement of conjunction, fail in one or both of these capacities?

"Beauty is truth," translated into the grammar of the factual universal, might read something like "all observed beauties have also been truths" or "all observed beauty has also been true." If we want to decide what to do about beauty—to derive, inductively, a rule for acting once we have registered its presence—we can see why Keats's oracle, when parsed in this fashion, offers a potentially suspect *vade mecum*. It denies the existence that there might be, in the world, any false beauty.

This might mean, as Kant would say, that we cannot be wrong about a judgment of beauty because, in calling something beautiful, we merely affirm our subjective feelings of pleasure in our experience of an object, feelings about which we can't be wrong. On the other hand, it might mean that our perceptions of beauty never lead to bad conclusions, a dictum that the early twentieth century found questionable at best. Arthur C. Danto writes of the *kalliphobia* of the later Dada artists that "they found beauty bitter because they were embittered by a society that venerated beauty. In unleashing a terrible war, it abused justice. In symbolic retribution, the artists abused beauty" ("Kalliphobia in Contemporary Art" 25). For (Riding) Jackson and Graves, the counsel of the urn represents abuse in the opposite direction, an appropriation of logical architecture and a demolition: beauty's violence to the forms of truth. To imagine the beauty-truth equivalence as a universal of fact is, by these lights, very bad induction, commitment to a principle based on evidence with a

severe selection bias. To imagine it as a universal of law—“all beauty *will* be true,” “all truth *will* be beautiful”—is to multiply the error indefinitely.

What do (Riding) Jackson and Graves hope to achieve by this comparison, in which poetry can't help but come off as an ungainly pretender? And why do they require the beauty-truth equivalence to look like clumsy poetry and even clumsier logic? After all, (Riding) Jackson in particular was often hostile to the use of symbolic logic, preferring to believe that natural language could offer a more profound clarity of description when wielded properly (“Such philosophic propaganda as that of Bertrand Russell, Rudolf Carnap and Ludwig Wittgenstein,” [Riding] Jackson felt, mistakenly slurred language as a medium riddled with “gravest weaknesses . . . facilities for logical error” [“Thoughts on Thought” 417].) In setting up this contrast between logical propositions and poetic propositions, the critics further a double program of definition and invention. The comparison defines a vector and a field of resistance for modern poetry (towards “classicism” and against Romanticism) and also justifies the invention of a critical metalanguage for valuing and interpreting this poetry (the generic and methodological apparatus of close reading). Both projects involve a flirtation with totality—the glimmer of a theory of everything.

A Universe Defiantly Intelligible

Let's address the question of poetic definition first; the problem of critical metalanguage will receive abundant treatment later on in the chapter. For the writers of *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies* and *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, the writing of early-nineteenth-century poets sounds alike because “in spite of their individualistic propensities and their private purposes or passions, they were historically one in reacting against the same sort of classicism, and were never, moreover, able to get beyond serving this reaction.” Echoing the arguments of Eliot's “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” (Riding) Jackson and Graves go on to argue that

modernism has set itself the “impossible task” or “invent[ing] the rituals by which it is to become formalized . . . individually but not individualistically creating a new classicism . . . founded on a philosophical theory which each poet was bound to interpret differently because he was not, so to speak, classically born. (*A Survey of Modernist Poetry* 269-70)

Above all things, modern poetry is defined by its various formal expression of the governing philosophical abstraction of “classicism” and its relationship to failed Romantic forms.

What’s more—for (Riding) Jackson more than Graves, perhaps—the failure of those forms comes down to their insufficient engagement with the problem of truth-value. “The romantic figures were giant-like[,]” she writes in the to the 1938 edition of *The Poems of Laura Riding*:

They renounced the muscular energies of their classical predecessors, and the dispute with falsity. Thus disarmed, they were deliberately and hugely weak; but in their weakness they dreamed hugely of a future in which existence was poetry positive, all of truth. They were giant-like by their dreams, prophetically swollen with dreams; instead of writing poems, they drew a swollen outline of poetry, which was their assertion of faith in poetry as something more than the negation of falsity. So it had to be, more they could not have done. But these are other days. These are days for neither dispute nor dreaming, but for poetry positive, poetry actual. These days are, by the laws of temporal and of poetic succession, that future in reverence of which the romantics eloquently did nothing. (412)

In (Riding) Jackson’s view—the great disappointment of Romantic poetry lies in its attempt to make the business of poems more and other than the pursuit of truth. For “poetry positive,” we might substitute “poetry *positivist*,” so deeply in this passage is (Riding) Jackson indebted to the conditions of logical positivism.

At best, the Romantic poets cleared the way for a kind of language-use in which

[a] poem is an uncovering of truth so fundamental and general a kind that no other name besides poetry is adequate except truth. Knowledge implies specialized fields of exploration and discovery; it would be inexact to call poetry a kind of knowledge. It is inexact to call it a kind of truth, since in truth there are no kinds. Truth is the result when reality as a whole is uncovered by those faculties which apprehend in terms of entirety, rather than in terms merely of parts. (“Preface” to *The Poems of Laura Riding* 407)

Poetry ought not, according to (Riding) Jackson, rely on exciting an aesthetic reaction, “stirring up . . . the poetic faculties” so one can “feel[] oneself in the poetic mood” or be cozened by “the flattering sensation of understanding more than [one] knows” (408). Rather, poetry can and should act as a variety of conceptual inquiry, unveiling “reality as a whole,” an ambition that reaches back to the deterministic universe that pre-dated the revelations of the New Physics: Einstein’s relativity and Heisenberg’s uncertainty, Schrödinger and his hapless cat.

Modern “reality” seems, somehow, defined by its inability to be conceived of as a whole, regardless of whether one is a scientist or a poet. And so the historical conditions are in place for the apparition of total understanding to capture the imagination, perhaps even by virtue of its seeming impossibility. (Riding) Jackson’s phrasing weirdly recalls the conceit of LaPlace’s demon—the imagined subjectless-subject, perfectly objective, who slips the token in the coin-operated binoculars at the view-from-nowhere observation tower and leans into omniscience.⁹

In a poetics that equates the function of poetry with the revelation of absolute truth (“in truth there are no kinds”) and Romanticism with the abdication of the poet’s responsibility to truth (“they drew a swollen outline of poetry . . . as something more than the negation of falsity”), the

⁹ Long before the twentieth century, the Marquis de LaPlace (1749-1827) articulated the ideal determinist world-view that (Riding) Jackson longs for:

Given for one instant an intelligence which could comprehend all the forces by which nature is animated and the respective situation of the beings who compose it—an intelligence sufficiently vast to submit these data to analysis—it would embrace in the same formula the movements of the greatest bodies of the universe and those of the lightest atom; for it, nothing would be uncertain and the future, as the past, would be present to its eyes. The human mind offers, in the perfection which it has been able to give to astronomy, a feeble idea of this intelligence. Its discoveries in mechanics and geometry, added to that of universal gravity, have enabled it to comprehend in the same analytical expressions the past and future states of the system of the world. (*A Philosophical Essay on Probabilities* 4)

The ideal knower, who comprehends “all the forces by which nature is animated and the respective situation of the beings who compose it” would come to be known as LaPlace’s demon. This omniscient intelligence, pure subjective substrate untainted by the formations of culture, would be a completely objective entity. Sharon Cameron’s *Impersonality* (2007) details observes that a desire to transcend personality and cultural identity is built into many modern aesthetic projects—and the appeal of LaPlace’s demon to modern sensibilities seems part and parcel of this desire, a nostalgia for determinism. Contemporary criticism has also mounted valuable critiques of the culture-less, universal subject, particularly the field of subaltern studies.

beauty-truth equivalence operates as a synecdoche for the aborted unification of affects and concepts as well as a monolithic Romanticism against which modern poetry can invent itself. Gertrude Stein—a writer of whom (Riding) Jackson intermittently approved—says of the Romantic poets that they “felt it was wrong to live by parts of a whole and they tried and tried . . . but . . . inevitably as they wrote longer and longer live[d] by parts of the whole” (“What is English Literature?” 44-45). Romantic poetry (at least as embodied in a bit of abstracted Keats) aspires to a holistic mimesis and fails, collapsing the judgments of sensual experience and the forms of conceptual inquiry into a whole that sounds unconvincing—irrational, even—to twentieth-century ears.

An ideal modern poetry would succeed in achieving this deferred expression of wholeness by its recommitment to the pursuit of an absolute and universal rationality.¹⁰ “Confronted by a terrifying, absorbing, fascinating universe,” (Riding) Jackson opines in “A Prophecy or a Plea” (1925), poetry “does not cry out: ‘How big, how terrifying, how fascinating!’ and permit itself to be overcome by it.” Instead, poetry answers the universe “atom for atom in a recreated universe of its own, a universe defiantly intelligible” (425). (Riding) Jackson’s truth demands not only that poetry undertake the project of a total mimesis—the complete, “atom for atom” recreation of the universe—but also the task of rendering that mirrored universe transparently legible. It’s a vision of poetry that runs counter to the ancient narrative of poetry’s fundamentally anti-cognitive qualities, a

¹⁰ Indeed, *Rational Meaning*, the project that would consume (Riding) Jackson’s later career was a quixotic attempt to resist ordinary language philosophy’s contention that the meaning of words lies in their use. *Rational Meaning* (1948-68) attempted to secure each word to a unique definition, a definition so precise that—as in John Wilkins’s *Essay Towards A Real Character and a Philosophical Language* (1668)—no word could ever be mistaken for the synonym of another word. Her hope, in this volume, is recognizable as part of a suite of modernist efforts—Eliot’s, Pound’s, Mallarmé’s &c.—to purify the language of the tribe. A typical Jacksonian distinction might articulate the difference between truth (“animation of words with purpose of mind to make manifest possessed awareness, productive of complete rightness of expression”) and “verity” (“animation of words with purpose of mind to make available possessed knowledge, productive of total accuracy of exposition”) (379).

narrative that stretches back (at the very least) to Plato, who exiled the lyric poets from his ideal Republic because of the unreason of their song.

While many modern poetics celebrate the poem's potential to disrupt rational processes—the Dadaist sound poetry of Kurt Schwitters, the mystic work of H.D., Robert Duncan, James Merrill, and W.B. Yeats, the “irrational element” of poetic craft championed by Wallace Stevens—it is too unsophisticated to frame (Riding) Jackson's program in terms of the usual anti-philosophical/pro-philosophical and anti-rational/pro-rational critical binaries. In fact, when regarded in the context of the modern fascination with totality and comprehensiveness, the hyperrational ideal of poetry that (Riding) Jackson advances (atom for atom replication of the universe) looks much less singular—and much less simple.

Joyce's *Ulysses*, Ogden and Richards's *the Meaning of Meaning*, Pound's *Cantos*, Russell and Whitehead's *Principia Mathematica*, Stein's *The Making of Americans*, Yeats's *A Vision*, Zukofsky's “A”: all these texts are animated, to one degree or another, by the desire for a theory of everything and, perhaps, the fear that this desire might actually be consummated. (Even Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, with its determination to exhaust the possibilities of philosophical language, might be classified as an endeavor of this kind.) So (Riding) Jackson's insistence that poetry offer up a theory of everything seems quite familiar when placed beside other encyclopedic modern experiments, literary and philosophical. Her call for a “defiantly intelligible” mimetic universe also puts the task of poetry on a par with the *desideratum* of modern philosophy and science: the objective “view from nowhere” espoused by the writers of the Vienna Circle Manifesto.

Objective, Subjective, Intersubjective

In *Objectivity*, their monumental history of the term and its uses, Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison set out to demonstrate that the epistemological system of objectivity is a modern one, not much

over a century and a half old. Studded with scientific representations of corpses and cloud formations, galaxies and mercury drops, the book argues that these images emphasize the cognitive preoccupations of the ages in which they were made—as do the interpretations of the scientists who fashioned them:

All the multiple senses of objectivity intersect in their opposition to subjectivity,” the authors write, “[t]he multiplicity of the one is simply the photographic negative of the other . . . [o]bjectivity and subjectivity are expressions of a particular historical predicament, not merely a rephrasing of some eternal complementarity between a mind and the world. (379)

If the practices of objectivity that pervaded modern scientific cultures privileged, in the words of Rudolf Carnap, “an intersubjective, objective world, which can be conceptually comprehended and which is identical for all observers” (*The Logical Structure of the World* 7) then, by Daston and Galison’s reckoning, the discourses of modern subjectivity should mirror this impulse in “photographic negative.”

And some of them do, sending up a great cry of protest, sometimes literally, at the notion of a world—a truth—made uniform from all perspectives by the intervention of objectivity:

wheeeee
who aw ah eeeee
clacka tacka tacka
tacka tacka
wha ha ha ha ha
ha ha ha

[. . .]

Science
—wheeeee!
ghosts
sapped of strength—
desire dead
in the heart—

Philosophy!
—haw haw haw haw (*The Collected Poems* 525)

In this early version of William Carlos Williams's "The Trees," for example, the poet heaps his disdain on usages that restrict language to a conveyance for rational meaning. A carnival of onomatopoeia and babble, these lines seem to transcribe the click of a typewriter (clacka tacka tacka), laughter (haw haw haw haw), and vocalizations that might indicate exhilaration, delight, wheezing, or contempt (who aw ah eeeee). Science and philosophy, "ghosts/sapped of strength," languish in exuberant jabber's ledger. Williams makes a mockery of the language of instrumental significance by stranding its avatars in a flurry of sound, activity, and transient emotive expression that seems to exceed the strictures of meaning.

But, although Williams's poem is nearly perfect as a "photographic negative" of modern objective genres in which language-use tends towards complete utility, it makes an even better contrast to (Riding) Jackson's fantasy of a poetry of absolute rationality in which each word would correspond to a single, atomic meaning. For her larger aim is not to discard the goals of science and philosophy but to render poetic language worthy of participating in objectivity's discourses. If we entertain, for a moment, her conviction that poetry must express an ultimate, objective truth, all the while abjuring the forms of philosophy in favor of its own organic formal rituals, we end up with a poetics that would need to strip language of qualia in order to operate.

Qualia are those perceptual experiences that load our involvement in the physical world but cannot be fully reduced to physical processes: the sensation of color, for example. Even the most intimate knowledge of processes in our neurons, the physicist Erwin Schrödinger believed, would never tell us "anything about the sensation of colour . . . the same physiological processes might conceivably result in a sensation of sweet taste or anything else" ("Mind and Matter" 155).

Furthermore, he writes,

there is no nervous process whose objective description includes the characteristic 'yellow colour' or 'sweet taste,' just as little as the objective description of an electro-magnetic wave includes either of

these characteristics . . . theories are easily thought to account for sensual qualities; which, of course, they never do” (155/64).

No amount of objective data—at least, given our current epistemological limitations—will tell us what it’s like to communicate through ultraviolet signals, as butterflies do, or what it’s like to be a bat (as in Thomas Nagel’s famous essay). Language often has a hard enough time communicating what it’s like to be another person. And therein lies the force of Wittgenstein’s maxim: “[i]f a lion could talk, we wouldn’t be able to understand it” (*Philosophical Investigations* 235).

Similarly, our experiences of reading literature—which happens, for the most part, in language—depend upon the qualitative occurrences that arise when the reader acts upon the text. And because we share only the common denominator of the body—and because the experiences of any given body can never be identical to the experiences of another—the qualia produced by any given act of reading will never be perfectly translatable or describable to anyone else. But (Riding) Jackson’s poetics require the fantasy of perfect equivalence, perfect translatability, in order to operate.

What would poetry look like if it divested itself of the obstructions and ambiguities of qualia? Or, rather, if it *tried* to divest itself of qualia? For, regardless of whether qualia exist in a definitive ontological way, language-users act as if they do. We have to. Words—written or spoken—press on the senses. They expose the nerves.

Poetry-sans-qualia, if one cleaves to (Riding) Jackson’s methods, might tend to laconic or verbose extremes since no word could ever synonymize another. It might also push the boundaries of workaday syntax, seeking out the most precise, intricately qualified, and unambiguous constructions and avoiding, at the same time, any gratuitous appeal to the sensuous in its pursuit of truth. And yet, how to make poetry deny the relativities of the senses? (Riding) Jackson sometimes seemed ambivalent about the possibilities and the merits of this venture. In “World’s End,” a poem composed in the lead-up to (Riding) Jackson’s attempted suicide in 1929—she leaped from the

window of a London flat after the collapse of her relationship with the Irish poet Geoffrey Phibbs—the tension between poetry as a medium with objective potentials and poetry as a medium of sensuous particulars is especially conspicuous:¹¹

The tympanum is worn thin
The iris is become transparent
The sense has overlasted.
Sense itself is transparent
Speed has caught up with speed.
Earth rounds out earth.
The mind puts the mind by.
Clear spectacle: where is the eye?

All is lost, no danger
Forces the heroic hand.
No bodies in bodies stand
Oppositely. The complete world
Is likeness in every corner.
The names of contrast fall
Into the widening centre.
A dry sea extends the universal.

No suit and no denial
Disturb the general proof.
Logic has logic, they remain
Locked in each other's arms,
Or were otherwise insane,
With all lost and nothing to prove
That even nothing can live through love (*Collected Poems* 111)

“World’s End” records the attenuation of the senses, perhaps from overstimulation: “The tympanum is worn thin/The iris is become transparent . . . Sense itself is transparent.” Where the world comes to an end, so does sense experience—or maybe it’s the other way around. In death, when the senses dissolve, so does the world. And yet a “[c]lear spectacle” persists even in the absence of an observer: “where is the eye?” It’s unclear, as if the poem were imagining how the world might look if there were no one to see it. It’s as if there really were a view-from-nowhere

¹¹ The flat belonged, in fact, to Robert Graves, with whom (Riding) Jackson and Nancy Nicholson were living in a “marriage of three” their acquaintances called the Trinity. Deborah Baker relates the story of Phibbs and the Trinity in *In Extremis: The Life of Laura Riding* (1993/2000). “World’s End,” Baker reports, is also the name of the cottage (Riding) Jackson shared with Graves at Islip.

observation tower and a pair of coin-operated binoculars but—for reasons unknown—LaPlace’s demon had abandoned its post.

What remains in the aftermath of love? World enough, perhaps, but the nature of that world is desaturated and sapped of sensuous features. “All is lost.” The corporeal dissolves: bodies have become no-bodies. And the vista of the “complete world,” freed of the “names of contrast” gives onto nothing but the boundlessness of a “dry sea.”¹² When the lover’s “suits” and “denials” no longer cloud “the general proof,” the vision of universality is not delightful but desolate. Logic is restored to itself but at what cost?

At first, it seems as if (Riding) Jackson is doing no more than rehearsing the old poetic trope in which the world becomes savorless and grim in the absence of the beloved, or else vanishes altogether. But (Riding) Jackson deals with the lover’s sense of abjection a little differently in the end. By the last lines of “World’s End,” a subject appears amidst all the abstraction. Really, it’s two subjects: “they.” And the language suggests they’ve been present all along, though invisible to the reader until now: “they/remain/Locked in each other’s arms” in the center of a disintegrated world.¹³ “World” does not, as it might for another poet, stand in for the beloved in any straightforward way; its meaning is literal. This is a poem about—(“What is this poem about?” was a

¹² A bitter revision of the lines from *Romeo and Juliet*: “My bounty is as boundless as the sea,/my love as deep; the more I give to thee,/the more I have, for both are infinite” (II.ii).

¹³ The line may also recall the first stanza of Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium,” which had just gone into circulation by the time (Riding) Jackson composed “World’s End”:

That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees
---Those dying generations---at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect. (*Collected Poems* 193)

question [Riding] Jackson considered the last word in vulgarity—but let that pass¹⁴)—this is a poem about what happens when the world passes some threshold of uncertainty and, thus, loses its integrity *as* a world.

The sense of abjection results not from the absence of the beloved but from the tension of the lovers' embrace. On one hand, the radical failures of the world around them might have driven them mad if they hadn't sustained each other ("or were otherwise insane"). On the other, their rigid clinch—"locked in each other's arms"—suggests desperation rather than passion, the weary vigilance of trauma. When "all is lost," the beleaguered lovers have nothing apart from one another. And yet this is hardly a comforting scenario. They seem, initially, to have "nothing to prove," which might be pleasant. Only the enjambment delivers a cruel twist: "nothing to prove/That even nothing can live through love." Love might be the last candle to gutter out in a state of total collapse (no mean endorsement). However, the poem's final judgment is not that love survives everything but that no one—and nothing—except nothingness itself—survives love. Larkin in "An Arundel Tomb": "What will survive of us is love" (*The Whitsun Weddings* 43). Larkin again: "Love isn't stronger than death just because statues hold hands for 600 years."¹⁵ (Riding) Jackson: we don't survive love and love doesn't survive us.

Flickering between reverence and terror, "World's End" can't quite commit itself to the vision of totality and abstraction it outlines. (This is to say nothing of the extravagant sonic qualities of its repetitions—"earth rounds out earth," "bodies in bodies," "logic has logic"—which exert their own peculiar sensual demands.) In this poem, the prospect of a theory of everything is repellant because a theory of everything would also have to encompass a theory of nothing. And so, when

¹⁴ The original preface to (Riding) Jackson's 1938 collected poems raises this objection with typical vigor: "[T]he excitement of feeling oneself in a poetic mood has come to be regarded as adequate fulfillment both for the reader and the poet. Hence the frequent vulgarism 'What is this poem *about*?'—when the reader feels that there is an element in a poem beyond that designed to evoke in him the flattering sensation of understanding more than he knows. (408)

¹⁵ Scrawled, according to Andrew Motion's *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* (1993), on a manuscript version of "An Arundel Tomb" (274).

faced with the phantom of nihilism, (Riding) Jackson's dream of a "defiantly intelligible" poetic universe looks, in practice, ambivalent at best. As any good poststructuralist will tell you, the more abstract language becomes, the easier it is for the genius of the reader to multiply and alter the resonances of what the poet sets down ("*L'on ne sort pas des arbres par des moyens d'arbres*," writes Francis Ponge in "Le cycle des saisons" [*Oeuvres* 53]: "no way out of trees by means of trees."). If poetry were to compete with objective discourses for access to absolute truth, it would have to be made of some other matter than language. This is obvious. What is less obvious is what we can understand by investigating (Riding) Jackson's polemical views about poetic truth.

(Riding) Jackson struggled with the problem posed by her attraction to poetry's ambiguities and her fidelity to an unyielding vision of objective truth and meaning. From the 1920s onward, her writing participates in the larger cultural conversation about the limits of the determinist world-view, which was fast eroding in the early twentieth century. By the 1930s, as Ian Hacking argues, the laws of physics, "long . . . the model of impersonal and irrevocable necessity, were shorn of their magisterial power":

They had once ordained the slightest motion of the lightest atom and hence the fall of every sparrow, perhaps the Fall itself. By 1936 they described only the probabilities of the future course of any individual particle. (*The Taming of Chance* 116)

The surprising thing here is not that science had to find some way of accommodating uncertainty (perhaps a sort of Fortunate Fall). It is, rather, the inventive ways in which modern art dealt with the new, indeterminate universe. As "World's End" attests, (Riding) Jackson experienced the attrition of certainty as a loss. She turned to poetry to deliver what science could not and was ultimately disappointed: "truth ends where poetry begins" ("Preface" to *Selected Poems in Five Sets* 416), she decided in the end. She would renounce the making of poems for good in 1941.

"Art and science are not self-evidently a single enterprise," Daston and Galison write:

[] [F]ew today assume that the True and the Beautiful must necessarily converge [][,] [N]or do they stand in stalwart opposition to each other. Instead, they uneasily but productively reinforce each other in a few borderline areas. (412)

The writers of *Objectivity* are surely more moderate than (Riding) Jackson on the question of how beauty and truth might relate to one another. For them, art and science, signified by the terms of the beauty-truth equivalence, are a little like tigers who occupy contiguous territories: they prefer to think themselves solitary and sovereign though they will occasionally forge alliances at the boundaries of their separate ambits. But (Riding) Jackson's resolution to assign poetry and science the same superseding directives (pursue absolute truth; make the universe fully and completely legible) presents an instructive example of the kind of poetry that would be written if we expected subjective modes and practices to counterbalance the perceived failures of objective ones: none at all. However, in a world with a heavy investment in the processes of disenchantment the idea that poetry might possess a relationship to absolute truth is significant. It illuminates the dependency of modern poetic and critical projects on a strong division between subject and object and also on the desire to abide in those moments where it's possible to confuse the two, moments that modern reading practice often encourages.

(Riding) Jackson's early belief was that poetry might compensate the world for the certitude of which science had deprived it (as firm a rejection of negative capability as a poet has ever issued). With this in mind, we can return to the question of what she and Robert Graves meant by contrasting the beauty-truth equivalence with a pair of logical propositions. "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" is obviously bad poetry by (Riding) Jackson's standards in that it conflates the judgments of aesthetics ("flattering sensation" ["Preface" to *The Poems of Laura Riding* 408]) with absolute truth. (For [Riding] Jackson, truth had "no kinds" [407].) If poetry were, somehow, to transcend subjectivity, it would need to differentiate its terms appropriately, say "truth" when it meant truth and "beauty" when it meant beauty. It would need, in short, to eradicate *false equivalence* and to be

very careful with the forms of predication that allow it. The beauty-truth equivalence, viewed in this light, provides a seductive invitation to persist in the illusion that aesthetic and conceptual certainty are one.

“Beauty is truth” becomes, read after (Riding) Jackson’s fashion, the ultimate in false equivalence. Its most profound insult lies in its form, an equation that might easily be mistaken for a logical proposition. What Graves and (Riding) Jackson have to forget in their abstraction and subsequent dismissal of the lines, are the theories of aesthetics to which Keats was responding in “Ode on a Grecian Urn”: the work of some of the most prominent Enlightenment philosophers links beauty and logical form as a matter of course. In the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), one of the foundational texts of classical Western aesthetics, Kant writes of beauty as an essentially non-cognitive experience. A judgment of beauty involves a feeling of disinterested pleasure that makes a claim to “subjective universality.”¹⁶ In other words, even though I know there is no *objective* quality in a Rodarte gown or a song by Nina Simone that would account for my delight in these things, my conviction of their beauty is so powerful that I believe that they should give everyone as much pleasure as they do me.

The beautiful, Kant theorizes, is

an object of delight apart from any interest. For where any one is conscious that his delight in an object is with him independent of interest, it is inevitable that he should look on the object as one containing a ground of delight for all men . . . therefore he must believe that he has reason for demanding a similar delight from every one.” (§6)

According to Kant, the impulse to universal validity is intrinsically part of any judgment of taste and this essential feature of aesthetic experience acts upon our language in strange ways; it causes us to speak of a fundamentally non-cognitive experience as if it were a function of rational processes.

¹⁶ A.G. Baumgarten and G.W. Leibniz, to name just two dissenters, held a very different view—that beauty is actually a form of clouded or disguised cognition. But Kant’s is the position that has tended to dominate theories of beauty for several centuries now.

The one seized by an a perception of beauty will

 speak of the beautiful as if beauty were a quality of the object and the judgment logical (forming a cognition of the object by concepts of it); although it is only aesthetic, and contains merely a reference of the representation of the object to the subject . . . because it still bears this resemblance to the logical judgment, that it may be presupposed to be valid for all men. But this universality cannot spring from concepts. For from concepts there is no transition to the feeling of pleasure or displeasure (§6)

While beauty's judge will, by definition, be in the grips of an irrational procedure deriving from sensation and affect rather than conceptual activity, *she will speak of her judgment as if it were logical*, as if it possessed propositional truth-value. That is, the person who finds Antony and the Johnsons' "Salt, Silver, Oxygen" a song of surpassing beauty will—impelled by the feeling that everyone ought to find it as beautiful as she does—express her judgment of taste in the forms of logic. This mode of speaking will make the song's beauty seem as if it were not a matter of judgment at all but, rather, a statement of objective fact.

 "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" is, in its original context, an utterance: it is the address of the urn itself to the reader and it's meant as a sort of cold comfort, offered in the face of mortality: "When old age shall this generation waste/Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe/Than ours, a friend of man, to whom thou *say'st* [emphasis mine],/'Beauty is truth, truth beauty' " (*The Collected Poems* 345-46). So when the urn delivers the conclusion that beauty is truth, it should come as no surprise—at least, to those who happen to be thinking about Kant—that the utterance of an aesthetic judgment takes on a propositional form drawn from conceptual discourse. For, in the *Critique of Judgment*, the entanglement of judgments of feeling with the forms of logic is inscribed, from the beginning, in all expressions of aesthetic experience. And the end of "Ode on a Grecian Urn" might be regarded as an illustration or an intensification of this philosophical model.

 In a sense, the ode is calling the bluff of Kantian aesthetics, asking what would happen if we were to push the demand of subjective universality to its limits. What if the judgment of beauty—

instead of merely expressing itself in logical form—*ate* logical form? What if everything knowable (“all/Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know”) could be condensed to a single theorem that unified the yields of reason with the understanding of the senses? These are the questions the end of the poem poses. And, in light of them, the beauty-truth equivalence resembles much less a “clumsy attempt” at a serious proposition in logic and much more a sophisticated examination of the relationship of aesthetic experience to the forms of conceptual language. The compression of beauty and truth into a unified field tenders to readers a formidable hypothetical: what if a coherent theory of everything were possible? What it would be like to know all there is to know of the world through beauty?

In order to discredit the beauty-truth equivalence by means of logic, Graves and (Riding) Jackson suppress—wittingly or not—the long association of beauty and logical form in classical Western aesthetics. Many of their contemporaries—I. A. Richards and William Empson among them—also struggled to confront a growing divide between subjective and objective discourses through the beauty-truth equivalence. They did this not out of naivety, but out of a growing conviction that the dream of a universal language for describing the whole of experience from the atomic to the universal to the merely personal was just this: a dream. Waiting for the catastrophe of personality to make sense in relation to a knowable, impersonal universe was a pervasive theme for both modern poetry and criticism. (Some waited more quietly than others.) Out of the promise and the failure of a theory of everything, as I show in the next section of the chapter, comes the invention of modern close reading.

The Logomachy of I.A. Richards

In *Letters from Iceland* (1937), W.H. Auden includes a long, chatty letter in rhyme royal—“fan-mail” (*Collected Poems* 81) addressed to Lord Byron. As he tries to explain what he likes so much about

Byron's poetry—how it has informed his own practice, why *Don Juan* is the best of traveling companions—Auden makes sure to tell readers what kind of critic he isn't:

In setting up my brass plate as a critic,
I make no claim to certain diagnosis,
I'm more intuitive than analytic,
I offer thought in homoeopathic doses
(But someone may get better in the process).
I don't pretend to reasoning like Pritchard's
Or the logomachy of I. A. Richards. (*CP* 97)

No mason of theory, Auden approaches critical reading as an “intuitive” act rather than a procedure that advances from a formal deductive framework. He dispenses his poetics in minute, “homeopathic doses” rather than offering broad-spectrum prescriptions for how to read and write.

What Auden is reacting against, as he makes plain, are overarching theoretical frameworks that (as he sees it) pretend to a kind of objective “view-from-nowhere” position in their sifting and ordering of human experience and its cultural products. Pritchard is very likely E.E. Evans-Pritchard, a social anthropologist who advocated the doctrine of structural-functionalism, which suggests that societies are complex macro-systems held together by dense webs of customs, norms, institutions, and traditions. The literary critic, I.A. Richards, meanwhile—by 1937 a figure of eminence in his field—represents for Auden an entire school of reading based on disputes about the meanings of words, “logomachy.” And the logomachic method of reading puts much pressure on the “truth” portion of the beauty-truth equivalence.

As Auden frames it, the link between Richards and Pritchard (apart from the convenient euphony of their names) lies in their systems-building approach to dealing with culture—their attempts to unify multiple spheres of human knowledge into a single, coherent structure. In the case of the developing modern discourses of humanities and social science, a theory of everything would, rather than explaining and reconciling the operations of physical forces, resolve the relationship between subjective perceptions and objective realities: beauty, for example, and truth. And the

juxtaposition of Richards and Pritchard in Auden’s poem points to the way ambitious theoretical ventures of different kinds were often, before disciplinary boundaries had hardened in the early twentieth century, alike in scale and communicable in their preoccupation with the possibility—and sometimes the impossibility—of describing a unified field of human knowledge. What’s at stake in a “logomachic” style of reading culture and literary texts, at least for various modern projects, is the nature of the claim that language can make on universal truth.

Two significant works of modern scholarship, both collaboratively authored, illustrate the homologies between theoretical texts in the aftermath of the long logical revolution of the nineteenth century: the *Principia Mathematica* (1910, 1912, 1913 and 1927) by Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead and *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923) by C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards. The *Principia* is a work of symbolic logic that strives to “[enlarge] the scope of mathematics . . . both by the addition of new subjects and by a backward extension into provinces hitherto abandoned to philosophy” (*PM* v). This “logician” work, which attempts to show that the elementary truths of mathematics can be derived entirely from logical proofs, is closely linked to the call for a unified field theory that David Hilbert made at the Second International Congress of Mathematicians in Paris in the year 1900.¹⁷ *The Meaning of Meaning*, meanwhile, is a colossal entry in twentieth-century philosophy of language, literary analysis, and linguistics, its agenda no less than the “dissection and

¹⁷ In August of 1900, David Hilbert addressed the Second International Congress of Mathematicians on the subject of ten unsolved mathematical problems. These problems were ten of the twenty-three that Hilbert would set out in various lectures during the year 1900. “Hilbert’s program,” as the aggregated problems came to be known, would determine much of the focus of mathematical inquiry for the twentieth century. The second problem appealed for a proof that would justify the postulates of arithmetic as internally consistent. Meanwhile, the sixth problem asked for a complete mathematical axiomatization—reduction to a system of axioms—of the laws of physics: “[t]o treat in the same manner, by means of axioms, those physical sciences in which already today mathematics plays an important part” (*In Search of Unity* 40). In short, it asked for a unified field theory, the kind of theory that we might, today, after the novelist Stanislaw Lem, refer to as a theory of everything. The allure of a unified field theory held special allure for intellectuals in the first third of the twentieth century, especially before Kurt Gödel’s incompleteness theorems showed that the truths of any given formal system are never entirely provable within that system—an insight that invalidated the entire project of the *Principia Mathematica*. (See Rebecca Goldstein’s *Incompleteness: The Proof and the Paradox of Kurt Gödel* [2006]).

ventilation of ‘meaning [,]’ the centre of obscurantism both in the theory of knowledge and in all discussion” (*TMoM* viii). Each book, in its way, participates in the two major agendas of modern logic: to fix mathematical truths to a firm, logical foundation and to create an ideal symbolic metalanguage for the purpose of describing natural language and rooting out its ways of signifying—as well as its tricks, ambiguities, and misdirections.

Furthermore, the respective authors of the *Principia* and *The Meaning of Meaning* moved in the same intellectual circles—literary Bloomsbury, the haunts of the Cambridge Heretics—and the complexities of their social interaction point to the interlaced textures of their intellectual undertakings. Russell and Ogden, as their correspondence attests, enjoyed a long professional relationship. And, moreover, both converge both in their investment in the person and ideas of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Ogden shepherded the first translation of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Englished by Wittgenstein’s friend and pupil F.P. Ramsey) into print. Meanwhile, Russell sustained a profound and difficult intellectual attachment to Wittgenstein, at first his student, thereafter his sometime colleague, friend, and enemy.

Ogden even prevailed upon Russell to review the first edition of *The Meaning of Meaning* in a 1926 issue of *The Dial*. The review is ambivalent at best. For one thing, Russell objects to one of the basic premises of Ogden and Richards’s work: that linguistic practice can be divided into objective and subjective uses, thereby resolving the question of if and how language can maintain fidelity to absolute truth. “Many notorious controversies in the sciences,” Ogden and Richards write,

can be shown to derive from confusion between [the symbolic and emotive] functions of language, the same words being used at once to make statements and to excite attitudes . . . With this understanding, it is believed that such controversies as those between Vitalism and Mechanism, Materialism and Idealism, Religion and Science, etc., would lapse and further the conditions would be restored under which a general revival of poetry would be possible. (viii)¹⁸

¹⁸ Richards and Ogden were indebted, in their scholarship, to the semiotic theories of C.S. Peirce as well as the “significs” of Victoria, Lady Welby, who, in *Significs and Language* (1911), described the investigation of meaning and

Although his own work is driven by the same impetus, to solve “the problem of a universal scientific language” (*The Meaning of Meaning* xiii), Russell responds with skepticism to Ogden and Richards’s ambitious desire to untangle symbolic registers of language from emotive ones:

The distinction between the emotional and the logical use of words is illusory. Since all words are intended to have effects on hearers (except when we talk to ourselves), the question of the way in which these effects are brought about is subsidiary. Sometimes the viscera (especially the ductless glands) play a large part in the causation, sometimes not. When they do, speech is emotional, when not, logical. But the distinction is only of degree, since there is always both a logical and an emotional aspect to our words. (*From Bentham to Basic English* 4)

Russell’s sarcasm is palpable. When a speech act erupts as a result of some convulsion of the glands—a “visceral” gut reaction—then he accepts it as a primarily emotional utterance. On the other hand, speech acts delivered in complete tranquility are as close to purely logical as language can come. “As close as,” for Russell rejects the idea that there is, in natural language, any thinking usage completely without feeling—or any feeling usage completely thoughtless.

The impurity of ordinary language, fixed half-way between the poles of cognition and affect is, in fact, part of what drives the construction of ideal languages from Leibniz’s *caracteristica universalis* to Schleyer’s Völapuk to Frege’s concept-script to Neurath’s international picture-language to Ogden’s Basic English to Pound and Fenollosa’s ideogrammatic fantasies about Chinese characters.¹⁹ My contention here is that the formation of the modern metalanguages of literary

language in conspicuously “unifying” terms: Science, she wrote, should “be no mere continuation of the Baconian search, the accumulation of data for a series of inferences regarding the properties of the material system as usually understood, but rather the interpretation, the translation at last into valid terms of life and thought, of the knowledge already so abundantly gained. While man fails to make this translation—to moralise and humanise his knowledge of the cosmos, and so to unify and relate it to himself—his thinking is in arrears, and mentally he lags behind his enacted experience” (2-3).

¹⁹ See introduction for a brief history of the roots of the modern mania for ideal languages. The search for a *characteristica universalis*, an alphabet of human thought capable of pure, rational representation, surfaces across multiple scientific, philosophical, and artistic arenas in the early twentieth century. Joyce makes use of both Esperanto and Völapuk in *Finnegan’s Wake*. Otto Neurath, one of the drafters of the Vienna Circle Manifesto, devoted significant efforts to the development of ISOTYPE (International System of TYpographic Picture Education), a pedagogical tool that attempted

criticism begins with these experiments in ideal language and owes, in this way, a debt to the scientist tendencies of the logical revolution.

While some constructed languages aspired not only to correct but to replace natural languages, others developed as descriptive supplements to ordinary verbal systems. Russell's work in *The Principia* partakes of this complementary goal. As he explains in a lecture delivered in 1918, we derive "great advantages from the logical imperfections of language, from the fact that our words are all ambiguous" ("The Philosophy of Logical Atomism" 25). An ordinary language, leached of its "complexities and ambiguities," would be a tragic mistake. "It would be absolutely fatal," he writes, "if people meant the same things by their words . . . because the meaning you attach to your words must depend on the nature of the objects you are acquainted with" (22-23). Our experience acquaints each of us with different objects and processes and this difference enables conversation rather than inhibits it.

If, for example, you had fallen in love with a coat of a certain blue and wanted to describe it to a person who had never seen it, you would have to rely on language's imprecision, its ability to approximate. For if I had no first-hand acquaintance with the coat—a blue between cornflower and lapis, say, in a cut of severe simplicity—I would have to be able, through your description, to assemble a roughly accurate image in my head. By contrast, a logically perfect language—in which "there w[ould] be one word and no more for every simple object, and everything that is not simple w[ould] be expressed by a combination of words . . . for . . . simple things" (25)—renders approximation impossible. First-hand experience—uniform, universal acquaintance—would be required even for the simplest acts of communication.

So it is with mingled sympathy and exasperation that Russell approaches *The Meaning of Meaning*, a book that sets out to theorize that ordinary language—at least, in its "logical" usages—can

to turn the statements of science into a visual language that would be transparently and perfectly translatable regardless of the linguistic or cultural context in which it was employed.

approach the clarity necessary to create and communicate objective bodies of knowledge. Russell observes that Ogden and Richards are after a theory of meaning “fitted into natural science” (*From Bentham to Basic English* 8) in the sense of its claims for natural language’s relationship to absolute truth and also in the sense of its own methodological rigor. The theory of everything at play in *The Meaning of Meaning* operates on several levels: on one hand, Ogden and Richards want to propose a universally applicable model of how and when language corresponds to the things of the world. “A clear analysis of the relation between words and facts,” they write, is “the essential of a theory of Meaning” (2).²⁰ This, we might call the book’s objectively-directed project and, in light of it, the text isn’t so different from (Riding) Jackson’s dictionary of rational meanings. On the other hand, the authors recognize a strong distinction between the goals of “logical,” scientific language and those of “emotional,” literary language.²¹ Ogden and Richards hope that unlearning our habit of mixing up emotional uses of language with logical ones will restore “the conditions . . . under which a general revival of poetry might be possible” (viii). We might call this recognition the book’s subjectively-directed project.

A general revival of poetry! How extraordinary—not to imagine that poetry is in need of revival (poetry is in art defined, like an invalid in a silver-fork novel, by its perpetual want of revival), but to imagine that this revival might be effected by quarantining emotional language in one sector of deployment and symbolic language in another. This strategy looks especially strange—especially modern might, really, be the better phrase—in light of nineteenth-century poetry’s long campaign to address the widening gap between discourses of subjectivity and the emergent languages of objectivity. Indeed, Keats’s beauty-truth equivalence furnishes one particularly pertinent example of this phenomenon—in part a reaction to the rise of aesthetic discourse in the Enlightenment.

²⁰ The debt to Wittgenstein’s picture-theory of language is obvious.

²¹ This distinction is in keeping with Richards’s contention in *Mencius on the Mind* (1932) that “[o]ne of the first conditions for [a genuine comparative studies] would seem to be [the] ability to use logical apparatus *tentatively*” (90).

By the early twentieth century, the idea that “beauty is truth” no longer seems to hold up as a viable theory of everything. Ogden and Richards advocate, as an alternative, an approach to poetry that would value this “emotional” language by stressing beauty’s independence from truth. Their reasons for this policy anticipate Adorno’s in *Aesthetic Theory*: “[a]rtworks detach themselves from the empirical world and bring forth another world, one opposed to the empirical world, as if this other world too were an autonomous entity” (2).²² In short, the writers of *The Meaning of Meaning* require poetry to maintain autonomy, to critique the processes of an increasingly disenchanting world and, on occasion, to console us for them. What is of interest to the contemporary critic here is the centrality of the “mistake” of subjective universality to the experience of reading poetry.

In *Science and Poetry* (1926), Richards constructs a picture of the mind as a system whose natural state is balance, “equilibrium” or “equipoise” (24); this harmony being constantly under threat from the pressures of modernity. He goes on to name his wild hope for the powers of poetry: “[Poetry] is capable of saving us; it is a perfectly possible means of overcoming chaos” (95).²³ In poetry, Richards sees a potential successor to what he characterizes as the waning structural influence of religious tradition, the “Magical View” of the world, a counterbalance for an age dominated by the waxing “scientific view” (57). He contends that “Poetry, together with the other Arts, arose with this Magical View . . . [and] may pass away with it” (58).²⁴ Poetry is at once an endangered species and an antidote, a repository of a kind of knowledge that transcends but doesn’t obviate scientific method:

²² Adorno’s theorization of “truth-content” is relevant here but space does not permit a comprehensive discussion.

²³ There is evidence that Richards believed in this salvific doctrine quite literally. In a post on the *Humanities after Hollywood* blog entitled “I.A. Richards’s Failed MOOC,” Mark Cooper and John Marx cite Richards’s moralistic approach to *The Iliad* on his public television show *The Wrath of Achilles*: “These nightmare horrors, however ancient *The Iliad* may be, are with and in us today . . . We’ll help men in the future best if we don’t forget ourselves.”

²⁴ This account of the origins of poetry holds much in common with, though may not be directly attributable to, the history of “poetic logic,” “poetic wisdom,” or “poetic knowledge” in the writings of Giambattista Vico. Vico’s work, especially his cyclical view of history, experienced a resurgence in the early twentieth century as it was discovered by prominent modernists like James Joyce and W.B. Yeats.

In its use of words poetry is just the reverse of science. Very definite thoughts do occur, but not because the words are so chosen as logically to bar out all possibilities but one. No. But because the manner, the tone of voice, the cadence and rhythm play upon our interests and make *them* pick out from among an indefinite number of possibilities the precise thought which they need. This is why poetical descriptions often seem so much more accurate than prose descriptions. Language logically and scientifically used cannot describe a landscape or a face. To do so it would need a prodigious apparatus of names for shades and nuances, for precise particular qualities. These names do not exist, so other means have to be used.
(33-34)

Divorced from questions of belief (Richards seems to think), poetry might take the place of the “old order” by helping us towards “a moral ordering of the impulses” (45). He sees poems as the rare but irrefutable records that this new order might be achieved—a purpose fundamentally different from that of science but no less necessary. And the process by which equilibrium may be achieved depends our feeling—in some sense—that poetical description is “more accurate” than prose description. So Richards defines the power of the subjective universal, essential to our experience of poetry, against logical and scientific language’s relative paucity of denotations: names. Poetry, according to these parameters, is that which we feel to be true *because* it exceeds names and verification alike.

“Logic” and its adjectival and adverbial variants appear with suspicious regularity throughout *Science and Poetry* (twice in the passage I’ve quoted above); when they appear, they are almost inevitably associated in some way with science, scientific language, and especially with the notion of truth:

In the poetic approach the relevant consequences are not logical or to be arrived at by a partial relaxation of logic. Except occasionally and by accident logic does not enter at all . . . Logic only comes in, if at all, in subordination to our emotional response. It is an unruly servant, however, as poets and readers are constantly discovering . . . [Poetic] truth is so opposed to scientific truth that it is a pity to use so similar a word, but at present it is difficult to avoid the malpractice.
(69-70)

That is, for Richards, logic in poetry—and logical truth—is besides the point. As in *The Meaning of Meaning*, he burns the bridge between truth and beauty by sectioning the former into the kind of truth that appeals to the intellect (scientific truth) and the kind that appeals to the emotions (poetic truth). Richards does, indeed, find it difficult not to fall into the “malpractice” of confusing the two kinds of truth, so much so that he has to create a special term for the kind of truth offered to us by poetry: “pseudo-statement.” And pseudo-statement is, regarded in a certain light, merely a restatement of the Kantian subjective universal.

A “pseudo-statement” is, according to Richards, a way of differentiating between

scientific statement, where truth is ultimately a matter of verification as this is understood in the laboratory, and emotive utterance, where “truth” is primarily acceptability *by* some attitude, and more remotely is the acceptability *of* this attitude itself . . . It is “a form of words which is justified entirely by its effect in releasing or organising our impulses and attitudes . . . a statement, on the other hand, is justified by its truth, *i.e.* its correspondence, in a highly technical sense, with the fact to which it points” (67/70-71).

In other words, a pseudo-statement is truth without truth-value, one which does not have to abide by the correspondence theory of truth, which matches names to extra-linguistic objects, states, and phenomena. “[I]t is *not*,” Richards writes,

the poet’s business to make true statements. Yet poetry has constantly the air of making statements, and important ones; which is one reason why some mathematicians cannot read it. They find the alleged statements to be *false* . . . The acceptance which a pseudo-statement receives is entirely governed by its effects upon our feelings and attitudes . . . A pseudo-statement is “true” if it suits and serves some attitude or links together attitudes which on other grounds are desirable. (67-70)

For Richards, the propositions of poetry require a reading practice that stresses feeling-to-be-true over knowing-to-be-true. In acknowledging statement and pseudo-statement as opposites, in differentiating scientific truth and poetic truth—the one quantitative and cognitive, the other qualitative and emotional—Richards suggests that the only way to reconcile the subjective and the

objective is to give up on the theory of everything, to think of the two kinds of truth as mutually necessary opposites that poetry allows us—occasionally—to confuse productively through the “logomachic” concept of pseudo-statement.

Close Reading as Metalanguage: Intimacy & Intent

How are readers to get from poetry the necessary pseudo-statements that Richards wants it to deliver? And how, exactly, does poetic pseudo-statement offer therapeutic value or combat disenchantment? In order to shape poetry into a force for moral order, Richards develops a way of systematizing reading practice so as to deliver consistent results, a critical metalanguage for describing and regularizing the effects of poems by assessing their language on the level of the word: one of the first versions of close-reading.

Richards elaborates his method, which calls for painstaking linguistic analysis, from the work of Laura (Riding) Jackson and Robert Graves in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*. This book performs what scholarship acknowledges as the first extended English-language close reading, an analysis of Shakespeare’s “Th’expense of spirit in a waste of shame.” (Indeed, Willam Empson credits this passage of *A Survey* as the inspiration for his own reading practice in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* though he famously refuses [Riding] Jackson her half of the credit.) By comparing a version of the poem with modernized spelling and punctuation to one from the 1609 edition of the sonnets, (Riding) Jackson and Graves hope “to match our own intelligence with Shakespeare’s . . . to feel as intimate with the language in which the poem was written as if all these years did not stand between ourselves and Shakespeare” (65). Contemporary critics know better (or else we are merely too embarrassed) to ask our hermeneutical feats to make good on the last part of the clause—to erase the burden of time that separates our own reading from the conditions of a poem’s making. Every truism of deconstructionism and reader-response criticism forbids it. We may still demand “intimacy

with language” but we don’t, generally, expect an intimacy with language to lead to an intimacy with authorial intent. And yet an intimacy with intent—and through this, poetic truth—is, ultimately, the outsized goal that (Riding) Jackson and Graves, writing forty years before “The Death of the Author,” want their experimental *explication du texte* to accomplish: a recovery of the original mental conflicts and motivations that spurred the sonnet’s creation.

Richards follows (Riding) Jackson and Graves in viewing the poem as something like an optogram: an image retained by the retina, or so it was once believed, in the last moments before death. When read rightly, which is to say optographically, poems—according to Richards—preserve more or less perfect reproductions of the complex psychological states that prompted their composition:

[T]o a suitable reader the words [of the poem . . . will reproduce in his mind a similar play of interests putting him for the while into a similar situation and leading to the same response . . . Why this should happen is still somewhat of a mystery. An extraordinarily intricate concourse of impulses brings the words together. Then in another mind the affair in part reverses itself, the words bring into being a similar concourse of impulses. The words which seem to be the effect of the experience in the first instance, seem to become the cause of a similar experience in the second. A very odd thing to happen, not exactly paralleled outside communication. But this description is not quite accurate. The words, as we have seen, are not simply the effect in one case, nor the cause in the other. In both cases they are the part of the experience which bind it together, which gives it a definite structure and keeps it from being a mere welter of disconnected impulses. They are the *key* . . . for this particular combination of impulses. So regarded, it is less strange that what the poet wrote should reproduce his experience in the mind of the reader. (*Science and Poetry* 35- 36)

If a poem’s construal can be reliably replicated from reader to reader, then the psychological condition it conveys attains the status of what Ransom might call a distinguishable logical object and Eliot an objective correlative: “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of [a] *particular* emotion [,] such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked” (*Selected Essays* 145). Like

LeGuin's ansible, then—a fictional device that promises instantaneous communication across infinite reaches of space-time—or else like a photograph, naïvely read, the poem acts as a vessel of indexicality, enabling the direct transfer of a mental-emotional state from poet to reader. This isn't to say that ambiguity (a word with great currency after the publication of William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* [1930]) can't enter into it but rather that all the salient ambiguities in a poem are those introduced by its writer, ramifications of the original "intelligence of Shakespeare" (as [Riding] Jackson and Graves put it) rather than functions of what readers bring to a poem. A good enough literary detective ought to be able to read from the optogram the shape of the windows in the room of the poem's composition.

Richards envisions poems as carriers of a kind of subjective-objective truth: subjective in the sense of the variety of private, psychological experiences a poem might record, objective in the sense that, through the poem, these experiences become (in theory) perfectly translatable. The mental state that prompts, for instance, the creation of a sonnet creates an equivalent mental state in the sonnet's readers, creates, that is, an equivalence, a transferable case of subjective universality. Rather than subjective-objective truth, we might call this theory of what the poem yields intersubjective truth or intersubjective equivalence, terms that split (in the tradition of pseudo-statement) the difference between the absolute truth that scientific discourses pursue and the relative truths that characterize our private, phenomenological landscapes.

In his preface to *Practical Criticism* (1930), Richards elaborates on his feeling that poetry must help us to forge a common reality in the foggy no-man's land between Truth and truth:

There are subjects—mathematics, physics and the descriptive sciences supply some of them—which can be discussed in terms of verifiable facts and precise hypotheses. There are other subjects—the concrete affairs of commerce, law, organisation and police work—which can be handled by rules of thumb and generally accepted conventions. But in between is the vast *corpus* of problems, assumptions, adumbrations, fictions, prejudices, tenets; the sphere of random beliefs and hopeful guesses; the whole world, in brief, of

abstract opinion and disputation about matters of feeling . . . As a subject-matter for discussion, poetry is a central and typical denizen of this world . . . It serves, therefore, as an eminently suitable *bait* for anyone who wishes to trap the current opinions and responses in this middle field for the purpose of examining them and comparing them, and with a view to advancing our knowledge of what may be called the natural history of human opinions and feelings. (5-6)

Unlike (Riding) Jackson, Richards stops short of asking the abstraction of poetry, whether as writers conceive it or as readers do, to make the universe “defiantly intelligible.” But, like her, he turns to poetry in order to discover something about what truths are possible in language and how communicable they are between subjects.

The early Wittgenstein’s conviction that ethics and aesthetics are transcendental, beyond the reach of what we can express through descriptive philosophical or scientific propositions, whispers through the passage above. In effect, this section of the *Tractatus* argues that a literary theory of everything is impossible because objective discourses can never have anything to say about subjective experiences: “The sense of the world must lie outside the world . . . Hence also there can be no ethical propositions . . . It is clear that ethics cannot be expressed . . . (Ethics and aesthetics are one)” (*Tractatus* §6.41-§6.421). And so, early twentieth-century literary criticism, floating uneasily between the demands of philology and *belles lettres*,²⁵ struggles to articulate itself in the gap between what the forms of objectivity describe and those things whereof we must be silent. It strives to endow its practice with some semblance of scientific rigor, while, at the same time, emphasizing the potential of literature to protect and diffuse those things that scientific inquiry cannot account for: “ethics, metaphysics, morals, religion, aesthetics, and the discussions surrounding liberty, nationality, justice, love, truth, faith and knowledge,” as the preface to *Practical Criticism* puts it.

Richards’s corpus of criticism responds to Wittgenstein’s severing of objective forms from subjective experience by according poetry space in the halfway house between science and “concrete

²⁵ See John Guillory’s essay, “Literary Study and the Modern System of the Disciplines,” in *Disciplinary at the Fin de Siècle* (2002).

affairs.” The kinds of psychological truth to which it allows access fall somewhere between “verifiable facts” and “generally accepted conventions.” And the poem’s promise of intersubjective communication inscribes within it “the whole world . . . of abstract opinion and disputation about matters of feeling.” If, for modern readers, a theory of everything is one that comprehends both subjective and objective perspectives, then Richards’s criticism labors to go on in light of the assumption that such a theory is impossible. His writing asks, rather, how we might construct a critical metalanguage that allows readers to respond to poems in reliable ways in order to build up a body of intersubjective truths. From these truths, pseudo-statements of which “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” is a central example, we might develop an excuse to replace one form of equivalence with another. That is, we might turn from the question of how beauty (art) can be equivalent to truth (science) and take up, instead, the problem of how the mind of the reader and the mind of the poet are made equivalent by means of the poem, how beauty moves.

A Little Scratching

How does beauty move? This question lies at the heart of the modern critical metalanguage of close reading inasmuch as its early versions were concerned with developing, through the medium of the poem, readers’ capacities for entering a state of intersubjective equivalence. Indeed, truth and beauty become the explicit terms by which ways of reading justify their operations. In *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), another of the urtexts of close reading as method and genre, William Empson writes that “[t]here is coming into existence a sort of party-system among critics; those critics will soon be considered mere shufflers who are not either only interested in Truth or only interested in Beauty” (11). In so many words, he describes the divide between those who read poetry for “Pure Sound,” associated with beauty, and those who read for “Pure Meaning,” associated with truth (10)—a rift Empson sees as a bad byproduct of nineteenth century Aestheticism.

Critics, he writes,

have been perhaps too willing to insist that the operation of poetry is something magical, to which only their own method of incantation can be applied, or like the growth of a flower, which it would be folly to allow analysis to destroy by digging the roots up and crushing out the juices into the light of day. Critics as ‘barking dogs,’ on this view, are of two sorts: those who merely relieve themselves against the flower of beauty, and those, less continent, who afterwards scratch it up. I myself, I must confess, aspire to the second of these classes; unexplained beauty arouses in me, a sense that this would be a good place to scratch; the reasons that make a line of verse likely to give pleasure, I believe, are like the reasons for anything else; one can reason about them; and while it may be true that the roots of beauty ought not to be violated, it seems to me very arrogant of the appreciative critic to think that he could do this, if he chose, by a little scratching. (9)

Beauty, according to Empson, ought never to be treated like an inexplicable, mystical object, an herb that retains its efficacy only when gathered at midnight under a new moon. This passage vociferously denies the idea that rational thinking—the forms of truth—can’t be applied to the feelings evoked by aesthetic experience: the “modes of statement . . . so interesting to the logician” (237) are (and should be) closely bound to aesthetic response.

The passage also reveals Empson in close conversation with Richards’s writings on the difference between emotional and symbolic uses of language. (Indeed, Richards was a mentor to Empson in the days before the latter was expelled from Cambridge for the possession of prophylactics. Throughout Empson’s career, Richards was the figure whom the writer of *Seven Types of Ambiguity* most liked to praise and quarrel with.) As a process, Empson’s approach to analysis is a literal unloosing or release: the genre of close reading in which he works is almost absurdly fine-grained, breaking poems down so as to concentrate the attention on the level of the stanza, the couplet, the phrase, and the word, using the relationships between these units to draw out shades of meaning that might otherwise remain invisible.

The goal of this analytical method, however, lies with a version of intersubjective truth that revises Richards's dream of the poem as a field of psychological equivalence. In Empson's estimation, the way each reader experiences the sounds of a poem will be subject to her personal idiosyncrasies of perception—qualia, though he doesn't use the word. He quotes, with approbation, Samuel Johnson's contention that "[w]e modulate the poem by our own disposition" (12). And this variance among readers means, according to Empson, that "very similar devices of sound may correspond effectively to very different meanings" (12) and thus to dissimilar conclusions about intent. So, to treat the poem as an optographic record of a mental state, as Richards does, seems suspect from the perspective of Empsonian ambiguity since different subjects will necessarily experience the sonic textures of a poem in different ways.

"I must confess," Empson writes, "I find the crudity and latent fallacy of a psychologist discussing verses that he does not enjoy less disagreeable than the blurred and tasteless refusal to make statements of an aesthete who conceives himself to be only interested in Taste" (11). Although Empson doubts the poem's ability to foster perfect emotional resonance between maker and reader, he does not completely discard Richards's faith in poetry's potential as "applied psychology" (*Seven Types of Ambiguity* 248). The purpose of his analytical "machinery" and of criticism in general, is as a sort of reassurance to readers that they're allowed to feel for and about and through poetry:

[I]f you feel that your reactions *could* be put into a rational scheme that you can roughly imagine, you become willing, for instance, to abandon yourself to the ecstasies of the Romantic Movement, with a much lower threshold of necessary excitement, with much less fear for your critical self-respect . . . To give a reassurance of this kind, indeed, is the main function of criticism. (244)

Close reading may not be able to make good on the therapeutic realignment that Richards asks of it, but it *can*, in Empson's version, help to contextualize mental and emotional conflicts, to make us more daring and vulnerable readers. It is reassurance of a kind, though it is really not very reassuring.

Empson is wary of Richards's fantasy of intersubjective equivalence in part because he is cautious, more generally, about problems of false or wrong equivalence. This misgiving is particularly evident in *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951), in which Empson attempts to develop an approach to close reading based on a form of symbolic notation that places special emphasis on equations:

SYMBOLS	
A.B	the Senses A and B used together
A + B	the Senses confused and regarded as one
A.(B)	the Sense B "at the back of the mind" when A is foremost
- A	deliberate exclusion of Sense A from a use of the word
A/1	the first Implication (or connotation) of the Sense A
A +	an appreciative pregnant sense of A, making it warmer and fuller
A -	a depreciative pregnant sense
Aζ1	the first Mood of Sense A, a sentence giving the speaker's relation to someone else among these 'A' "What I call A but they don't" or "What they do but I don't" and A? the Sense A used of oneself under cover of using it about someone else, or as - A? "I am not like him"
A!1	the first Emotion associated with Sense A
EA	the Existence Assertion, "A is really there and worth naming"
A = B	the various Equations "A is B". Chart of the five types of equation p. 54

Fig. 1.1 Chart from *The Structure of Complex Words*

The image above reproduces the index to Empson's symbolic critical metalanguage, an abstruse key to the larger aim of the book: to reconcile beauty and truth, emotive meaning with cognitive meaning, as if this system of signification possessed its own metaphysical reality. The "equations" of his system represent Senses, Implications, Emotions, Moods, and the relations among them. A harsh critic might call the system unwieldy, a milder one merely unwieldy for anyone who doesn't happen

to be William Empson.²⁶ “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” offers Empson, unsurprisingly, a rich example on which to test his machinery.

The reading of “Ode on a Grecian Urn” in *The Structure of Complex Words* responds directly (and somewhat acerbically) to Richards’s reading of the same poem in *Mencius on the Mind: Experiments in Multiple Definition* (1932). And both interpretations turn on how subjective experience (beauty) and objective knowledge (truth) cohere or fail to cohere within the casing of the equation-form. “Urns induce states of mind in their beholders[,]” Richards writes, echoing his earlier claims about pseudo-statement, “they do not enunciate philosophical positions” (*Mencius* 116). The meanings of Truth and Beauty, he claims, can be made to intersect or overlap at certain points, so that there are multiple ways of rendering “Beauty is Truth” tautological. But it is not tautology in the Wittgensteinian sense of formal logic, which refers to a universally valid truth, but in the sense of fallacy, a series of baseless statements that reinforce each other to collapse. Richards, in outlining the ways in which “Beauty is truth” fails logical sense, recapitulates the confusion between poetic truth and scientific truth that the equivalence induces for modern readers and highlights, in the process, how early close reading’s dependence on subjective universality often warred with its demand for a poetry that could deliver coherent, rational propositions.

Richards defends “Beauty is truth” as poetically effective but it is a rather backhanded defense. In order for the phrase to count as valid poetry in Richards’s system, which divides emotive truth from logical sense, it must be rendered philosophically inert, pseudo-truth or self-annihilating question. Reading “Beauty is truth” as multiply tautological “account[s] for its power *in the poem* (when, of course, it is not apprehended analytically) to convey that feeling of deep acceptance which is often a chief phase in the aesthetic experience” (116). For Richards, poetic apprehension is firstly

²⁶ One of the book’s first reviews remarks that “[w]hat remains is to treat a poem as a poem . . . I doubt, however, if such interesting formulae as “A(B)! equals 1\$ are going to be of much help”—Campbell Crockett in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol. 11, No. 3 (Mar., 1953), pp. 269-271.

a matter of the senses, only latterly of reason. So if a poetic line strikes an immediate emotional chord, it shouldn't matter much if it fails (or transcends) logical sense—nonetheless, Richards's own concern with testing the truth-value of the proposition implies a search for, as Monroe Beardsley puts it, a “nonrelativistic logic of explication” that makes subjective universality a central feature not only of an experience of poetry qua poetry but also of critical reading.

Empson, meanwhile, vigorously disagrees with the idea that “Beauty is Truth” can be divested of its metaphysical baggage or its cognitive purchase, that it works primarily as an appeal to inchoate emotion: “It seems to me that a flat separation of Sense from Emotion would be merely a misreading here” (*Structure of Complex Words* 6). He tries, instead, to find some middle ground between Richards's reading of the poem (too “Emotive”) and the critic Cleanth Brooks's reading of the poem (“not emotional enough” due to its view of “Beauty is Truth” as “an entirely coherent philosophical position expressed by irony and paradox” [368]). But what lies between these two positions, the self-annihilating question and the true proposition? How does Empson mediate the affective and the cognitive?

His solution hinges on a triangulation of the description of the scenes painted on the urn and the description of their effect on a perceiver. He is particularly concerned with images in the third and fourth stanzas of the poem: the celebrants “coming to the sacrifice” and the “little town . . . emptied of its folk, this pious morn,” the “heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,” the “burning forehead” and the “parching tongue” these tableaux inspire in an observer:

[T]he poet has just told us he is desolate . . . (if the critic will condescend to notice anything so sentimental) . . . The idea that the pursuit of beauty eats up the pursuer, who therefore sacrifices himself to it, is not really a remote one for a romantic poet . . . These people's homes will be left desolate because they have gone to make a piece of art-work, and so will Keats' home because he is spending his life on his art. Beauty is both a cause of and an escape from suffering, and in either way suffering is deeply involved in its production. Here is the crisis of the poem; in the sudden exertion of muscle by which Keats skids round the corner from self-pity to an imaginative view of the world. None of these people can get anything out of the world except

beauty, and at once we turn back to the pot with a painful ecstasy in the final stanza; there is nothing else left. This is the force behind the cry “Beauty is Truth” (obviously, I think), however the terms of it are to be interpreted. (369-70)

Empson comes here as close as he ever does to a theory of beauty: as an occasional cure to the same suffering that is its genesis—although, even here, the terms of the equation are allowed to be mysterious, “to be interpreted.”

The ode, he argues, imagines beauty as an all-devouring truth not because every truth is beautiful but because, within the space of the poem, beauty is the only truth being offered to you. This is the mechanism by which

metaphors which are Emotive when merely applied to the pot, in the first lines of the poem, become Cognitive when applied to the real theme. The beauty of the pot presumably tells truth so far as it is a sound guide to the poet, and what it tells him is how to digest his sufferings and turn them into beauty. (371)

Beauty, in this model, is a self-consuming—a self-contradicting—truth, true by virtue of the fact that it allows no reality outside itself. All roads lead to beauty. None lead away. The urn, a closed system in which anticipation never flags and culmination is never achieved, pictures the knife’s edge between pleasure and pain, the place where one partakes of the other, where suffering can be made beautiful but can never be made other or more than beautiful. Beauty is all the truth because it is the only truth, absolute inasmuch as the perceiving mind cannot imagine it false or less than total—the observer frozen in the constitutive moment of subjective universality, before knowledge of subject and object as irreconcilable can penetrate. The urn admits no other kind of truth. This reading is essentially optimistic. This reading is essentially tragic.

For Empson “Beauty is truth,” records the poem’s transfer from the emotive to the cognitive but the price of the overt registration of the switch is a collapse—not necessarily of beauty, which has always been somewhat mysterious to Empson, but of truth in the wider sense. It is here condensed to beauty so that to read “Beauty is truth” is to participate in the detonation of truth, to

watch it come undone even as the equivalence brings it into existence: “[Keats], like his readers, I think, was puzzled by the remarks of the poet, and yet felt that they were very *nearly* intelligible and relevant” (371). There *is* a paradox here, if not necessarily a cleanly articulated one after the fashion of Brooks. Empson assesses the phrase by how nearly it approaches—and fails—perfect sense. Rhetorically, the identity “Beauty is truth” enacts the breakdown of truth even as it asserts the existence of truth.

Empson seems to valorize here a kind of aporia, pushing past the compulsion to certitude of the subjective universal and on to the conditions for negative capability. Indeed, this reading recalls Keats’s claim in the negative capability letter (Empson quotes an earlier portion of the letter to underscore his own position) that “[b]eauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.” Beauty creates the conditions for the “half knowledge” (Keats *CP* 539) of Empson’s interpretation, although negative capability, the renunciation of “irritable reaching after fact & reason,” is a position Empson would have found untenable on its own. For him, any pleasure in a failure of reason can only occur after all possible applications of reason have been exhausted. This is the other half of the paradox, which might be applied to the act of interpretation in a larger sense: contentment with mystery begins where analysis ends. In the process of trying to parse “Beauty is truth,” Empson’s analysis explodes at the second of the major terms. Truth becomes unknowable at the limits of logic. And if modern close reading relies, to some extent, on a theory of poetic truth, then its application to the beauty-truth equivalence dramatizes the desire for certainty in reading and the acceptance of doubt that follows: the moment of subjective universality and its aftermath, in which reading acknowledges the absurdity of its ambition.

All That We Have No Art to Lay Open

By the 1950s, when *The Structure of Complex Words* first saw print, the New Critics, heirs to (Riding) Jackson, Graves, Richards and Empson, had embraced and altered the methods of modern close reading—moving away from the questions of intersubjective equivalence and applied psychology that preoccupied its architects. William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley's essay, "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946), promoted a version of close reading that divorced the meaning of poems from any question of intent (though not from the issues of structural objectivity and poetic truth). And most poststructuralist close readings, which began to emerge in the nineteen-sixties, followed suit—tracking either the reserves of significance readers brought to the text or else the unconscious meanings that made their way into the poet's language. Nonetheless, the question of which readings are righter, more relevant than others, persists. Whether that question addresses how texts have meant for past readers or what they might mean to us now, it relies on the idea that texts bear some kind of correspondent connection both to other texts and, often, to extra-linguistic realities. This is all to say that there is still some problem of literary truth or literary fact at play in contemporary reading practice.

When we understand early versions of close reading as based, at least in part, on the desire to deploy poetry as a means of ratifying intersubjective truth and avoiding false equivalence, we can grasp how deeply attempts to address a gap between subjective experience and objective forms are embedded in the foundations of professional reading. Moreover, we can appreciate how humanist reactions to modern philosophy implicate literary studies—especially the reading of poetry—in a larger logical modernism that thinks about truth, that yearns for a theory of everything—or resists it—or mourns its impossibility.

Now that we study poetry in an age in which technological advancement has posed new questions about how the languages of objectivity and the languages of subjectivity inform one another, it may be helpful to recall that the original project of modern close reading arose from the

desire to make logic speak to literature, as if to call out a denial of the final proposition of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (§7). "The detachment of that phrase from its context," Empson writes,

is the weakness of our generation. Could not Romeo be written?
Were the Songs and Sonets [sic] what cannot be said? What
philosophy cannot state, art lays open. But philosophy has only just
found out what it cannot state, all that we have no art to lay open.
(qtd. in *William Empson: Among the Mandarins* 174)²⁷

But we forget what we cannot state. We forget the things for which we have no art and no language. A gap appears.

While it's true that a craftily constructed database, for example, enables keyword searches of multiple corpora and analyses of the kind that might fall under Franco Moretti's rubric of "distant reading," it's also true that the impulse to apply this sort of technology to literary studies has its roots in the logical modernism of early close reading and represents, therefore, not a radical break from the assumptions about literary truths that inform modern reading practice but a resurrection of them. Just as the technology of close reading develops out of attempts to valorize the utility of studying poetry, so do the technologies of digital humanities endeavor to revalue literature by applying the forms, codes, and tools of objective discourse to it. Consider Moretti's quest for a "falsifiable" (*Distant Reading* 64) literary criticism "sensitive," as MacKenzie Wark puts it, to "knowable, empirical facts" ("The Engine Room of Literature") and antithetical, as Moretti sees it, to close reading. For Moretti, close reading is, "[a]t bottom . . . a theological exercise . . . whereas what we really need is a little pact with the devil: we know how to read texts, now let's learn how not to read them" (48). Distant reading—in search of a way of rendering useful the immense construct of "world literature"—would bypass close reading, and the regrettably small canon of texts it's able

²⁷ This "closing tautology" is famously contested territory. Where Empson attempts to make this phrase productive, Theodor Adorno sees in it a distasteful "reveren[ce] [for] authoritarian authenticity. See *Hegel: Three Studies* and *Against Epistemology* for elaborations on this critique.

to account for, in favor of a wide-ranging, longitudinal approach to reading that would be able to describe the trajectories of literary forms *en masse*, a “formalism without close reading,” in the words of Jonathan Arac (qtd. in Moretti 65).

One major difficulty—to which Moretti has obviously given some thought—is the incredibly complex matter of defining the terms under which literature might translate to a legible body of data. For instance, one inquiry maps described in *Distant Reading* maps British detective fiction through what Moretti terms the “well-defined formal trait” of the clue (63) and sets out to find “clear, hard facts” (64) to support Moretti’s evolutionary model of literary form. But Moretti, although he cites a great deal of work on the significance of clues (Victor Shklovsky, Siegfried Kracauer, Theodor Reik, Ernst Bloch, and Tzvetan Todorov, among others) doesn’t ever quite define the clue as a data point, though he tells us it’s “a *formal* device . . . [whose] concrete embodiment changes from story to story (. . . words, cigarette butts, footprints, smells, noises, and so on) [and whose] narrative function (the encrypted reference to the criminal) remains constant” (71). Moretti’s work is illuminating, to be sure, but the question of what it illuminates is not always obvious.

Genre—another key variable for Moretti’s work—remains similarly mysterious. In a comparison between genres, Moretti juxtaposes the titles of seventeenth-century Anti-Jacobin novels and those of nineteenth-century New Woman novels. He concludes from this comparison that the usage of the indefinite article “a”—as opposed to the definite article “the”—jumps from three percent in the Anti-Jacobin novels to thirty percent in the New Woman Novels. This jump gives rise, in turn, to the ingenious conclusion that Anti-Jacobin titles tend to prefer the definite article because they want to use “received ideas” rather than changing them whereas the New Woman titles employ the indefinite article because they want to challenge cultural norms about how to understand women so that readers see ideas about daughters and wives afresh. It’s a thrilling

insight but one that requires a great deal of faith in the variables. Leaving aside questions of sample size and delineation, in order to believe this claim a claim based in literary fact, we have to trust (for example) that Moretti knows what “genre,” “novel,” “Anti-Jacobin novel,” and “New Woman novel” mean—and that he can translate that knowledge into terms we can understand as data. Moretti’s stance against passing off mysticism as literary criticism is admirable but his own project cannot entirely evade the charge either.

Moretti is aware of this, I have to believe, since he explains how nearly every venture he has undertaken in distant reading has resulted in some kind of seemingly insuperable setback. Almost every one of the italicized prefaces that heads the chapters of *Distant Reading* features some kind of charming disclaimer, in which Moretti—in his unflappable way—takes an impediment to progress as a sign that his slow journey towards a falsifiable literary criticism is proceeding just as it ought to. There is some weight to Moretti’s claim that the question of whether close reading and distant reading are “complementary, compatible, [or] opposite” is much less interesting than the question of “explanation in literature” (137). It is quite obvious, to me at least, that the two practices *must* be complementary in that they address different sets of questions. The abstraction of data allows us to ask—and answer—certain kinds of questions at scale: What is there? How long has it been there? What is the pattern of its being?²⁸ Close reading, in the many variants now practiced, pursues different matter: Why do I feel what I feel when I read? How can I explain the effects of a rhetorical flourish or an image or a concatenation of sounds that seems to me, for some reason, beautiful? How does any given piece of writing express or influence its historical and cultural contexts?

But if the really interesting problem is the problem of “explanation in literature,” it’s difficult to see how the conditions that prompted the development of distant reading are very different from

²⁸ For instance, it might be interesting to apply Moretti’s methodology to track poetic forms, like sonnets, haikus, or ghazals, which have quantifiable traits that might be rendered into data more easily than literary terms with higher degrees of abstraction.

those that prompted the development of close reading. For both, in a sense, begin with the premise that factual claims may be made in the course of literary study, that there exist such things as literary facts and that literary facts are facts by virtue of being true: a falsifiable literary criticism requires a consonant theory of truth.

With each amiable acknowledgment of the shortcomings of his work, Moretti gestures, abstrusely, towards the idea that, although his reading experiments may not have hit upon objectively true interpretations of literary objects, those readings are there to be found:

Once you have been *really* proved wrong, the argument is no longer about you; it's about a world of facts that everybody agrees to share (and respect); about hypotheses that have an objectivity of their own, and can be tested, modified, or indeed rejected. A little narcissistic wound is a small price to pay for such progress. (*Distant Reading* 108)

Moretti proposes that there's a "world of facts" about literature to which we can all agree and, moreover, a set of testable, objective hypotheses that literary studies can pursue, if not definitively confirm. The True Reading exists, but never for us. And so, his methodology is less a rupture with the historical aims of close reading than an echo of John Crowe Ransom's view of literature as a "logical object" enfolded in a "tissue of irrelevance from which it does not really emerge." Effective criticism continues, by these lights, to be a cluster of right readings that will never, nonetheless, approach the interpretation of literature that would be true for all readers at all times.

I write this without judgment. All of this is to say, merely, that both distant reading and modern close reading possess a metaphysics—an imagined realm of objective truths that bear some correspondent relationship to the activity of literary analysis, broadly conceived.²⁹ Indeed, this idea is not unlike the subjective universality in which Kantian aesthetic judgments suspend us—convinced, for an instant, that what we find truly beautiful must be truly beautiful to all others. Where literary

²⁹ See Chapter 3, "Wallace Stevens & His Worlds of Logic," for a discussion of the ontological status of literary truths in relation to what I call "Rabbit Heaven"—the poetic equivalent of Frege's third realm, where logical objects dwell, independently of any given mind.

criticism is concerned, that moment of creative general error is not one we have laid to rest. The quandaries of logical modernism recur, as I have tried to show, wherever questions of objectivity and of literary and poetic truth—implicitly or explicitly stated—emerge to haunt us. We dream of the unified field or write its infinite elegy.

CHAPTER TWO

*

The Logic Problems of Gertrude Stein

That truth means ‘agreement with reality’ may be said by a pragmatist as well as by anyone else, but the pragmatist differs from others as to what is meant by agreement, and also (it would seem) as to what is meant by reality.

--Bertrand Russell, “William James’s Conception of Truth” (1908)¹

Explaining why I do not believe in the absolute myself . . . yet finding that it may secure ‘moral holidays’ to those who need them, and is true in so far forth (if to gain moral holidays be a good), I offered this as a conciliatory branch to my enemies . . . [who] . . . trampled the gift under foot and turned and rent the giver . . . Using the pragmatic test of the meaning of concepts, I had shown the concept of the absolute to mean nothing but the holiday giver, the banisher of cosmic fear . . . my absolutist critics fail to see the workings of their own minds in any such picture, so all that I can do is to apologize, and take my offering back.

--William James, “Preface” to *The Meaning of Truth* (1909)

If They Saw It They No Longer Knew It

The logic problems of this chapter begin—in more ways than one—with the epigraphs. A reconsideration of the aesthetics of Gertrude Stein, this stage of my investigation of the contours of logical modernism establishes Stein’s thoughtful, poetic rebellion against the terms of absolute truth espoused by Bertrand Russell and, also, strangely the plural and relative varieties of truth advanced by her mentor, William James.² What lies between (or beyond) these two possibilities for shaping literary truth? In order to establish Stein as a philosophical mediator—as well as a canny truth-theorist—it’s necessary to give the context for her intervention, which plays out against the

¹ First published under the title “Transatlantic Truth” in the *Albany Review* (January 1908).

² In the period about which I’m writing, the boundary between analytic and Continental schools of philosophy had not yet hardened. And so I avoid, where possible, the designation “analytic truth” in favor of “absolute truth,” “logical truth,” or “mind-independent truth.”

backdrop of public debates about what it means to define truth by its “agreement with reality”—debates primarily staged between modern, intellectual men.

“When I was at college I studied philosophy” Stein writes acerbically in *The Geographical History of America* (1936), “that was it they did not know what they saw because they said they saw what they knew, and if they saw it they no longer knew it” (150). The arguments about truth advanced by William James, Bertrand Russell, and Alfred North Whitehead form the necessary background for this chapter. But, by placing Stein’s explorations of fact, truth, and precision next to theirs, do I risk inscribing her work within a context inimical to it? And, if so, why would I wish to risk such an inscription? The risk is worth it only if I trust Stein’s daring, playful funambulism to circumvent any great reckonings in little rooms. I do trust it. Turning to the conditions of truth set forth by modern philosophy and contextualizing Stein within those channels reveals, I suggest, an alternate path through a critical impasse that has become increasingly significant to Stein criticism: the question of (to use Marjorie Perloff’s terms) the determinate Stein and the indeterminate.

The indeterminate Stein is a Stein like the one Charles Bernstein describes in his essay “Poetics of the Americas,” a figure who “does not depend upon supplemental literary or narrative contexts to secure her meaning but enacts her subjects as continuously actualized presentations of meaning . . . words on the page and the Imaginary structures they build” (117). Meanwhile, after Jennifer Ashton, another tradition of scholarship has protested that Stein’s theory of names renders her writing “antithetical to the very idea of linguistic indeterminacy” (*From Modernism to Postmodernism* 68). In the wake of this claim, critics have positioned Stein everywhere on the spectrum between Bernstein’s radically open version and Ashton’s fixed one. Barrett Watten, for example, has drawn attention to Stein’s materialist commitments, the way her concern with the “world of objects” (*The Constructivist Moment* 119) demonstrates a “social subjectivity” (“An Epic of Subjectivation”) and a specificity of which Bernstein’s effectively formalist approach deprives the writing. Similarly, the

work of Ulla Dydo has uncovered in Stein's drafts, particularly in the resolutely abstract work of the 1930s, indications of how the finished work often points back to the material and historical contexts that informed the conditions of its production. Dydo's thinking has, in turn, paved the way for many other works of criticism that maneuver between the determinate and the indeterminate Stein, including the writing of Logan Esdale, Rachel Galvin, Susannah Hollister, Steven Meyer, Liesl Olsen, Joan Retallack, and Emily Setina.³

What remains unsatisfying about the framing of the determinacy/indeterminacy problem is that it often primes the conversation to trail off into the swampy territory of authorial intent. If we accept Stein's writing as determinate, does it follow that we must also accept it as deliberate? And if we call it indeterminate, are we implicitly declaring fidelity to the untold flocks of unconscious meaning that creep in when we read as psychoanalysts or rank-and-file poststructuralists? These are questions my method is too cowardly to confront. And so, instead, I adopt a quicksand defense—brushing the words “determinate” and “indeterminate” under a thick layer of silt and offering, instead, a rubric of reading that leads away from intent and towards considerations of form and reference more capaciously imagined, as components of a theory of poetic truth. On second thought, these words may be more dangerous than the ones I profess to bury.

This chapter contends that Gertrude Stein's writing elaborates a theory of literary truth dependent on a poetics of *multiple reference*, a phrase I define as exact denotation that assumes multiple *denotata*, not all of which are knowable to any given reader. Furthermore, multiple reference—in essence a kind of correspondence theory of literary truth—affirms an “agreement with reality” that laughs at the absolute truth of logical discourse and the relative truth of pragmatic

³ See Dydo's *The Language That Rises* (2008), Esdale's “Gertrude Stein's Twin” in *Textual Practice* (2011; 25:6), Hollister and Setina's *Stanzas in Meditation: The Corrected Edition* (2012), Galvin's “Gertrude Stein Anew: A Review of *Stanzas in Meditation: The Corrected Edition*” in *Jacket2* (November 2013), Steven Meyer's *Irresistible Dictation: Gertrude Stein and the Correlations of Writing and Science* (2003) Liesl Olsen's “An Invincible Force Meets an Immovable Object: Gertrude Stein Comes to Chicago” in *Modernism/modernity* (April 2010) and Retallack's prefatory materials for Hollister and Setina's edition of Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation* (See, also, Retallack's *The Poethical Wager* [2003]).

discourse alike. Through her engagement with the theories of truth advanced by modern philosophy, Stein proves herself an exemplary logical modernist, playing darts across the subject-object divide, mixing feeling and thinking, aesthetics and concepts, “automobiles,” as she writes in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, “with Emerson” (152). The most fundamental logic problems of Gertrude Stein—a writer who might be claimed for logic in a number of different ways—arise, I contend, from her talent for creating writing that represents the conditions of logic as a literary problem.

This chapter opens with a brief résumé of modern, philosophical theories of truth, placing particular emphasis on the dispute surrounding the pragmatic conception of truth espoused by William James and the logical conception of truth promoted by Bertrand Russell. Although both theories of truth begin from a premise of correspondence, the idea that truth constitutes an “agreement with reality,” they differ profoundly when it comes to the issue of what correspondence with reality actually means. Meanwhile, Alfred North Whitehead’s theory of truth-as-correspondence draws on the languages of both pragmatism and logical atomism.

After situating Stein within these Transatlantic conversations about truth, I consider her own intervention by way of the multiply referential *Stanzas in Meditation* (1932), a long and famously “unreadable” poetic sequence that, in the words of scholar Mary Loeffelholz, always seems to fall “between different sorts of canonizing stories” (“History as Conjugation” 33)—“canonizing stories” in the sense of whether there is a canonical Stein (and, if so, what that would look like) and how to place a canonical Stein within the larger canonizing projects of modernism. *Stanzas* is a poem intensely engaged with the writing of William Wordsworth (particularly *The Prelude*) and belongs, properly, to the post-Romantic tradition of long philosophical poems.⁴ Building on this insight, I take for my primary analytical locus the word portrait of the painter Francis Picabia that appears

⁴ See Rebecca Ariel Porte’s “Long Dull Poems: Stein’s *Stanzas in Meditation* and Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*” in *Primary Stein* (2014) for an extended consideration of Stein’s relationship to Wordsworthian poetics.

towards the end of the poem. This section of *Stanzas* elaborates a “painting problem” that also turns out to be a kind of logic problem. The portrait of Picabia offers a key (though hardly the only one) to the aesthetic machinery of the poem as a whole.

The chapter concludes by tracking the development of the strategy of multiple reference to a piece that precedes the drafting of *Stanzas* by more than a decade. The posthumously published “I Can Feel the Beauty” (1917) divulges—contrary to the spontaneous generation narrative of Stein’s formal experiments—an iteration of the writer deeply interested in the uses of inherited literary form, in this case the Romantic ode. Echoing the preoccupation with the Keatsian beauty-truth equivalence that so perplexed modern literary critics, “I Can Feel the Beauty” advances a linguistic agreement with reality that, acting as abstraction’s necessary critic, assigns the capacity for reference both to the name named and the name left unnamed.⁵ And the name unnamed, her writing argues, is that which only poetry can deliver.

The Holiday Giver

William James (for all intents and purposes the most visible avatar of American pragmatism) and Bertrand Russell (spokesman for Cambridge philosophy and the new logic) agreed in their endorsement of pragmatism’s inductive, experiential methodology, its “empiricist attitude,” as James writes in *Pragmatism* (1907). The matter of their quarrel was the pragmatist conception of truth. For Russell, pragmatism assumes an “epistemological theory of truth” that “confines truth to propositions asserting what I now perceive or remember” (*An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* 305). But this “epistemological” theory excludes, according to Russell, “the possibility of events that no one experiences and of propositions that are true although there can never be any evidence in their favour” (305). In James’s view, assertions about the existence of mind-independent truths amount to

⁵ See Chapter One, “The Clumsy Attempt: Modern Criticism & the Beauty-Truth Equivalence” for a discussion of the significance of the end of “Ode on a Grecian Urn” to the development of modern close reading.

sheer vanity, while Russell requires a notion of absolute truth on which to ground mathematical objects and processes. We are “driven,” he writes, by the “narrow[ness]” of pragmatism’s agreement with reality to the “logical theory of truth,” which grants ontological independence to events and propositions regardless of whether they are experienced, proven, or known (305). Truth, for Russell requires “some form of correspondence between belief and fact” (*The Problems of Philosophy* 80) between what is given to us by perception and cognition and a reality that, although we may not properly be said to “know” it, exists independent of them.

James, too, applies a kind of correspondence logic to his theory of truth but dismisses the “vulgar notion” of correspondence (*The Meaning of Truth* 50), which presumes the *relata* to be the subjective and the objective, “ideas” and “non-human realities” (51). For James, rather, the truth-relation consists not in the correspondence of a thought or a perception to a mind-independent reality but in the correspondence of “conceptual parts of our experience to sensational parts” (51). By this reimagining of correspondence, James skates past the “rationalist” subject-object distinction, evading what he names the logician’s “diseased abstractionism” (*The Meaning of Truth* 152): the “abstraction and insufficiency . . . verbal solutions . . . bad *a priori* reasons . . . fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes” that pragmatism’s empirical attitude is meant to spare us (*Pragmatism* 31). Most of all, James writes, the idea of truth as a correspondence between the faculties may save us from the “pretence of finality in truth” (31). To view absolute truth as anything more than the “holiday giver” (*The Meaning of Truth* 5), a sort of philosophical opiate, is to lose contact with the “richest intimacy with facts” (*Pragmatism* 23) that grants the pragmatic method its powers.⁶

⁶ James’s “holiday giver” points to a letter he received from Russell in April, 1909, several months before the former composed the preface to *The Meaning of Truth*. The letter thanks James for gifting Russell with a copy of *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909), which Russell found “awaiting [him] on [his] return from a holiday (which was also a “moral holiday”)” (*The Meaning of Truth* 301). This correspondence suggests another excellent reason to read *The Meaning of Truth* as an intricate (and occasionally irritable) engagement with Russell’s thoughts on pragmatism.

Alfred North Whitehead, Russell's partner in the composition of the *Principia Mathematica*, expresses, nonetheless, some diffidence about Russellian abstraction. Whitehead's formulation of process philosophy, which conceives of reality in terms of enfolded events and processes rather than in terms of independent objects and affairs, cuts against Russell's logical atomism. But it also draws on the logical theory of correspondence, which entails the postulate of a mind-independent reality. In *Process and Reality* (1929), Whitehead writes that "'truth' is the absence of incompatibility" between propositions and the patterns made by actual entities, which are themselves unknowable by process philosophy's criteria for knowing. These positions—absolute truth as "holiday giver" (pragmatic correspondence), as necessary "correspondence between belief and fact" (fact-based correspondence), and as correspondence between propositions and patterns made by the real (pattern-based correspondence)—encapsulate the major positions that grow out of the attitude that truth is an "agreement with reality." Stein's position on truth resembles Whitehead's in that it occupies a medial position between pragmatic correspondence and fact-based correspondence but, as I will show, it revises pattern-based correspondence in several significant ways. The author of *Tender Buttons* (Objects, Food, Rooms), could never have countenanced the idea that we know an object only through the shadow it casts. Nor would she have accepted the idea that words do not, in themselves, possess a certain materiality.

Evidently Russell has a very limited set
of consequences in mind.

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The notion that it is quite easy to know when the consequences of a belief are good, so easy in fact, that a theory of knowledge need take no account of anything so simple—this notion, I must say, seems to me the strangest assumptions for a theory of knowledge to make. Let us take another illustration. Many of the leaders of the French Revolution were disciples of Rousseau, and their belief in his doctrines had far-reaching effects, which make Europe at this day a different place from what it would have been without that belief. If, on the whole, the effects of their belief have been good, we shall have to say that their belief was true; if bad, that it was false. But how are we to strike the balance? It is almost impossible to disentangle what the effects have been; and even if we could ascertain these, our judgement as to whether they have been good or bad would depend upon our political opinions. It is surely far easier to discover by direct investigation that the *Contrat Social* is a myth than to decide whether belief in it has done harm or good on the whole.

Another difficulty which I feel in regard to the pragmatic meaning of "truth" may be stated as follows: Suppose I accept the pragmatic criterion, and suppose you persuade me that a certain belief is useful. Suppose I thereupon conclude that the belief is true. Is it not obvious that there is a transition in my mind from seeing that the belief is useful to actually holding that the belief is true? Yet this could not be so if the pragmatic account of truth were valid. Take, say, the belief that other people exist. According to the pragmatists, to say "it is true that other people exist" means "it is useful to believe that other people exist." But if so, then these two phrases are merely different words for the same proposition; therefore when I believe the one, I believe the other. If this were so, there could be no transition from the one to the other, as plainly there is. This shows that the word "true" represents for us a different idea from that represented by the phrase, "useful to believe," and that, therefore, the pragmatic definition of truth ignores, without destroying, the meaning commonly given to the word "true," which meaning, in

if it
means
food,
then
when
I eat
food
I eat
bread.

400
also.

it is the species, "useful to believe" is the genus.

Surely, but how decide the value by comparing it with other truths you believe in. The result of comparing being the measure.

of course it does. yet it may be

subsumed under the latter idea but the former is not thought but the useful result of the latter.

Fig. 2.1 James's heavily annotated copy of Russell's "Transatlantic Truth" (1908), McMaster University Copy

The Critic of Abstractions

Gertrude Stein more or less liked William James. Gertrude Stein more or less liked Alfred North Whitehead.⁷ She did not like Bertrand Russell.⁸ One obvious temptation, when considering Stein's philosophical position on literary truth, is to reduce her position to her personal affinities, even though to do so is to indulge in an unjust simplification of her praxis. The argument advanced here

⁷ Whitehead's relationship to Stein was not always uncomplicated. As Steven Meyer notes, he appears to take her to task for her "iconoclasm" in a lecture delivered at Radcliffe's Fiftieth Anniversary Jubilee in 1929: "Talking on the subject of historical changes," he proposed that "the iconoclastic impulse which is so prominent in the literary school today has done its work. It is not rejected. It is not shocking anybody. But its preoccupations have ceased to interest the creative ability under thirty, still more that under twenty-five years of age" (qtd. in *Irresistible Dictation* 192).

Stein recalled her time at James's Harvard laboratory fondly but admitted that her disillusionment with science (as she recounts in *Everybody's Autobiography* [1936]) dated to his remark that "science is not a solution and not a problem it is a statement of the observation of things observed and perhaps therefore not interesting perhaps therefore only abjectly true" (242). In some ways, her adventurous revisions of pragmatist correspondence represent an effort to relieve truth of the abjection to which she felt science had subjected it.

⁸ Stein's meeting with Russell at the home of Alfred North Whitehead occasioned this delicately poisonous reminiscence in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*:

Another person who turned up during that week was Bertrand Russell. He came to Lockridge the day North Whitehead left for the front. He was a pacifist and argumentative and although they were very old friends Doctor and Mrs. Whitehead did not think they could bear hearing his views just then. He came and Gertrude Stein, to divert everybody's mind from the burning question of war or peace, introduced the subject of education. This caught Russell and he explained all the weaknesses of the American system of education, particularly their neglect of the study of greek. Gertrude Stein replied that of course England which was an island needed Greece which was or might have been an island. At any rate greek was essentially an island culture, while America needed essentially the culture of a continent which was of necessity latin. This argument fussed Mr. Russell, he became very eloquent. Gertrude Stein then became very earnest and gave a long discourse on the value of greek to the english, aside from its being an island, and the lack of value of greek culture for the Americans based upon the psychology of Americans as different from the psychology of the english. She grew very eloquent on the disembodied abstract quality of the American character and cited examples, mingling automobiles with Emerson, and all proving that they did not need greek, in a way that fussed Russell more and more and kept everybody occupied until everybody went to bed. (151-152)

The subject of the brangle, as staged by Stein, is education, particularly the differences between American and English systems of education. Stein's defense of the American neglect of Greek (designed partly to distract the party from the personal drama of the Whiteheads' anxiety about their enlisted son and in part for the express purpose of annoying Russell) relies on an equation of geography with national character (This linkage shows up throughout her work, most notably in *The Geographical History of America* [1936], a recurrence that suggests that Stein took the idea quite seriously.). Her major claim is that that American psychology—the American mind—is, essentially "disembodied" and "abstract," as opposed, presumably, to the embodied and particular character of English psychology. The Emerson Stein is thinking of here may be the essay "Nominalist and Realist," which claims that

[i]n the famous dispute with the Nominalists, the Realists had a good deal of reason. General ideas are essences. They are our gods: they round and ennoble the most partial and sordid way of living. Our proclivity to details cannot quite degrade our life, and divest it of poetry. (*The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* 393)

resists that temptation, though it does note that Stein was acquainted with all three philosophers, which may have encouraged her to engage with their ideas. What do these competing theories of truth mean for the purposes of literature as Gertrude Stein conceives it? If we accept the idea that, as this chapter proposes, Stein's literary truth involves a correspondence model of some kind then the next matter to address is the operation of that correspondence model, the nature of its *relata*, and its possible resemblances or resistances to (respectively) pragmatic correspondence and fact-based correspondence.

As a way of opening a dialogue about Stein's relationship to her interlocutors, I offer an anecdote from *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. This passage, which reflects on Stein's friendship with Alfred North Whitehead during the summer of 1914, sums up her tendency to paint her conversational partners in shades of irony ranging from tender to toxic. It also exposes her customary means of manufacturing this irony, the manipulation of well-established literary tropes:

Gertrude Stein and Doctor Whitehead walked endlessly around the country. They talked of philosophy and history, it was during these days that Gertrude Stein realised how completely it was Doctor Whitehead and not Russell who had had the ideas for their great book. Doctor Whitehead, the gentlest and most simply generous of human beings never claimed anything for himself and enormously admired anyone who was brilliant, and Russell undoubtedly was brilliant.

Gertrude Stein used to come back and tell me about these walks and the country still the same as in the days of Chaucer, with the green paths of the early britons that could still be seen in long stretches, and the triple rainbows of that strange summer. They used, Doctor Whitehead and Gertrude Stein, to have long conversations with game-keepers and mole-catchers. (pp. 148-149).

The scene is practically allegory—the Great Writer and the Great Philosopher reaffirming their organic connection to the landscape as they make their peripatetic way from game-keeper to mole-catcher, admiring the sylvan scene while World War I rages outside their pastoral, English retreat.

The ramble over the green evokes Lake Poet promenades and transcendental Thoreauvian jaunts alike—and, indeed, this sequence might be read as an ironic renaissance of these systems of

poetics—ironic in that the walks are made possible by the war and contained within it. The joy of the Stein-Whitehead friendship is consolatory but conversations about philosophy and history do not necessarily change history—the threat of violence is ambient, structural, and also personal. The sons of Alfred North and Evelyn Whitehead were old enough to enlist in the army and Stein, drafting her reminisces in the early thirties, writes with this knowledge in mind.⁹

Stein's generous attribution of the best parts of the logical edifice of the *Principia Mathematica* to Whitehead not only reminds us of her grudge against Russell but also gestures at the kind of philosophical endeavor her own work might advocate—one that takes place in natural language (amidst nature, green paths and triple rainbows and all) but by no means discards the abstractions of logical discourse. In a way, this passage, which collapses the particular walks of an entire summer into one “endless[],” exemplary sequence operates as a playful tribute to Whitehead's process philosophy, layering time, movement, and knowledge production so copiously that even rainbows must repeat themselves thrice. But it does not pay homage uncritically, for Stein does not consider the abstraction of logical truth necessarily “diseased” as Jamesian pragmatism does. Nor does she approve Whitehead's skepticism about her own formal “iconoclasm.”¹⁰ (Notice that Stein does not describe conversations about literature in her anecdote.) The singular experience of each walk builds, through condensation and repetition, to the abstracted walk that Stein couches in the generalizing grammatical construction “used to” (“used to come back,” “used to . . . have long conversations). The ultimate result is a mode of literary representation that argues for a correspondent relationship between the concrete and the abstract and suggests, moreover, that the repetition of the particular may give rise to an intuition of the universal—a position that puts the radically empirical “process” of process philosophy in service to the fact-based correspondence of the logical theory of truth.

⁹ Both Thomas North Whitehead and Eric Whitehead did eventually serve in the armed forces during the First World War. Eric died in France on March 13th, 1918. He was nineteen years old.

¹⁰ See footnote 7.

Stein's account of her friendship with Whitehead is also a literalized effort to reorient the distressed relationship of poet to landscape and of modern poetry to modern philosophy, a venture shaped by her attitude towards the legacy of Romantic and transcendental forms, genres, and motifs. According to Stein, the way to offer an accurate portrait of modern reality is to use the experience of parochial daily life to facilitate a sensitivity to the abstract. Her poetics conceives of the relationship of particulars to universals (abstraction, disembodiment) as part of the process of claiming holism from fragments—a corrective to the “partiality” of nineteenth century English writing and, specifically, to what Stein sees as the failures of the Romantic poets. Consider this meditation on long Lake Poet poems as “parts of a whole” from *Lectures in America*, which strongly recalls *Autobiography's* Whitehead set-piece:

[T]he nineteenth century thing lives by its parts . . . The same thing is true with nineteenth century poetry. The lake poets had other ideas, they felt that it was wrong to live by parts of a whole and they tried and they tried . . . but they too inevitably as they wrote longer and longer live [*sic*] by parts of the whole[.] (“What Is English Literature?” 44-45)

Whitehead had, himself, strong ideas about philosophy and landscape. In an essay entitled “The Romantic Reaction” (which is particularly concerned with Wordsworth, though it also cites Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, and Tennyson), he argues for a doctrine that “involves the abandonment of the traditional scientific materialism, and the substitution of an alternative doctrine of organism” (*Science and the Modern World* 36) that balances subjective experiences with eternal objects.

Whitehead's essay sums up Wordsworth's critique of science as “its absorption in abstractions,” science's neglect of “the important facts of nature [that] elude the scientific method” (*Science and the Modern World* 83). For Whitehead, Wordsworth's poetry enacts a literary version of pragmatic truth. He writes that

Both Shelley and Wordsworth emphatically bear witness that nature cannot be divorced from its aesthetic values; and that these values arise from the cumulation, in some sense, of the brooding presence

of the whole onto its various parts. Thus we gain from the poets the doctrine that a philosophy of nature must concern itself at least with these five notions: change, value, eternal objects, endurance, organism, interfusion. (*Science and the Modern World* 87)

Change, value, eternal objects, endurance, organism, and interfusion are, in various proportions, the substance and the aims of Stein's philosophical poetics. But her idea of her Romantic predecessors differs from Whitehead's in that she sees their poetry as having failed to achieve the holism contingent on these six concepts. (Many modernist writers developed a monolithic straw-man version of Romanticism in order justify their own formal experiments against it.)¹¹ She is also, as the rest of this chapter demonstrates, much more devoted to the recuperation of abstract universals than a practitioner of, say, Jamesian pragmatism really ought to be. Thus her own writerly innovations—which Whitehead found rather tiresome—aim towards holistic reconciliation of particular and universal, often by means of a deconstruction of Romantic forms. Stein's agreement with reality simultaneously gestures towards and away from Romanticism (as she conceived it), towards and away from abstraction.¹²

What Stein takes from Whitehead, ultimately, is the idea that philosophy—and philosophical literature—may act as the “critic of abstractions,”

harmonising them by assigning them their right relative status as abstractions, and . . . completing them by direct comparison with more concrete intuitions of the universe, and thereby promoting the formation of more complete schemes of thought. It is in respect to this comparison that the testimony of great poets is of such importance. Their survival is evidence that they express deep intuitions of mankind penetrating into what is universal in concrete fact. (*Science and the Modern World* 87)

¹¹ Steven Meyer has documented, in his work, a vision of Stein as ecstatic scientist, a linguistic experimentalist in the tradition of the Romantics—and especially of Wordsworth. Cf. *Irresistible Dictation*.

¹² Stein's most positivist work—her explicit attempt at a theory of everything—is *The Making of Americans* (1903-1911), which uses the form of the novel to create a taxonomy of every possible kind of human character. While she turns away from this methodology of complete description after finishing the novel, she does not discard the idea that language might represent—or at least point towards—wholeness.

Philosophy as the critic of abstractions is not, of course, opposed to abstraction any more than literary criticism is, generally speaking, opposed to literature. Stein protests, along with Whitehead, the idea that “the abstractions of science are irreformable and unalterable” (*Science and the Modern World* 87), if only because abstractions themselves are worth reforming and altering, not necessarily in themselves, but in how we contextualize and relate to them. In a draft of a letter from 1932 (the same year she composed both *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and *Stanzas in Meditation*), Stein describes her dedication to “exactitude of abstract thought and poetry as created by exactness and as far as possible disembodiedment [*sic*] if one may use such a word, creating sense by intensity of exactness” (qtd. in Dydo’s *The Language That Rises* 25). It is in this striving to make the abstract “exact” that the shape of Stein’s agreement with reality makes itself known. For Stein’s correspondence-inflected theory of how writing makes claims to truths depends, to use her own lexicon, on “intensity of exactness,” precise correspondences between language and “inner and outer realit[ies]” (*The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* 210), abstract universals and concrete particulars.

As the next section of the chapter shows, Stein’s *Stanzas in Meditation* (1932) seeks to out-Whitehead Whitehead, “evolv[ing],” as he writes in his letters, “a way of speaking which applies equally to physics, physiology, and to our aesthetic experiences . . . [which] ordinary philosophic abstractions won’t do []” (*Alfred North Whitehead: The Man and His Work* 223). Well, not *exactly*. By Stein’s lights, ordinary abstractions are precisely the point. For in the final analysis, the test for literary truth in Steinian poetics is whether any given piece of writing functions as a critique of the way abstractions *correspond* to lived experience (I mean critique in the classical sense, as the systematic practice of doubt.). If abstraction is “diseased,” as James claims, then Stein’s response to this disease is not to deny abstraction but to apply physic. Steinian poetics “confronts,” to use Whitehead’s language, “the sciences with concrete fact” (*Science and the Modern World* 87) as a sort of *pharmakon*.

Art stages an encounter between “concrete intuitions of the universe” (87) and universal concepts—holding the abstract and the concrete in perpetual, nictating flux.

The Painting Problem (I)

“[H]e at least knows,” Stein writes of her friend, the French painter and poet Francis Picabia, “that if you do not solve your painting problem in painting human beings you do not solve it at all” (*The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* 119). Stein goes on to say that Picabia

had conceived and is struggling with the problem that a line should have the vibration of a musical sound and that this vibration should be the result of conceiving the human form and the human face in so tenuous a fashion that it would induce such vibration in the line forming it. It is his way of achieving the disembodied . . . All his life Picabia has struggled to dominate and achieve this conception. Gertrude Stein thinks that perhaps he is now approaching the solution of his problem . . . He who is going to be the creator of the vibrant line knows that it is not yet created and if it were it would not exist by itself, it would be dependent upon the emotion of the object which compels the vibration . . . Gertrude Stein, in her work, has always been possessed by the intellectual passion for exactitude in the description of inner and outer reality. She has produced a simplification by this concentration, and as a result the destruction of associational emotion in poetry and prose. She knows that beauty, music, decoration, the result of emotion should never be the cause, even events should not be the cause of emotion nor should they be the material of poetry and prose. Nor should emotion itself be the cause of poetry or prose. They should consist of an exact reproduction of either an outer or an inner reality. (210-211)

In this passage, Stein links her own artistic practice directly to Francis Picabia’s. If Picabia’s paintings “struggle[]” to “achiev[e] the disembodied” (which we might classify as a kind of abstraction), then so does Stein’s writing. If the true test of Picabia’s powers—the “painting problem”—is the representation of the human form (generously construed) and the human face, then so is Stein’s. *The Autobiography*, written in 1932, records a devotion to “exactitude in the description of inner and outer reality,” whether in visual art or in language, the precision to which the synaesthetic “vibration in the line” must tend.

Stein's lines are composed of words rather than charcoal or paint but no less dedicated to the paradox of sensuous "vibration" or the "achievement of the disembodied" for that. Her *ars poetica* demands that literature ("poetry and prose") hold the particular and the abstract in tension in order to produce the "destruction of emotional association," a concern for which Picabia's name, as this chapter will show, becomes an indicator. In arguing that fidelity to reality results in the demolition of emotion rather than the production of it, Stein revises Wordsworth's oft-quoted—and oft-misunderstood—assertion from the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, that "all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (448).¹³ In part an iteration of modernist impersonality, Stein's interest in creating a literature that expressly undoes emotion also works to construct and then to move against an invented Romanticism.¹⁴

Long Dull Poems

Wordsworth was much on Stein's mind in 1932, the year she composed *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* for a popular audience and, in tandem, the long, abstract poem *Stanzas in Meditation*, which would only see full publication in the mid-1950s, about ten years after Stein's death.¹⁵ In a missive from that year (addressed to the publisher Louis Bromfield), Stein says that she is "trying to write a long dull poem like the long ones of Wordsworth and it is very interesting to do" (qtd. in Dydo

¹³ This statement is often oversimplified by modernist writers who overlook Wordsworth's heavy qualification of this statement: "and though this be true, Poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply. For our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings" (Routledge Classics [2005] p. 291).

¹⁴ See Sharon Cameron's *Impersonality* (2007).

¹⁵ A new critical edition of *Stanzas in Meditation*, deftly edited by Susannah Hollister and Emily Setina, has recently made its way to press—a good and necessary thing and a large step towards rendering *Stanzas* easier to write about and to teach. There are few texts that have more required the help. We have known since the mid-eighties, thanks to Ulla Dydo's careful attention to Stein's drafts, that the version of *Stanzas* first released in 1956 is a corrupt text—mostly owing a set of revisions demanded by Alice B. Toklas involving the words "can" and "may." Hollister and Setina's revised edition (along with Joan Retallack's introductory reading of the poem) have enriched my own approach immensely—and I am deeply grateful to them for sharing proofs of their edited volume with me in advance of the publication date.

493). And, indeed, most of the proper nouns (in a poem that uses very few of them) derive from the Wordsworthian lexicon: “wander,” “cloud,” “mountain,” “lake,” “surprise,” “delight,” “meditation,” and “repose.” The poem, as I have argued elsewhere, uses landscape and autobiography in much the same way as *The Prelude* does—as part of a complex articulation of the interdependence of imaginative acts and quotidian textures. And Stein’s conversation with Wordsworth, at times a quarrel, at times a wry accommodation, poses questions specific to how *Stanzas* takes up *The Prelude* and also somewhat larger questions about what it means to assume agreement with external realities in Stein’s work (people, places, objects, foods, rooms)—and specifically intertextual agreement, correspondence with inherited literary works and forms.

Stanzas doesn’t yield its correspondences easily. Like birds who mistake a clear pane of glass for the open air, readers may be painfully repulsed by a text that seems to be poised between the offer of transparency and its irrevocable repeal. Nearly two hundred stanzas in length, the poem features long, glimmering cascades of abstract language punctuated by short, vivid evocations of flora and fauna, landscape features of Spain, Italy, France, and England, the speech acts and paraphernalia of veiled domestic spaces, and a little discourse on the aesthetics of painter Francis Picabia. Generically, the writing borrows from (among other things), Romantic long poem, nursery rhyme, philosophical meditation, fable, fairy tale, autobiography, Shakespearean drama, and pastoral.

Nonetheless, despite its difficulty (maybe even because of it, in a sense), *Stanzas* makes an excellent case study for purposes of addressing the parameters of Stein’s agreement with reality, for the poem features both a high degree of abstraction and also a serious engagement with recognizable extra-textual phenomena. In addition, the story of its critical reception highlights the dilemma of Stein’s referentiality. Ulla Dydo’s work with the poem displays the ambivalence of its referential status. On one hand, she views *Stanzas* as a challenge to reference. “In [its] instability of shape, voice, and meaning,” she writes,

lies the maddening magnificence of the stanzas. I want to read, not read into or pin down, the poems . . . The more the language empties out of references and antecedents, nouns to pronouns, the more new readings open (*The Language That Rises* 503-504)

On the other hand, Dydo's initial investigations, conducted during the 1980s, reveal a poem that is anything but "emptie[d] out of references and antecedents." Composed in a series of notebooks, *Stanzas* showed signs, as Dydo noticed early in her examination, of a puzzling scheme of editorial changes, all the more noteworthy in that Stein very rarely revised any of her drafts. Throughout the notebooks, the word "may" had been crossed out, sometimes with great force—tearing the page in a few instances—and replaced (often by "can").

At first, Dydo couldn't understand the rationale behind these changes. The answer came to her in a dream:

I knew already that in the spring of 1932, the manuscript of Stein's early novel, *Q.E.D.*, about her 1902 love affair with May Bookstaver and a triangle situation in which Stein was jilted, was discovered in Paris. But it took me weeks of pondering the substitution of "can" for "may" and other changes until their meaning finally came to me in a dream that made the verb "may" and the name "May" one. It was more than recognition of a pun. With nothing spelled out by the words, I then groped for what happened by a kind of underground burrowing in texts until, after twists and turns that led me down blind alleys to dead ends and misinterpretations, I found passageways into the texts through contexts I had not known were there. (491)

What Dydo had discovered—and later confirmed through records of interviews with Stein's lover Alice Toklas—was that Toklas herself had demanded the changes. It was only in unearthing and reading *Q.E.D.* that Toklas discovered Stein's early relationship with May Bookstaver. Toklas was less angry about the affair itself than about her own ignorance of it. She and Stein had promised to take each other fully in confidence at the beginning of their partnership and Toklas apparently felt the omission a terrible breach of faith. Although the flight from reference is active in the abstract passages of *Stanzas in Meditation*, it is countered by an equally strong pull *towards* the referential and the concrete: "Anxious to please not only why but when/So then anxious to mean. I will not now"

(*Stanzas in Meditation* III.xxi).¹⁶ Abstraction may be one of the defining qualities of the poem but it's hardly pure abstraction. The "may" revisions demanded by Toklas speak, if anything, not to a text already denuded of reference but to a text that refers too much, too intimately, too often. Stein's text is not a-referential but *multiply referential*—and a comprehensive reading must account for those layers of reference, even though some strata may always be invisible to us.

By multiple reference, I mean a particular kind of agreement with reality in which reference is neither secure nor yet completely free-floating, in which words denote some number of referents (or *denotata*) equal to or greater than one but fewer than infinity. Advocates of the indeterminate Stein would say, after Dydo in one of her reader-response moments, that sometimes it's better "to read, not read into or pin down" Stein's work (*The Language That Rises* 503). By contrast, advocates of the determinate Stein would say, after Jennifer Ashton, that we should treat Stein's words (particularly her nouns and pronouns) as variables in a mathematical expression:

if we square an x in one mathematical expression, and then times it by two in another, and then gave it a minus sign in another, we would hardly be inclined to regret that the x had somehow grown less lively or meaningful over the course of our different uses of it, and we certainly wouldn't say that its meaning had thereby become indeterminate . . . no matter how often x might appear, each successive use would have to be understood as presenting both a new x and a new value, even as x 's capacity for reference remained unchanged. (*From Modernism to Postmodernism* 87-88)

For Ashton, therefore, Stein's account of reference constitutes an extreme of Gottlob Frege's distinction between sense and reference (roughly equivalent to connotation and denotation) in which words-as-variables are "essentially identical to [their] referential function . . . denot[ing] . . . something like [their] own rule of operation, much as we might say that game-pieces in chess denote

¹⁶ The poem's abstraction has certainly contributed to its uncertain status among critics. Marjorie Perloff suggests that "the early portraits like 'Picasso' and 'Mabel Dodge at the Villa Curonia' manifest a care for consistency that we don't find . . . in the great poem of this period, 'Stanzas in Meditation.'" (*Poetry On and Off the Page* 60). And yet, in his 1957 review of Stein's "great poem," John Ashbery assigns *Stanzas* the very consistency of pattern Perloff feels it lacks, an obedience, as in the novels of Henry James, to "some rhythmic impulse at the heart of all happening" ("The Impossible: Gertrude Stein 252). "Stanzas," he writes, "create(s) a counterfeit of reality more real than reality" (254) that alternates "plenty of monotony" (250) with the "sudden inrush of clarity" (252).

their own rules of movement” (*From Modernism to Postmodernism* 88). In this rendering of Stein, what names denote is their own usage—and thus their referents are secure, always self-reflexively specific, singular, and context-dependent. This theoretical device pays off if we are willing to accept that the consistent referent for Stein’s names is their own being and becoming. But how, then, do we account for cases in which reference is mixed, in which what’s denoted are extra-textual elements as well as intra-textual operations?

Take, for example, one of *Stanzas in Meditation*’s Wordsworthian palimpsests:

It might be very well that lilies of the valley have a fragrance
And that they ripen soon
And that they are gathered in great abundance
And that they will not be refreshing but only
Very lovely with green leaves (I. x)

Read as a statement about how poetry works, the names in the lines above seem to tell us that poems bear some resemblance to lilies of the valley, abundant, swift-ripening and possessing no particular use-value despite their decorative qualities (“And they will not be refreshing but only/Very lovely with green leaves.”). Meanwhile, a strongly autobiographical reading—in which the referents in question come from Stein’s personal history—would note that the lily of the valley’s Latin name, *Convallaria majalis*, translates to “hedge of may” and that a common sobriquet for this poisonous flowering plant is “may lily.” It is hard to deny that Stein’s relationship with May Bookstaver seems to be inscribed in these lines. And then it is the may lily, as well as poetry, that becomes a transient pleasure that “ripens soon” but cannot “refresh.” Its loveliness is the loveliness of the ephemeral, which, like a fruitless love affair, “leaves” (in both senses) all too soon.

But this passage encodes, too, a reference to the Wordsworthian intertext:

When summer came,
Our pastime was, on bright half-holidays,
To sweep along the plain of Windermere
With rival oars; and the selected bourne
Was now an Island musical with birds
That sang and ceased not; now a Sister Isle

Beneath the oak's umbrageous covert, sown
With lilies of the valley like a field (*The Prelude* II. li. 55-62)

When Wordsworth ends his description of resting on the Windermere island after boat races, he claims that he “was taught to feel, perhaps, too much,/The self-sufficing power of Solitude” (II. li. 76-77). The poem records the ways in which a geographical experience foments the sense of autonomous isolation necessary for the production of art. “Autonomous” and “isolated” might equally describe one of the most powerful impulses in Stein’s poetics but the flight from reference is never unmixed, for *Stanzas*’ lilies are not just any lilies but *these* lilies or *those* lilies—Wordsworth’s lilies, Stein’s lilies, Stein’s May or Stein’s may. If autonomy is the aim, it is an aim *Stanzas* never quite achieves. Although the poem recontextualizes and repurposes the Wordsworthian vocabulary, it can never quite free its language from context; it can never make its purpose pure.

The layers of reference built into the text refuse complete determinacy and also complete indeterminacy in a way that might make the terms of determinacy or indeterminacy seem, themselves, suspect. While the “lilies of the valley” point us towards Stein’s romantic history, they also direct us towards a consideration of how landscape informs the aesthetics of the poem as a whole. I’m not suggesting here that there’s a one-to-one correlation between episodes in *The Prelude* and lines in *Stanzas*; the relationship is nothing so simple. Nor am I arguing that Stein uses allusion in the same way as Eliot or Pound, both writers of important modernist long poems that demonstrate a curatorial avidness. *Stanzas in Meditation* is at once allusive and elusive. Unlike *The Cantos* and *The Wasteland*, it is much less concerned with preserving fragments of other texts than it is with turning other texts to fragments. But, for all that, it doesn’t obliterate the traces of what it’s smashed, it leaves them out in the open, like pieces of a broken bowl used to construct a mosaic. The resultant artwork recalls, through its materials, the color and shape of the original thing.

The example above suggests that if we read Stein’s names as (to use Ashton’s simile) variables in a mathematical expression, we must do so with the understanding that, in addition to

denoting their own rules of operation, these variables may also act like the x in any given quadratic equation. That is, the x of a quadratic equation may refer to positive, negative, imaginary and complex solutions. It is possible, for instance, to have a quadratic equation to which 3 and -3 are valid solutions but to which 7, -13, and 2,426 are not. The same might be said of *Stanzas in Meditation*: its linguistic variables renew themselves by repetition but they are often secured not merely to one instantiation of reference but to several at once. This is not to say *Stanzas* is infinitely and indefinitely referential—a quadratic equation is not indefinite merely because it has more than one solution—but rather to claim that the best way to read this poem is with the assumption of multiple reference in mind.

What the determinate Stein gets right is the potential for specific referentiality in Stein, whereas the indeterminate Stein helps us to understand that some of the writing's *denotata* are *essentially* unnameable and unknowable—and this realization may be the point at which the reader's *connotata* begin to color in the blind spot. In the end, all this concern with denotation points back to the question of Stein's agreement with reality. Names in *Stanzas* often make simultaneous use of two or three of the universe of possible cases of reference rather than merely one. And only some of the actually existing referents (if we grant that there are actually existing referents) are ever discoverable or recoverable, so that the effect is of a poetic language that hints at, to reiterate Russell's formulation of logical truth, "the possibility of events that no one experiences and of propositions that are true although there can never be any evidence in their favour . . . [f]acts . . . wider . . . than experiences" (*An Inquiry Into Meaning and Truth* 305). As a result of its multiply referential poetics, *Stanzas* resembles, more than anything, a house in which some rooms are locked, some unlocked, and muffled conversations drift into the hallways from behind doors we may never get to open. But this is hardly to say there is nothing in particular behind them for us to find. Each stanza of the

poem is a “stanza in between” (II. xix). In Italian the word “stanza” means a “stopping” or “standing place” or—to render it more colloquially—a room.

The Painting Problem (II)

Let us begin again (Beginning again and again, as Stein tells us elsewhere, is natural.). In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, the artist Francis Picabia has a problem—specifically a painting problem, which, according to Stein, must be tested and solved through representation of “the human form and the human face” by means of a line with “the vibration of a musical sound” (210). Moreover, “if you do not solve your painting problem in painting human beings you do not solve it at all” (119). There’s a maddening airiness to Stein’s talk of painting problems and vibrant lines but if we consider these sentiments in light of a poetics of multiple reference, we may yet bring them to earth. If I’m right about the usage of multiple reference in *Stanzas*, then the few proper names that make their way into the poem ought to be extremely charged sites of significance. One of these electric locations is the textual portrait of the painter Francis Picabia that makes an appearance towards the end of the poem (V. lxxi). The scheme of layered denotation that characterizes the poem as a whole makes the most sense, I contend, if we read it as a linguistic adaptation of the visual technique of superposition—a key feature of Picabian aesthetics—and an agreement with reality that aims to replace singular reference with multiplicity.

When Stein writes that Picabia is “approaching the solution of his [painting] problem” (*The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* 210), she is speaking of the *Transparences* work of the late twenties and early thirties, the experiments with superposition that Marcel Duchamp would later call “a juxtaposition of transparent forms and colors [that] . . . express the feeling of a third dimension without the aid of perspective” (*Salt Seller: The Writings of Marcel Duchamp* 157), just the kind of gesture towards unperceived realities (“without the aid of perspective”) that *Stanzas* makes

throughout, for to layer perspectives on top of each other is to do away with any single perspective—to approach the condition of the view-from-everywhere, or else the view-from-nowhere. Stein is also preoccupied with doing away with perspective—and particularly single perspective—as is apparent from the variation in pronouns that opens her portrait of Picabia:

There was once upon a time a place where they went from time to time.
I think better of this than of that.
They met just as they should.
This is my could I be excited.
And well he wished that she wished.
All of which I know is this. (V.lxxi)

The deconstructed fairy-tale opening (“once upon a time a place where they went from time to time”) gives way to a judgmental mode in which “I” thinks better of “this,” than of “that,” in which “they” meet as “they” should and “this” becomes the question “could I be excited”—and is then succeeded by his wishing about her wishing.¹⁷ We can wish that others wish the same things as we do, of course, but all of which “I” knows for certain is “this,” a word that stands in here, for those things most immediate in our perception, though even “this” becomes mutable and multiple as the portrait takes shape.

Stein seems to argue, through her interest in pronouns and especially in those pronouns that tend to stand in for people—“I,” “they,” “he,” “she”—that certain problems can *only* be confronted by a representation of the limit case of human experience, as (for example) in a portrait. “Stanza

¹⁷ Of the universe of possible names, Bertrand Russell acknowledged only two that might be “logically proper,” that is, not reducible to description: “this” and “that.” These demonstrative pronouns (much beloved of Stein) mark, in Russell’s model, the closest linguistic link to our knowledge of things, what Russell calls (after James) “knowledge by acquaintance”—that is, the kind of knowledge of which we are directly aware, the kind that can be derived from sense data, memory, and introspection. All other “ordinary names,” the sort that can be reduced to description, involve not only direct knowledge of things but a logically independent knowledge of truths (30). This compounded knowing, Russell calls “knowledge by description.” (Steven Meyer’s analysis of Stein’s engagement with the Jamesian categories of “knowledge by acquaintance” and “knowledge by description” is very thorough. Cf. *Irresistible Dictation*; Stein collapses the two kinds of knowledge in the title of *An Acquaintance With Description*, which begins with the evocative name-pairing “Mouths and Wood” [*Yale Unpublished Stein* 530]). It is only through the mediated “knowledge by description, Russell claims, that we are able “to pass beyond the limits of our private experience.” Although “we can only know truths which are wholly composed of terms which we have experienced in acquaintance, we can yet have knowledge by description of things which we have never experienced” (*The Problems of Philosophy* 39). Both kinds of names serve important functions in natural language precisely because they are intimately associated with experiential particulars.

lxxi,” a portrait of Picabia, is one in a series of many word portraits that Stein produced over the course of her career (“Ada,” “Matisse,” and “Picasso” are a few of the most famous.). One of the most frequently excerpted pieces of *Stanzas*, V.lxxi was reprinted several times in Picabia’s exhibition catalogues of the mid-thirties, often alongside images like this one:¹⁸



Fig. 2.2 “Transparence—Tête et Cheval” (1930), Francis Picabia, Collection of the Museum of Modern Art.

Picabia’s portrait of Stein (also executed in the early ’30s) would take its cues from her written work—it places Stein, who was thinking a great deal about landscape when Picabia knew her, against a backdrop of green mountains. Just so, Stein’s portrait of Picabia pays tribute to his painting.

In the image above, two views of one face (or is it one view of two faces?) make a transparent scrim through which the figure of a horse is moving. A bird amidst leaves haunts a corner. Two large hands with an intimation of diaphanous sleeves reach towards each other along the diagonal. Foreground and background mix freely; it is as if we are seeing the figures in the painting from multiple vantage points. Is the horse the dream of the face(s)? Is the face the dream of the horse? Whose hands are those? Nothing is fully external to anything else. Much as do the elements of Stein’s deconstructed landscapes, every line in “Transparence—Tête et Cheval”

¹⁸ One of the few pieces of *Stanzas* to enjoy the pleasures of merely circulating during Stein’s lifetime.

acknowledges its own permeability, a clue, perhaps, to what Stein meant by linking Picabia's work to the achievement of the "vibrant line."

Meanwhile, Stein writes of Picabia:

This which I wish to say is this.
Something that satisfies refuses.
I refuse to be ought or caught.
I like it to be caught or ought.
Or not if I like it to be ought or caught.
This is whatever is that they could be not there.
This is an introduction to Picabia. (V.lxxi)

The text locates "satisfaction" in refusal. *Stanzas'* ethics of pleasure are predicated on rejections and displacements of convention: "I refuse to be *ought* or *caught*" but "I like *it* to be ought or caught." Picabian aesthetics, like those of *Stanzas*, satisfy through resistance, through the intimation of realities they *refer* to but do not adumbrate. In combination, the sure strokes and laminate compositions of his paintings picture a world of exactness in multiplicity.

Stein's portrait argues that the goal of Picabia's work (and, by extension, her own) is a picture of interior realities that never quite reduce to one:

The thing I wish to say is this.
It might have been.
There are two things that are different.
One and one.
And two and two. (V.lxxi)

Like Picabia's, Stein's superpositions organize several different tiers of reference into a symbiotic whole so that multiplicity and singularity are always present in each other. "One and one" are the same word (the word for a sameness), linked by "is" (which we might read as the copula of identity) but made different by context—syntactical position. The additive "and" sums them up to "two." From "two and two," we might get four.

In a sense, *Stanzas in Meditation* is a poem that desires to approach not the expression of a singular, "emotional" subjectivity but rather the condition of mathematical truth as described by

Bertrand Russell in a 1902 essay called “The Study of Mathematics” as an “ordered cosmos where pure thought can dwell as in its natural home, and where one, at least, of our nobler impulses can escape from the dreary exile of the actual world” (*Mysticism and Logic* 61). For Russell, mathematics gives onto an “ordered cosmos” where the propositions of “pure thought,” some of which are as yet inaccessible to us, dwell apart from daily life and experience. This vision of a realm of pure thought has about it the taste of Hegel’s transcendental logic and also of Plato’s cave full of “dear, gorgeous nonsense,” to quote Wallace Stevens quoting Coleridge (*The Necessary Angel* 3). Like Russell, Stein places a great deal of pressure on exactitude—an insistence that strongly suggests her concern with states of objectivity—whether it’s possible to find in language a correspondence to objective realities, a truth that in some way transcends the quandaries of both personal and propositional identity and reference.

Unlike Russell, Stein believes it’s possible to achieve the necessary abstraction and exactitude through literature or music or painting like Picabia’s. Her writing argues that language may be made, to employ Russell’s characterization of mathematics, “sublimely pure” (*Mysticism and Logic* 61) or at least about as pure as the names of numbers, which she wields as if they possessed multiple reference. *Stanzas in Meditation* performs a usage of language that counters Russell’s prescription about the relationship between the particular and the general. “Literature,” he writes, clothes the general in the particular, the universal in “individual dress,” while mathematics, “rigidly” structured by logic, offers direct access to the general-universal “in its purity, without any irrelevant trapping” (*Mysticism and Logic* 61).¹⁹ Stein’s gamble in *Stanzas* is that the particular does not consist of “irrelevant trappings” but may serve, rather, as a crucial device for accessing what is general, a logic, in other words.

¹⁹ Recalls John Crowe Ransom’s characterization of literature as a “logical object or universal” contained in a “tissue of irrelevance from which it does not really emerge (“Criticism, Inc.”) Cf. Chapter One of this project.

One way to look at Stein's use of number throughout the poem is as satire of how the names of mathematics agree with reality, a way of making it clear that numbers, when used according to her scheme, are a special case of the coexistence of multiple reference and exactitude, particularity and generality. Stein ends her stanza on Picabia with a series of lines that emphasize the poem's engagement with the forms of mathematical-philosophical discourse, numbers expressed in propositional statements:

One is one.
If I am would I have liked to be the only one.
Yes just this.
If I am one I would have liked to be the only one
Which I am.
But we know that I know.
That if this has come
To be one
Of this too
This one
Not only now but how
This I know now. (V.lxxi)

The conditional phrases—"if I am"—evoke the modified syllogisms of nineteenth-century logic, while the repetitions of number (which occur throughout the text) call to mind William James's wry advice, remembered by Stein in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*: "Now for philosophy you have to have higher mathematics and I don't gather that has ever interested you" (79). At the time of Stein's schooling, analytic philosophy was truly coming into its own. The most fashionable and innovative philosophical work involved mathematics because formal logic—the method of analytic philosophy—was a language derived from mathematical origins. Stein's 1932 recollection of James's counsel demonstrates, at the same time, her awareness of logic as a vital part of the philosophical discourse of her time and her ambivalence towards it.

In the portrait of Picabia, Stein's use of number is, in large part, a statement of her engagement with the matter of formal logic—particularly questions of truth and identity—and her determination to reattach this matter to the methods of art. For "one," in addition to operating as

the name of a number, also serves as the name of a third person, singular pronoun, which means that even one (the lowest positive natural number, which should be quintessentially singular) is, in fact, multiply referential. Moreover, the referents of one are, respectively, a number and a person, a concurrence that places pressure on constructs of mathematical identity and human identity alike. One *is* one. But also, one is not always one. By means of this plurality of identities, Stein crystallizes the Picabian “painting problem” of the representation of the human face and the human form, which are singular and multiple simultaneously, abstract and concrete at the same time.

Each instance of “one” (there are seven in the lines of *Stanzas* quoted above) is rendered slightly different by the exigencies of context—grammar, syntactical position, the surrounding words. (Even the verb “is” might allow several different readings, depending on how we interpret the copula.) “One” is itself, it is the “only one,” it is “this one,” it is what “I” would have liked to be, what “I am.” Even as it is conceived and known, “one” must be reconceived and relearned: “But we know that I know/That if this has come/To be one.” The poem is interested in how something—how anything—“comes to be one,” concept-formation and ego-formation: identity as process. How does unity arise out of difference or difference out of unity? How do we know anything but through “now” and “how,” the perpetual present continuous? Even “now” and “how” are hard-won words, born out of the quality of attention required by the poem’s multiple levels of reference, its complex patterns of superposition. In Stein’s epistemology, the really difficult thing is to reach a place where it is possible to say: “This I know now.”

Losing, Refusing, Pleasing, Betraying, Caressing

Stein’s portrait of Picabia works out a multiply referential agreement with reality in which names denote specifically—even as they emphasize the difficulty of knowing all possibilities for correspondent *denotata*. In the next section of the chapter, I ask how the model of the multiply referential name might fulfill Stein’s desire (in the oft-cited “Poetry and Grammar” lecture [1925])

for a poetry that “would not invent names, but mean names without naming them” (*Lectures in America* 235). For Stein, “nouns ma[ke] poetry” but need not be stated explicitly in order to print their effects on the work. Poetry, in Stein’s view, is *essentially* concerned with “using with abusing, with wanting with denying with avoiding with adoring with replacing the noun” (213).²⁰ Stein worries, throughout “Poetry and Grammar,” that nouns (names) can be exhausted through use, denatured by careless repetition. (Pronouns, she thinks, are slightly less apt to erode in this way.) Her stated goal is to rejuvenate the name in her own poetry not by creating new names but (somehow) by reconfiguring language so as to lose, want, deny, avoid, adore, and replace the noun.

One way Stein’s poetry “names without naming” is through its turn to the pronoun, the article, and other less exhausted parts of speech—a process that results in a high degree of abstraction. Another way in which she deals with the unnamed name is, I want to suggest through my reading of “I Can Feel The Beauty” (1917), far more literal. An examination of a vital point in “Poetry and Grammar” (with reference to the use of multiple reference in *Stanzas in Meditation*) will set the stage for my consideration of “I Can Feel The Beauty’s” deployment of unnamed names.

“I had always been very impressed,” the lecture continues,

from the time I was very young by having had it told me and then afterwards feeling it myself that Shakespeare in the forest of Arden had created a forest without mentioning the things that make a forest. You feel it all but he does not name its names. (236)

²⁰ The entirety of the relevant passage reads as follows:

Poetry is I say essentially a vocabulary just as prose is essentially not. And what is the vocabulary of which poetry absolutely is. It is a vocabulary based on the noun as prose is essentially and determinately and vigorously not based on the noun. Poetry is concerned with using with abusing, with losing with wanting with denying with avoiding with adoring with replacing the noun. It is doing that always doing that, doing that doing nothing but that. Poetry is doing nothing but using losing refusing and pleasing and betraying and caressing nouns. That is what poetry does, that is what poetry has to do no matter what kind of poetry it is . . . So that is poetry really loving the name of anything and that is not prose. (*Lectures in America* 213)

Even though Shakespeare never uses the words for “the things that make a forest” in *As You Like It*, Stein argues, audiences are as vividly aware of the pastoral setting as if names for “forest” permeated the play.²¹ The example of the forest of Arden recommends that readers consider the possibility that Stein’s writing features literal unnamed names, *denotata* (some of which we can access) that, like Shakespeare’s forest and its component parts, are present in the text *because* they aren’t named

Of a piece called “An Acquaintance With Description,” Stein writes that “I remember in writing [it] looking at anything until something that was not the name of that thing but was in a way that actual thing would come to be written” (*Lectures in America* 237). Here, language bypasses the name, becoming identical—perfectly correspondent—to the “actual thing” or, at the very least, expressing the actual thing without the necessity of naming it. Stein’s interest in naming without naming is also an interest in how names agree with reality and thus constitutes another of her logic problems.

For a logician—especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, names were a particularly fraught issue—a significant obstacle to the major philosophical project of the time—to create a perfected formal language that would help to clear the fog of ambiguities that accompanied the practice of philosophy in ordinary language. As Frege writes, a

logically perfect language (*Begriffsschrift*) should satisfy the conditions, that every expression grammatically well-constructed as a proper name out of signs already introduced shall in fact designate an object, and that no new sign shall be introduced as a proper name without being secured a reference (“Sense and Reference” 70).

Names, because they can be co-referring (as in Frege’s logic problem “Hesperus is Phosphorus” or “the morning star is the evening star”) or non-referring (as in the phrase, “the current Empress of Romania, which has, at the moment, no corresponding real world referent) are problematic for the

²¹ A search of MIT’s digital version of *As You Like It* reveals forty-six appearances of the word forest (including stage directions) but Stein’s recollection of the play as bare of nominal descriptions of said forest may, have some truth to it. It certainly reflects her own refusal to name names. “I can look at a landscape without describing it,” proclaims *Stanzas in Meditation* (II.vii).

creation of a symbolic language meant to eliminate ambiguity as far as possible in the discernment of true propositions. Bertrand Russell, an astute reader of Frege, would outline the project this way in “Mathematics and Logic” (1919): “logic . . . is concerned only with *forms*, and is concerned with them only in the way of stating that they are always or sometimes true—with all the permutations of “always” and “sometimes” that may occur” (*Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy* 180). A perfected system of formal logic would need to circumvent, somehow, the problems of co-reference and non-reference that plague systems of natural language. In order to distinguish the true from the false, a formal language must burn away the fog of the inexact.

Through naming without naming, Stein, similarly, attempts to create a language capacious enough both for the abstractions of mind-independent truth and the specificity (as in the pragmatist doctrine of radical empiricism) of granular experience. In the case of *Stanzas in Meditation*, the result is a poem that wields language as if the cumulative result of layered phenomenological observations amounted to precise, disinterested “reproduction of . . . outer or an inner reality” (*The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* 211) Stein wants show that the ripples and plicas of ordinary language can, in fact, be truth-correspondent. But what aligns her with some of the commitments of modern logic is her conviction that truth can be a function of form. Accordingly, her writing pushes natural language to its formal limits in order to claim for it a unique ability to represent mental experience’s attachment to something resembling logical truth. If *Stanzas* can represent the human mind as capable of abstraction and exactitude, it can claim to increase the sphere of what we can know through ordinary language—not merely “our acquaintance with particular existing things,” as Russell states it (*The Problems of Philosophy* 34) but with abstract universals.

How, then, do we reconcile the Stein committed to formal abstraction with the Stein who encodes her biographical flotsam and jetsam in her poetry? If we turn to her writing elsewhere, the contradiction resolves. The *Autobiography*’s account of Stein’s quarrel with Rusellian principles

anticipates another lecture she would give on her American tour of 1934-1935, “What is English Literature?” There, she would argue that English literature (unlike American literature) is inadequate to the representation of twentieth century realities. The lecture situates nineteenth century English writing as dependent on portraying what Stein calls the island’s “daily life” and particularly the attachment in writing of explanation and sentiment to daily life.

By contrast, Stein positions American writing as disembodied and abstract:

the disembodied way of disconnecting something from anything and anything from something was the American one . . . it is a lack of connection, of there being no connection with living and daily living because there is none, that makes American writing what it always has been and what it will continue to become (*Lectures in America* 53-54).

And yet, *Stanzas in Meditation*, the poem Stein describes as her “real achievement of the commonplace” (*The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* 225) attaches the specific to the general as a matter of course, a flight to disembodiment by way of embodiment. For Stein does not discard “daily life” entirely. The poem moves through the “daily” realities of life with Alice, memories of May, dinner parties and trips through the European countryside. But, in the end, Stein’s poetics argue that these data (though necessary to the progress of thought) ought to be regarded as parts of a whole—points on a continuum that attaches universal to particular.

The seeming discontinuousness of the biographical experience encoded in the text—its refusal to cohere into a cohesive, linear narrative—is, then, a part of the strategy. The biographical parts of the poem are there not in spite of their failure to cohere but *because* of that failure. The poem argues that in order to catch a glimpse of the universal, it is necessary to observe the world of particulars minutely, to see where it is structurally unsound (emotional or sentimental in Stein’s reckoning) and then to shatter it. “Daily life” need not be wholly avoided but it must be estranged and stripped of its continuity if it is to be seen for what it really is, a sliver of a larger reality to which it corresponds. For Stein, the phenomenological and the quotidian must always be contextualized in

relation to the universal (and vice versa) so that the “painting problem” of representing the human face, form, and mind always touches on the logical problems of what to do about names and the realities to which they might refer. It is to this paradox that the poem’s ambivalence about sense experience tends. *Stanzas in Meditation* operates by the logic of Wittgenstein’s ladder—after you have climbed the last rung, you must pull it up after you.²²

True Beauty

Stein’s usage of multiple reference in *Stanzas* is her way of forging an agreement with reality that mediates between Jamesian pragmatism’s insistence on truth as a function of context-dependent relations between mental faculties and Russellian fact-based correspondence, which posits the existence of logical truths to which we may not necessarily have perfect access. Unnamed names, read literally as indicated nouns that do not, themselves, appear within the lexicon of the writing, act as tests of language’s capacity for reference. If we take seriously the conceit that there are some identifiable unnamed names in Stein’s writing—even though they may be outnumbered by *unidentifiable* unnamed names—then we may be able to understand her brand of logical modernism as a “literalis[m] of the imagination” (to borrow Marianne Moore’s borrowing of W.B. Yeats’s assessment of Blake) whose agreement with reality comprehends both the radical empiricist’s sensitivity to experience and the logician’s fidelity to absolute truth.²³

“Forest” constitutes, for Stein, an identifiable unnamed name in *As You Like It*. In light of this example drawn from the “Poetry and Grammar” lecture, the final sections of this chapter

²²Or else the ladder of Schopenhauer, from whom Wittgenstein cribbed the metaphor in the first place.

²³The unrevised “Poetry,” one of Moore’s most famous works, quotes the phrase “literalists of the imagination from an essay called “William Blake and His Illustrations to the *Divine Comedy*” (in Yeats’s *Ideas of Good and Evil* [1903]). She gives readers this portion of the essay in her footnote to the original version of the poem: “The limitation of his view was from the very intensity of his vision; he was a too literal realist of imagination, as others are of nature; and because he believed that the figures seen by the mind’s eye, when exalted by inspiration, were “eternal existences,” symbols of divine essences, he hated every grace of style that might obscure their lineaments” (*Collected Poems* 157). To Yeats’s mind, Blake is clearly a believer in the correspondence of truth.

pursue a thought experiment in naming without naming: a naïve, literalist-of-the-imagination reading of Stein's agreement with reality in which the goal is to identify an unnamed name, expressed and indexed by the writing but never openly nominated. The case study for this thought experiment in naming without naming will be "I Can Feel The Beauty" (1917), a little looked-at entry in the *Yale Unpublished Stein* that demonstrates the depth of the writer's experiments with multiple reference.

Appealing to extra-textual and intertextual historical frameworks, particularly Stein's deployment of the Romantic ode, this section of the chapter reimagines her relationship to inherited poetic forms by examining "I Can Feel The Beauty's" manipulation of odic tropes. The writing is, I contend, particularly concerned with the poems of John Keats, whose "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and "Ode to a Nightingale" permeate Stein's language. One particularly notable odic feature of "I Can Feel The Beauty" is Stein's revision of the end of "Ode on a Grecian Urn" ("True beauty/True beauty/True beauty" [93]), in which she breaks the form of the beauty-truth equivalence, restructuring the terms in a way that looks forward to Theodor Adorno's formulation of "non-identity," a strategy that tells us experiments with identity (logically and pragmatically conceived) are a matter of concern in "I Can Feel The Beauty." Similarly, there is her invocation of "the happiness in Jenny Nightingale" (84), which, juxtaposed to certain structural resonances in the writing, intimate that the generic conventions of the ode are the right touchstone for a multiply referential reading. My analysis proceeds to an elaboration of Stein's allusions to Erik Satie's *Socrate*, a crucial musical intertext, and culminates in the hypothesis of an identifiable unnamed name in the writing.

I have rehearsed elsewhere the argument that Keats's beauty-truth equivalence was, for modernist readers of poetry, a pressing problem in large measure because it was, in the words of Laura (Riding) Jackson and Richard Graves, "just a clumsy attempt at a serious proposition in logic" (*A Pamphlet Against Anthologies* 82).²⁴ And in a way, the eruption of the Keatsian equivalence in

²⁴ Ibid. Chapter One.

twentieth century contexts operates as kind of litmus test for concerns about the limits of form. The equation of beauty and truth—which Empson and Richards both read, to varying degrees, as the collapse of feeling and thinking, aesthetic experience and conceptual knowledge—troubles early twentieth century readers and writers because they see in it not merely the failure of aesthetics and concepts to cohere in the form of a proposition but, in effect, a *failed* proposition and a failed attempt at correspondence. That is, the propositional form itself fails truth—and fails it in an explicitly aesthetic context.

It is, of course, significant that a certain strain of modernism tends to see a logical identity between the affective and the cognitive as unsound, invalid, false—but it is significant too that this sense of the failure of the substance also seems to diagnose a failure of form. That is, modernist apprehensiveness about the beauty-truth equivalence is also trepidation about the limits of both poetic and philosophical forms. And this trepidation is, in turn, bound up with the search for sustainable modern forms that will either preserve a relation between truth and beauty or allow art and aesthetics to become more and other than beautiful in order to better adhere to a reality that often seems to be neither.²⁵

In “I Can Feel the Beauty” (1917), the beauty-truth equivalence from “Ode on a Grecian Urn” becomes, for Stein, a motif to be repeated, varied, transposed, broken, and reformulated to reflect a new agreement with reality. The terms of Keats’s equation—beauty is truth, truth beauty—echo throughout like a ghostly descant:

I can feel that beauty. (84)

Can you see beauty in the sun.

²⁵ Arthur Danto’s work on avant-garde aesthetics and what he calls “kalliphobia” (the fear of beauty) makes the argument that twentieth and twenty-first century visual artists reject beauty precisely for this reason—that the realities they are trying to reflect are profoundly unbeautiful. See *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art*, Chicago & Lasalle, III.: Open Court (2003) and “Kalliphobia in Contemporary Art” in *Art Journal*, Vol. 63. No. 2 (Summer, 2004), pp. 24-35.

Not at all the truth. Can the truth be separated. (85)

In case I feel the beauty I can shed tears. (86)

You can see the feeling in the beauty.

Can you feel the beauty thinkingly. (87)

Amy.

I think there is no truth.

Indeed there is in that name.

Amy Linker.

True beauty

True beauty

True beauty. (93)

Why does “I Can Feel the Beauty” worry so incessantly about the relationship between beauty and truth? The former is an aesthetic category that modernist writers often saw themselves as pushing against. The latter, however, is a concept whose potential uses were, for modern logicians and modern poets alike, significant, strange, and vexed. For Stein, as for many of her coevals, the conjunction of truth and beauty figures a relationship between particular truths and absolute ones—and this figuration has its roots in the Keatsian formulation. “Beauty is truth” challenges the explicitly non-conceptual theories of beauty advanced by such prominent Enlightenment philosophers as Hume and Burke, who claimed that the registration of beauty was a phenomenon of the senses and the emotions—not a cognitive act but an act of feeling.²⁶ (“Can you feel the beauty thinkingly” [87].) The radical nature of the proposition that beauty is equivalent to truth—especially for modern writers—lies in its collapse of the boundary between affect and cognition. The beauty-

²⁶ Hume: “Pleasure and pain . . . are not only necessary attendants of beauty and deformity, but constitute their very essence . . . [B]eauty like wit, cannot be defined, but is discerned only by a taste or sensation . . . beauty is nothing but a form, which produces pleasure, as deformity is a structure of parts, which conveys pain; and since the power of producing pain and pleasure make in this manner the essence of beauty and deformity, all the effects of these qualities must be derived from the sensation (*A Treatise of Human Nature* 32).

Burke: “[Beauty] is no creature of our reason, since it strikes us without any reference to use, and even where no use at all can be discerned, since the order and method of nature is generally very different from our measures and proportions, we must conclude that beauty is, for the greater part, some quality in bodies, acting mechanically upon the human mind by the intervention of the senses” (*A Philosophical Inquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* 146).

truth equivalence causes us to linger in the moment of Kantian subjective universality: *what I think beautiful, everyone must think beautiful; what is true for me in this moment is true for all*. For twentieth-century readers, to be suspended in this alluring error—to identify beauty with truth—is to confuse the distinction between thinking and feeling faculties, to make the phenomena of embodiment coextensive with the activities of the mind and, in so doing, to cast doubt on the propositional form that makes this confusion possible, a broken agreement with reality.

“I Can *Feel* the *Beauty*” creates an overt affinity between beauty and affect; truth and thinking remain the odd words out (“Can the truth be separated.”). What would it mean for beauty to be felt “thinkingly,” the writing asks. Can it be done? And can it be done—the piece was drafted during World War I—in a way that helps us to process violence and conflict? Or is a rational experience of beauty—thinking beauty—completely *unthinkable* in such an environment, “[n]ot at all the truth” (85). One telling moment in the writing begins with the introduction of the name “Amy,” which recalls the French *aimé*, meaning “beloved.” If we read “Amy” as a figure for love and love as a figure for feeling more broadly conceived, then the writing’s commentary on that name (“I think there is no truth./Indeed there is in that name”) would translate to something like this: “I think there is no truth. Indeed, there is truth in feeling and in the name of feeling.” There is truth in what feeling feels. There is truth in beauty. That is, truth and beauty may not be equivalent for Stein but they are, in some way, *linked*, an association that the next line, which joins the first name “Amy” to the last name “Linker” makes clear. A clear instance of multiple reference, this name also hints at the tendency of denotation to obsolesce and fall into obscurity as time frays the relationship between signifier and signified.

“Amy Linker” is not a Steinian coinage. The reference is to a *couturière*, now little remembered, who was known for designing innovative and practical (though expensive) collections

of womens' sportswear and casual wear.²⁷ The beauty and feeling in this piece (which thinks a great deal about the emotions of erotic love) are also coded as explicitly involved with the feminine, the domestic, and with lesbian desire:

What is beauty.
Beauty is a region.
A southern region in a woman.
Always a woman. (91)

When Stein says "It is satisfactory to feel her beauty," she is referring, at least in part, to a haptic desire: "[a] southern region in a woman" (88). Beauty becomes reified: a map, a woman's body or the clothes or touches used to cover and navigate that body—ephemeral things.

"I Can Feel the Beauty" connects aesthetic experience directly to physical experience through the medium of desire. But it is only in its plainest reworking of the beauty-truth equivalence: "True beauty./True Beauty./True Beauty," that the cloudy connection between the two terms comes into focus. Stein transforms an identity (beauty = truth = beauty) into a noun-modifier phrase: "true beauty." That is, she gets around the problem of equivalence by undoing equivalence through grammatical rearrangement. Beauty and truth are no longer—morning star, evening star—equal logical quantities. They are no longer co-referring names. Beauty becomes a noun, a solidity, a force or an energy, a tendency, a thingness, an object. Truth becomes a descriptor, beauty's handmaid. "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" is, for modernists readers, only legible as propositional identity—and as a violation of propositional identity. By discarding the propositional form, Stein neutralizes its formal anxieties. She suggests that inequality, rather than identity, is a more sensible origin point for asking how we know what we know and feel what we feel. Beauty and truth enter into a relation in which the most thinking can do to feeling is to qualify it: to tell us that beauty *can*

²⁷ *The American Cloak & Suit Review* (Volume 10, No. 4; October 1915) describes "A Smart Suit By Amy Linker" as "[d]ecidedly original and essentially youthful . . . [a]mong the smartest of the serge and covert cloth tailormades recently imported" (191-192).

be true beauty. It does not necessarily follow that there is, in the world, any particularly beautiful truth.

The end result is a representation of the connection between truth and beauty that anticipates, *avant la lettre*, the “nonidentity” of Theodor Adorno’s negative dialectics. Nonidentity marks the place where equivalence fails. “[Contradiction] indicates the untruth of identity,” Adorno writes, “the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived” (*Negative Dialectics* 5). For Adorno, nonidentity is a way of marking a perpetual gap between concepts and things—concepts are, in his model, *never* exactly equivalent to things. The concept may gesture at the object but it must never be mistaken, especially by philosophers, for the object itself:²⁸ In this way, non-identity undoes the more conservative versions of the correspondence theory of truth, which imply that to agree with reality is to agree consistently and securely, particularly in the matter of identity:

[T]he appearance of identity is inherent in thought itself, in its pure form. To think is to identify. Conceptual order is content to screen what thinking seeks to comprehend. The semblance and the truth of thought entwine. The semblance cannot be decreed away, as by avowal of a being-in-itself outside the totality of cogitative definitions . . . Aware that conceptual totality is mere appearance, I have no way but to break immanently, in its own measure, through the appearance of total identity. Since that totality is structured to accord with logic, however, whose core is the principle of the excluded middle, whatever will not fit this principle, whatever differs in quality, comes to be designated as a contradiction. Contradiction is nonidentity under the aspect of identity [.] (5)

Traceable to Aristotle’s *De Interpretatione*, the law of excluded middle is one of the three classic laws of logic—and also one of Russell and Whitehead’s first examples of a theorem of propositional logic in the *Principia Mathematica*.

Russell, who regards the three “laws of thought” as *a priori*, states them like this in a popular treatment of philosophy from 1912:

1) Law of identity: “Whatever is, is.”

²⁸ Derridean *différance* might also offer a useful rubric for reading in this instance.

2) Law of noncontradiction: “Nothing can both be and not be.”

3) Law of excluded middle: “Everything must either be or not be”

(*Problems of Philosophy* 50).²⁹

A corollary of the principle of identity, which states that a thing is the same as itself ($A = A$), the principle of excluded middle says that any given proposition is true—or else its negation is. When Adorno invokes the “appearance of total identity” created by the classic laws of logic, he is referring to the way the law of identity represents a strict divide between self and other and the way the laws of excluded middle and non-contradiction (contradictory statements cannot be simultaneously true) reinforce that binary.³⁰ If $A = A$, then only I am I (You are not I. Heathcliff is not I. A rose is a rose. But rose is a rose is a rose is a rose.). The laws of excluded middle and non-contradiction represent, respectively, the “jointly exhaustive” and the “mutually exclusive” cases of the law of identity. “I cannot be I if you are I” and “I must be I or not I.”³¹ Adorno is very far from wanting to close the distance between things and the concepts that gesture towards them. He has no interest in preserving the formal conditions for identity. Instead, he proposes negative dialectics as a way of preserving and even encouraging encounters with nonidentity, rescuing “contradiction” from the “aspect of identity” by reminding us that “objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder” (5). And that remainder might be something like one of Stein’s unnamed names—a

²⁹ “[W]hen we think in accordance with [these laws] we think *truly*” (50).

³⁰ One of Adorno’s notes in *Negative Dialectics* takes up identity and nonidentity with specific reference to formal logic and what he sees as its unfulfilled promise of “absolute objectivity”: “Literally, the preponderance of the object might be traced back to the point where a thought believes it has won its own absolute objectivity by rejecting any objectivity that is not thought—in other words, to formal logic. The “something” to which all logical propositions refer even when they are free to ignore it entirely is a copy of that which a thought means, and without which it could not be. the noncogitative is a logically immanent condition of the cogitative. In fact, the copula “is” always conveys some objectivity already, after the model of existential judgments. This disposes of all the hopes kindled by our craving for security: that in formal logic we might possess something downright unconditional as the sure foundation of philosophy.” (184)

Adorno is treating the copula (“to be” in English; *sein* in the original German) as the copula of identity ($A=A$), as the copula of membership (X is a subset of Y), and as the copula of predication (relation and property, as in the phrase “The table is wooden). The objectivity he sees inscribed in the copula seems to encompass these polysemies.

³¹ Later, more expressive versions of formal logic would question the law of excluded middle by arguing for a third case in which the truth of a proposition is unknown. (Quantum mechanics is often described in terms of this third case.) Susan Haack’s *Deviant Logic, Fuzzy Logic: Beyond the Formalism* (1996) is a good, if technical, introduction to many-valued (as opposed to bivalent) logics.

presence brought to life by a refusal to identify, to assign the aspect of identity. By bringing nonidentity under a concept, negative dialectics suggests, we introduce a sort of antibiotic into an overgrown ecology of concepts, disrupting the very process of conceptualization by showing where it breaks down: inaugurating, in place of a system, an “anti-system” (*Negative Dialectics* xx). This treatment is meant to make it possible, in turn, to imagine a new relationship to reality as identity gives it to us and as it does not.

Stein’s “true beauty” renders the beauty-truth identity, in effect, a *nonidentity*, a locus of the mismatch between what concepts promise—truth, in the absolute sense—and what we sense, perceive, feel—even when the reference-relationship is functioning at its highest capacity. Beauty is, in this paradigm, inextricable from the pleasures and discontents of matter: the body’s desires or else our non-rational responses to painting or music or love or war. “Can you understand the pleasure we take in their pleasure” (“I Can Feel The Beauty” 88), she writes, blurring the lines between what “we” feel and what “they” feel. It is an instance of correspondence and empathy made possible, paradoxically, by a resistance to complete logical identity. One pleasure derives from the other but is not the *same* as the other. And this unlikeness matters.³²

In Stein’s poetics, in which a masterpiece is “knowing that there is not identity and producing while identity is not” (“What Are Masterpieces and Why Are There So Few of Them?” 360)³³, even the identity that must be done away with is not always the same identity. For sometimes (as we saw in the portrait of Picabia) “identity” refers to a logical or mathematical expression of like

³² In “Idem The Same: A Valentine to Sherwood Anderson” (1922), Stein includes a section called “Why Do You Feel Differently” (*Gertrude Stein: Writings, 1903-1932*):

Why do you feel differently about a very little snail and a big one.
Why do you feel differently about a medium sized turkey and a very large one.
Why do you feel differently about a small band of sheep and several sheep that are riding.
Why do you feel differently about a fair orange tree and one that has blossoms as well. (476)

Idem, of course, is Latin for “the same.” Identity in multiple senses was a longstanding concern for Stein. Why is “I” different from “you” and what does it mean that we feel and are—different?

³³ *Gertrude Stein: Writings, 1932-1946*.

quantities and sometimes to the continuity of ego over time. Stein is concerned with both senses of the word, for the negation of the one might make possible the transcendence of the other. In fracturing and recombining the Keatsian identity, Stein is also creating the conditions for imaginaries that strive towards the impersonal, the intersubjective, the places where the ego is plural or else absent altogether, the places where “identity is not.”

The Odicy of Gertrude Stein

The confrontation of Keats’s equation in “I Can Feel the Beauty” is not an isolated instance in the piece; it signals, rather, Stein’s subtending engagements with historical narrative, Romantic aesthetics and modern logic—the problems of intellectual inheritance and most especially of inherited poetic and philosophical forms. Although Stein preferred to speak of her work in terms of “writing” rather than “form,”³⁴ her close conversation with historical forms of writing—and particularly those of literature and philosophy—offers strong support for an approach that takes into account formal theories and trajectories.

By tracing genealogies of form in Stein, we are able to reveal patterns of historical engagement in her writing that might otherwise remain obscure. In “I Can Feel The Beauty,” Stein’s formal preoccupations also point towards her deployment of unnamed names, the ultimate point towards which this chapter tends. For Stein, the problems of received form area kind of logic problem, even as unnamed names are. How, her writing asks, is it possible to account for history while, at the same time, resisting what she sees as arid, inorganic historical forms? Her answer to this question is often a matter of recontextualizing or decontextualizing the structural and lexical properties of those forms in ways that argue a frequent coincidence between the multiply referential

³⁴ “The great thing is not ever to think about form but let it come. Does that sound strange from me? They have accused me of thinking of nothing else. Do you see the real joke? It is the critics who have really thought about form always and I have thought about—writing” (*The Atlantic Monthly* [1935], a conversation between Gertrude Stein and John Hyde Preston (Qtd. in Meyer xvi).

and the intertextual. In cutting up and remixing the beauty-truth equivalence, “I Can Feel the Beauty” makes a meal of not only of the inherited philosophical form of the propositional identity but of the inherited poetic form of the ode. It is also an exploration of how parsimonious formal cues may encourage readers to see in texts independent realities to which language proper points the way but does not name.

“I Can Feel the Beauty” is, firstly, war writing—war writing in the sense of the historical events and forms it responds to and war writing in the sense of the literary forms it tests for their capacity to represent both modern violence and personal turmoil; it is overtly concerned with how, if at all, art might help us to process historical and personal conflict. Drafted towards the end of World War I, this piece reflects the wartime activities of Stein and her lover Alice B. Toklas. With funds levied from her American relatives, Stein purchased a Ford van, which she named “Auntie.”³⁵ Collaborating with the American Fund for French Wounded, she and Toklas delivered medical supplies to injured French soldiers and these errands are inscribed in Stein’s writing: “We will relieve suffering. We can promise anything” (84), she writes, “[t]o go as you wish./In the Ford./In the Ford” (*Yale Unpublished Stein* 90). Against the scrim of the war, “I Can Feel the Beauty” projects the emotional and geometrical logics of Stein’s triangular proofs of affection:

Do they love the brother.
They do not. They find they have a wife.

History is taught by battles. Who fought there.
Well I was furious at you and I think I had cause. We then
forgive our brother. (84)

The piece’s juxtaposition of brothers and wives reflects the emotional battles of Stein’s personal biography—she and Leo fell out in large measure because Gertrude and Alice had found one

³⁵ After Stein’s Aunt Pauline, “who always behaved admirably in emergencies and behaved fairly well most times if she was properly flattered” (*The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* 172).

another—Gertrude, Alice, Leo—art, love, war. Against her private history, Stein sets the array of battle.

It's tempting to dismiss this conjunction of international conflict and personal acrimony as typical Steinian hubris—and it may be this, in part, but it is not merely this. For the measurement of personal quandaries against public problems has robust formal and generic precedents, especially in the poetic tradition and especially, within that tradition, in the context of what M.H. Abrams called the genre of the greater Romantic lyric. This twentieth century retroprojection of a stable “Romantic genre” (*The Correspondent Breeze* 77) of lyric says much both about what the twentieth century needed from nineteenth century poetry and how modern poets conceived of themselves as reacting against what they saw as congealed poetic traditions—traditions that they nonetheless required, if only so they could lob adjectives like “congealed” at them. For Abrams, the greater Romantic lyric “displaced what neoclassical critics had called the “greater ode”—the chiefly elevated Pindaric” with a “descriptive-meditative poem” that was, nonetheless, often called an ode (77-78).

Abrams famously linked the ode and the greater Romantic lyric in his description of the structure of early nineteenth century poems in which “mind confronts nature and their interplay constitutes the poem” (78). In fact, the greater Romantic lyric seems, in this essay, to be striving towards the condition of the odic:

Some of the poems are called odes, while the others approach the ode in having lyric magnitude and a serious subject, feelingfully meditated. They present a determinate speaker in a particularized, and usually a localized, outdoor setting, whom we overhear as he carries on, in a fluent vernacular which rises easily to a more formal speech, a sustained colloquy, sometimes with himself or with the outer scene, but more frequently with a silent human auditor, present or absent. The speaker begins with a description of the landscape; an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape evokes a varied but integral process of memory, thought, anticipation, and feeling which remains closely interwoven with the outer scene. In the course of this meditation the lyric speaker achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem. Often the poem rounds upon itself to end where it began, at the outer scene, but with

an altered mood and deepened understanding which is the result of the intervening meditation. (*The Correspondent Breeze* 76-77)

One way of understanding how “I Can Feel the Beauty” signifies is to contextualize it as a response to nineteenth century versions of the ode, which modern critics have (after Abrams) often characterized as the exemplary lyric poem with a “determinate speaker” addressing a “silent human auditor” on the subject of a personal dilemma “closely involved with the outer scene.” Twentieth-century lyric reading practice has seen in Romantic odes an annular structure that layers the public against the private and, in so doing, claims and reinforces a link between poetic form and subjectivity, the lyric speaker of which Abrams writes.³⁶

Stein’s experiment with the odic marriage of public and private in “I Can Feel the Beauty” predates Abrams’s essay on the structures of the greater Romantic lyric by about fifty years.³⁷ Nonetheless, her writing seems to anticipate Abrams’s theory about how nineteenth century odes work, if only by way of deconstructing some of the most famous ones and grafting the samples together within the agar medium of autobiographical writing. This is not to suggest that the ode is some kind of fixed, historically stable poetic form, only that Stein, like many other modern poets, had a tendency to characterize inherited forms as fixed and stable, in part to legitimize her own formal experiments.³⁸ Like “lyric,” “ode” is an extremely nebulous term in the English-language tradition, sometimes defined by prosodic features like meter and stanzaic composition, sometimes by thematic or generic concerns, and sometimes (as in the Abrams model) by conventions of style

³⁶ My use of the word “lyric” is qualified here . When I use it in my own right, I refer to lyric reading practice after Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins. See *The Lyric Theory Reader* (2013) and *Dickinson’s Misery* (2005).

³⁷ “Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric,” the Abrams essay from which I quote, first appeared in 1965.

³⁸ For the dense version of this argument about modernist nostalgia for historical forms, see Meredith Martin’s *The Rise & Fall of Meter: Poetry and English National Culture, 1860-1930* (2012).. Martin shows how debates about prosody informed Victorian notions of English national identity and also how modernist misunderstandings about historical models of prosody contributed to a vision of nineteenth century verse forms that overemphasized their fixity.

and structure.³⁹ Romantic odes look back, nominally at least, to the classical heritage of Sapphic, Pindaric, and Horatian odes—although they share few (if any) of same strategies of versification. The more closely related historical analogues are probably the seventeenth and eighteenth century English odes of poets like Andrew Marvell, Abraham Cowley, John Dryden, and Thomas Gray.⁴⁰

“I Can Feel the Beauty” is, in essence, an odic mash-up. It reworks the tropes of the Romantic ode in a way that suggests that Stein saw in those early nineteenth century poems something of the same structural and topical continuities that Abrams would later write about. The writing begins, as many Romantic odes do, with a sort of invocation.⁴¹ Compare the opening of Stein’s partially lineated writing to the first stanza of Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn”:

In that case why is there any hesitation.
I can understand the woman.
Can you come down.
In that way they met and in these candles we often
speak of candles now and in these cares they were frightened. You can
never frighten me.

³⁹ The entry for “ode” in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry & Poetics* (2012), is both expansive and confusing, conflating the odic with the generic terms “lyric” and “song.” The definition notes that the etymology of ode lies with the Greek “*aeidein*, “to sing,” or “to chant. [] In mod[ern] usage,” it continues, ode is “the term for the most formal, ceremonious and complexly organized form of lyric poetry, usually of considerably length. It is frequently the vehicle for public utterance on state occasions, e.g., a ruler’s birthday, accession, or funeral, or the dedication of some imposing public monument. The ode as it has evolved in contemp. lits. generally shows a dual inheritance from cl. sources, variously combining the measured, recurrent stanza of the Horatian ode, with its attendant balance of “tone and sentiment [”] (sometimes amounting to a controlled ambiguity, as in Andrew Marvell’s “Horatian Ode” on Oliver Cromwell), and the regular or irregular stanzaic triad of Pindar, with its elevated, vertiginously changeable tone (as in William Collins’s “Ode on the Poetical Character”), in interesting manifestations as late as Robert Bridges and Paul Claudel. Both forms have frequently been used for poems celebrating public events, but both have just as frequently eschewed such events, sometimes pointedly, in favor of private occasions of crisis or joy.” It is public poetry—or not. It is private poetry—or not. The definition continues in this fashion for another three pages (971-973), a fact that testifies either to the ode’s status as some kind of ur-poetic form or else to its lack of coherency as form-in-time. In both cases, the odic would seem to be remarkably protean in nature, “vertiginously changeable,” as the encyclopedia puts it.

⁴⁰ These pre-Romantic odes were sometimes composed after Cowley’s “Pindarique” model, itself an irregular ode form based on a misreading of the classical meters and stanzaic patterns of Pindar.

⁴¹ The instantiation of the Gertrude-Leo-Alice triangle resonates strongly with the beginning of Keats’s “Ode on Indolence,” where another urn makes a cameo (if that object metaphor be not too mixed):

One morn before me were three figures seen,
With bowèd necks, and joinèd hands, side-faced;
And one behind the other stepped serene,
In placid sandals, and in white robes graced;
They passed like figures on a marble urn.

(Ibid. Keats. p. 349)

The way to talk about it is this. Do they love the brother. They do not. They find they have a wife.

In witness whereof they bring the matter here. We found two keys on the book shelves.

Can you complain to him. What good does it do. He does teach you about buttons. She can be taught everything. You mean she is advantageous. We can talk about love.

The love of him. The love for him. We can have hysterical feeling. History is taught by battles. Who fought there. (Stein 84)

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
Thou foster child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy? (Keats 344)

The odic lexicon infiltrates Stein's writing. "I Can Feel the Beauty's" "hesitation" recalls "Ode on a Grecian Urn's" "slow time"—Keats's poem is nothing if not a poem about hesitance, the indefinite arrest of the "marble men and maidens" (345) who decorate the sides of the urn.

Meanwhile, the words "woman" and "wife" that enter the poem shortly thereafter (probable references to Toklas), recall, especially in the way they are qualified, the "unravish'd bride of quietness" apostrophized by the Keats poem. The woman is "understand[able]," Stein's writing tells us. The wife "can be taught everything." Stein, of course, does not use apostrophe in the same way as Keats does. While "Ode on a Grecian Urn" opens by testing out different modes of address and description for a single object ("Thou still unravish'd bride..." "Thou foster child..." "Sylvan historian..."), "I Can Feel the Beauty" delays direct address until its third line ("Can you come down."), a stratagem that signals the writing's disruption both of odic convention and of any notion of stable perspective.

Stein's play with pronouns—her precipitous shifts from first person to second person to various modes of third person (“*I* can understand the woman.” “Can *you* come down.” “In that way *they* met [.]”)—unsettle the fiction of the speaker-interlocutor relationship that was becoming, for modern readers, the characteristic apparatus for reading Romantic odes.⁴²

Like a Picabian painting, which might show several points of view at once, “I Can Feel the Beauty’s” cagy use of the pronoun makes it extremely difficult to unite the picture plane under the rubric of a single, consistent perspective. Though Toklas or some Toklas-like entity is sometimes addressed, this revenant is hardly the singular “silent human auditor” of Abrams’s formulation.⁴³ It’s similarly hard, despite the wealth of autobiographical detail in the piece, to see in the writing a fixed speaker that might operate as a Steinian avatar.⁴⁴

Though there may be no single key for reading “I Can Feel the Beauty”—we have found, after all, “*two* keys on the book shelves”—tracking Stein’s engagement with inherited words and forms allows us to see her formal innovations not as disruptions without context but as reactions to poetic conventions that assume an historical continuum. She writes that “[h]istory is taught by battles,” reminding us explicitly of the wider context of which her work partakes—the fights with Leo, the reimagining of the poetic forms of the past, and always the war. But “history” is, here, also an elegiac word. It recalls the “Sylvan historian” of Keats’s verse: a vision of art as repository of a “cold pastoral” (Keats 345), a retreat from conflict that, though it does not offer the warm,

⁴² This apparatus would be fully ratified by the late twenties, when a series of influential guides to reading various kinds of poetry by the light of the speaker (odes among them) would be published in succession. These included (to name just a few) *A Survey of Modern Poetry* by Laura (Riding) Jackson & Robert Graves (1928), *Practical Criticism* by I.A. Richards (1929), and *Seven Types of Ambiguity* by William Empson (1930).

⁴³ Nor is Keats’s urn, come to think of it—being neither human nor particularly silent. The final couplet: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all/Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know,” is actually spoken by the urn.

⁴⁴ Stein’s repeated invocation of William and Henry James, both known for their close attention to the question of points of view, reinforces the centrality of perspective in “I Can Feel the Beauty”:

James is nervous.
I can easily see James.

Indeed I mean Henry.
Indeed you can call him for James. (92-93)

changeable vagaries of life-in-time, promises lastingness, the indefinite suspension of pleasure. In the world of “I Can Feel the Beauty,” this retreat is no longer possible. (Instead of “wild ecstasy,” there is “hysterical feeling.”) While “Ode on a Grecian Urn” acknowledges the limitations of the moment of arrested anticipation, it sees in the tableau of a “Fair youth” pursuing a “maiden loth” the consolatory delights of fixity:

Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss
Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve:
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair! (345)

Stein disagrees: “Indeed then can you ask her to kiss” (89), she writes, associating, thereby, an erotic liberation of form with—erotic liberation—a removal of the checks on desire and particularly on lesbian desire. The urn is smashed to pieces but at least (at last?) we can “talk about love.”

Talking about love turns out to be a project that requires multiple voices or, at the very least, multiple sources and referents. “Ode on a Grecian Urn” is one among many interpolations in Stein’s quodlibet:

A name indeed a name is appropriate. And then there are clouds. You mean in her happiness. In the happiness in Jenny Nightingale. I do not use this name easily. I have learned to have it. Can you compare Jenny Chicken. We find comparisons unacceptable. In that way we are not restrained. (84-85)

Names are here, as ever for Stein, of great interest, so it makes sense to be especially alert to their usage when she tells us to. “A name,” we learn, “is appropriate” here—this direction followed by the invocation of “clouds” and “happiness,” two nouns or names extremely significant to the Romantic vocabulary and often used within the space of a single poem: “those thin clouds above, in flakes and bars” and the “stuff/Whence Fancy made me dreams of happiness” from Coleridge’s “Dejection: An Ode,” to pick an example nearly at random (*Coleridge’s Poetry and Prose: A Norton Critical Edition* 155-158).

But the names that stand out most in the passage are the proper nouns: “Jenny Nightingale” and “Jenny Chicken.” Like many of Stein’s names, these two encrypt several layers of reference at once. “Jenny Nightingale” is Jenny Lind, the “Swedish Nightingale,” one of the most celebrated opera singers of the nineteenth century⁴⁵ and “Jenny Chicken” is Jeanne Poule (*poule* is one of several French words for “chicken.”), Stein and Toklas’s French servant and a font of domestic anecdotes in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. But although these historical and autobiographical details matter, they do not fully account for the relationship between these names.⁴⁶

The most obvious connection is one of class (*Aves*) if not species. Both nightingales and chickens are kinds of birds. And a bird, in the poetic context, is rarely ever just a bird (The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne.). Chickens may have a less prestigious poetic lineage than nightingales but, then, that’s the point. They are a workaday bird, the layers of eggs rather than the singers of songs. Chickens are unromantic. Nightingales are Romantic.

Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale,” in which the songbird’s “happy lot” induces the feeling of being “too happy in thine happiness” is, perhaps, the most obvious analogue for the “happiness in Jenny Nightingale,” a difficult name: “I do not use this name easily. I have learned to have it.” Too, there is some evidence that Stein tended to link nightingales to Keats as a matter of course. In

⁴⁵ For Stein, who craved celebrity, Lind was always associated with fame. In a letter to Carl Van Vechten from 1816, she writes that “Alas, about every three months I get sad. I make so much absorbing literature with such attractive titles and even if I could be as popular as Jenny Lind where oh where is the man to publish me in series” (*The Letters of Carl Van Vechten & Gertrude Stein* 53). Ibid.

⁴⁶ Autobiography and history, more generally conceived, are difficult to separate in Stein’s work. There’s a moment in “I Can Feel the Beauty,” for example, when Stein invokes Queen Victoria:

It is not easy to refine. Do you mean Queen Victoria.
Say Queen Victoria.

The temptation, perhaps, is to make some kind of statement about Stein’s relationship to history or monarchy or Englishness based on this allusion but any such statements would need to account for the autobiographical element: Stein was reading the letters of Queen Victoria out loud to Toklas during their stay in Terreno (as *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* recounts), just about the time Stein was drafting “I Can Feel the Beauty.” The two were members of Mudie’s Library in London, which sent them books wherever they travelled. (Ibid. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* [164]) Similarly, a reference to Mrs. Phelan might inscribe masses of “feeling” but it’s also a reference to the artist Henry Phelan Gibb, a good friend of Stein’s.

Everybody's Autobiography, she writes about attending a Phi Beta Kappa lunch at Berkeley and being asked “why I do not write as I talk.” Stein replies that “if they had invited Keats for lunch and they asked him an ordinary question would they expect him to answer with the Ode to the Nightingale” (292). In this anecdote, the relationship between nightingale-speech and ordinary-speech is one of tension. And Stein uses this contrast to preserve distinctions in these modes of language-use. And yet, her invocation of Keats, if anything, stresses continuities between her own project and that of the Romantic ode.

“I Can Feel The Beauty” also struggles with the matter of how the devices of poetry might correspond to ordinary experience, how Romanticism manifests in modern work, even despite strenuous efforts to reject it. Stein’s writing demonstrates a reluctant but thorough engagement with inherited forms and tropes. Always writing her way out of identity, Stein would, as a matter of course, find something useful in “Ode to a Nightingale’s” desire to transcend personality:

That I might drink, and leave the world unseen
And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves has never known
The weariness, the fever, and the fret. (346)⁴⁷

And yet, the model of art-as-autonomous-retreat-from-history (which “I Can Feel the Beauty” also assigns to “Ode on a Grecian Urn”), is one the writing can’t hew to for long. “Can you compare Jenny Chicken,” the piece muses, “We find comparisons unacceptable. In that way we are not restrained.” Stein rejects a one-to-one comparison between Romantic projects and modernist ones, a rejection the writing frames as necessary if “we” are not to be “restrained.” “I Can Feel the Beauty” is marking here a perceived disjunction between the work performed by inherited poetic forms and tropes and the work that modern writing might need to perform—even as it enters an intense dialogue with those forms. For Stein, the movement from nightingale to chicken is less an elegy for

⁴⁷ Ibid. Keats.

Romantic form, which is a living presence in her work, than a question about what kind of art is appropriate for a modern moment, a moment in which the lived experience of the quotidian seems to call for a less rarified bird: a bird-of-the-world.

All this cant of chickens and nightingales culminates, in the final lines of “I Can Feel the Beauty,” with, so to speak, a cooked goose:

Can you eat with relish.
Do you like birds.
Fowl
And cooking. (94)⁴⁸

The chicken prevails. Writing is not like a nightingale’s song in the text’s analysis.⁴⁹ It is much more like the meal one gets out of a chicken, practical sustenance: “The idea of modern composition is to keep it up that is all” (85). This isn’t to say song is an utterly useless or outmoded in “I Can Feel the Beauty,” just that the writing argues that poetry doesn’t always need to aspire to the condition of music. Or else, it may be better to say that poetry ought, at the very least, to aspire to the music of “modern composition” rather than to birdsong. For “I Can Feel the Beauty” is a piece motivated, in large measure, by a relationship to music.

“Can you see beauty in the sun./Erik Satie is his name./We met him and we were willing to listen” (93). The composer Erik Satie is the relevant figure. If the Romantic ode traditionally contextualizes personal dilemmas with reference to landscape, Stein’s odic deconstruction locates the events of daily life with respect both to contemporary historical patterns and aesthetic experience. Satie’s opera *Socrate* serves, in “I Can Feel the Beauty,” as one of several fixed stars—points by which it’s possible to navigate the writing’s oscillating personal and public registers. Stein writes in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* that “[i]t was a great pleasure to know Erik Satie,” that he “liked food and wine and knew a lot about both” and that he talked about music only once in her

⁴⁸ “[C]ooking” is also “William Cook,” who taught Stein how to drive the Ford she used as an ambulance. (Ibid. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* [162])

⁴⁹ In this moment is a ghost of the odic ring-structure described by Abrams.

company, offering that “he was glad that it was being recognised that modern french music owed nothing to modern Germany” (169). Stein uses Satie, both in the *Autobiography* and in “I Can Feel the Beauty,” as a way of valorizing French national culture, a construct under extreme pressure during the invasions of World War I. “Cooking” and “Fowl” become, in addition to figures for modern writing and Stein’s driving instructor, a way of valorizing Epicurean French culture through Satie’s love of good wine and good (French) cuisine.

Stein’s tribute to Satie isn’t only a statement of fidelity to French cultural values; it’s also a way of gesturing at queer poetics and aesthetics. We learn from the *Autobiography* that “[i]t was many years later that Virgil Thomson, when we first knew him in his tiny room near the Gare Saint-Lazare, played for us the whole of Socrate. It was then that Gertrude Stein really became a Satie enthusiast.” (169) *Socrate*, which Satie began composing in 1917, was a musical setting of passages from Plato’s *Symposium* (Satie used the French-language translations of Victor Cousin for the libretto). The Princesse de Polignac (*née* Winnaretta Singer)—an American lesbian expatriate of means—commissioned Satie to write some music to accompany a private reading of Plato’s dialogues in the original language.

In a letter to a friend, Satie describes the work as “a return to a classical simplicity with a modern sensibility. I owe this return . . . to my friends the “cubists”” (89).⁵⁰ Like Stein, who thought very deeply about how to integrate the techniques of contemporary painters into her writing, Satie was striving for a uniquely modern style of composition. (“Then sing. We hear singing,” Stein writes in “I Can Feel the Beauty,” referring to Satie as much as to songbirds [85].) The resultant piece, as described by Samuel N. Dorf, is a “quasi-oratorio” scored for orchestra and womens’ voices that

⁵⁰ Letter to Henry Prunières as quoted in Dorf; translation my own.

presents a series of vignettes in the life of Socrates⁵¹. The parts are divided among four singers: Alcibiades, Socrates, Phaedrus, and Phaedo.

At the Princesse's direction, Satie wrote the vocal lines not for men but for women and was firm in his insistence that only sopranos were to sing them.⁵² Dorf argues, after Elizabeth Wood, that the four female soprano voices of *Socrate* . . . create . . . a "Sapphonic": a "mode of articulation, a way of describing a space of lesbian [musical] possibility [...] among women who sing and women who listen" (96).⁵³ The combination of French modern compositional technique and lesbian subtext evident in *Socrate* finds analogous expression in "I Can Feel the Beauty":

Alcibiades.
Is Alcibiades a name for beauty.
I think so. (93)

Alcibiades, here, is not only the historical figure—renowned for his political mobility and also for suggesting an ill-fated military expedition (the ignorant clash of armies was a topic extremely *au courant* in 1917). Nor is he only his literary avatar—the would-be lover of Socrates in the *Symposium*, a common figure for a beautiful young boy among university-educated male homosexuals. Alcibiades is, in this context, the Alcibiades of Plato as filtered through Satie, Alcibiades as sung by a woman who loves women.

I emphasize these layers of allusion in part to show how Stein's code for lesbian sexuality—now often read as text rather than subtext—relies on historically specific, external references—correspondences—that do not always easily yield to an abstracted reading practice. As Dorf notes of *Socrate*, "it is not always what is said, but sometimes more importantly, what is not said. It is what this invocation of Archaic Greece *could* mean to the listener, and for many in Polignac's circle, a

⁵¹ See "Étrange n'est-ce pas?": the Princesse Edmond de Polignac, Erik Satie's *Socrate*, and a Lesbian Aesthetic of Music?" *French Literary Studies: Queer Sexualities*. Volume XXXIV (2007).

⁵² Ibid. 97. Dorf remarks that "[r]eading Greek was itself a transgressive act for women, and in many circles a badge announcing proto-feminist sympathy (Marcus 86). In countless letters, Satie (expressing Polignac's wishes) vehemently insisted that the work only be performed with female voices, preferably four — one for each role."

⁵³ Wood qtd. in Dorf.

veiled lesbian eroticism lies at its core” (97). The same applies to “I Can Feel the Beauty,” which places a high value on what cannot be said, what must be approached elliptically if it is to signify most truly and with the most force.

“I Can Feel the Beauty’s” pattern of multiple reference compasses the lesbian *Socrate* and the Romantic ode. And this pattern yields at least one possibility for an identifiable unnamed name in the poem’s odic modulations, though there may be others invisible to us (“Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/Are sweeter” [Keats 344]).⁵⁴ Let’s follow the conceit to its conclusion: the word unspoken is *urn*.⁵⁵

It is difficult to argue from an absence, except, perhaps, when absence is absence’s subject: an urn is a name for an absence, a vessel with a hollow at its center, an object that recurs so often in English-language poems (and odes especially) that Cleanth Brooks would later use it as a metonym (like lyric) for *all* poetry in the volume *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947). There is another fortuitous coincidence here, a fortuitous absence made vivid by Stein’s dissolution of identity—both in the sense of ego and equivalence—her refusal to “name names.”

In the mid-nineteenth century, Karl-Heinrich Ulrichs coined the word *Urnig* as a name for men who desired other men; it was German for “Uranian,” a word that Ulrichs traced to Plato’s *Symposium*—the text of Satie’s *Socrate*, where, according to Stein, Alcibiades is “a name for beauty.” *Urnig* was a term favored by modern sexologists like Havelock Ellis and Edward Carpenter, who used it to describe an intermediate sex of men who desired men and women who desired other

⁵⁴ I have somewhat superstitiously avoided referring to “I Can Feel The Beauty” as a poem thus far (I have named poetry without naming it). But Stein’s own definition of poetry suggests that “I Can Feel The Beauty” qualifies:

Think what you do when you do do that when you love the name of anything really love its name. Inevitably you express yourself in that way, in the way poetry expresses itself that is in short lines in repeating what you began in order to do it again . . . dimly I knew that nouns made poetry. (“Poetry and Grammar” 57)

⁵⁵ Another potential unnamed name might be “ode” itself, a candidate that would emphasize Stein’s poetry as ultimately self-expressive, gesturing at its own form in a way that might be generalizable to all those literary objects we name poems.

women. This resonance is a powerful one for purposes of reading Stein's poem.⁵⁶ Like an urn, which defines a productive void, "I Can Feel the Beauty" renders absence a generative presence and, moreover, makes a virtue of queer desire's frequent need to express itself outside of normative language and forms. An unnamed name is not silent merely because it goes unspoken.

Furthermore, if we entertain the idea that Stein's poetry contains identifiable unnamed names—literalisms-of-the-imagination—we are better prepared to understand how her language acts as a substance with its own productive materiality and also as a referring device that attaches to words, objects, perceptions, and thoughts—facts outside the body of the text. Similarly, we might think of the function of the identifiable unnamed name as a gesture towards names both unnamed and unidentifiable, specific but unknowable *denotata*. For in the act of identification, we realize, as Adorno's articulation tells of non-identity tells us, how much the act of identification, even at its most comprehensive, leaves out. When an object goes imperfectly into its concept, it leaves a remainder and, too, a reminder of how much is real and unidentifiable at once: unsaid words, unobserved objects, unperceived perceptions, unimagined images, and unthought thoughts. It is this catalogue of "un"s that intimates a reality of mind-independent truths, a whisper of a world seen without a self, to steal a phrase from Virginia Woolf.⁵⁷

If unnamed names emanate from Stein's poetry in this way, then they qualify as something like a literary fact to which her language corresponds, even as it indexes other kinds of facts, both intertextual and extratextual. The unnamed name, so conceived, provides a means of eavesdropping

⁵⁶ See Carpenter's *The Intermediate Sex*, first published in 1896 and Havelock Ellis's *Sexual Inversion*. Stein and Ellis would meet in 1936 at a lunch meeting with editor Alan Lane (*The Letters of Gertrude Stein & Carl Van Vechten* pp. 480-81.)

⁵⁷ The phrase appears at the end of *The Waves* (1931):

But how describe the world seen without a self? There are no words. Blue, red—even they distract, even they hide with thickness instead of letting the light through. How describe or say anything in articulate words ever again?—save that it fades, save that it undergoes a gradual transformation, becomes, even in the course of one short walk, habitual—this scene also. (287)

on thoughts we'll never think and experiences we'll never have. In encouraging us to acknowledge the independence of other minds and concepts that exist beyond us, the unnamed name forms a bulwark against the most solipsistic iterations of idealism, in which all truths are mind-dependent. Meanwhile, fancifully, perhaps, Stein's work endows language with its own independence, an indexical power—multiply referential, often self-referential—that transcends the habits of any given language-user.

And so Stein's agreement with reality, which claims that language may provide "exactitude in the description of inner and outer reality" (*The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* 210) honors the pragmatist insistence on the centrality of mental states to the truth-relationship ("inner reality") but salvages what it can from Russellian logical realism. Her writing practices a fact-based correspondence in which both the linguistic and the non-linguistic may lay substantive claims to the name of "reality." "[W]ell what is hope," she asks, in *Everybody's Autobiography*, "hope is just contact with the facts" (116). If unnamed names are some of the facts with which we come in contact when we read her poetry, then Gertrude Stein's hope is, perhaps, what I have been writing about all along.

CHAPTER THREE

*

Wallace Stevens & His Worlds of Logic

[I]t is fashionable to speak of the metaphysician as a kind of misplaced poet. As his statements have no literal meaning, they are not subject to any criteria of truth or falsehood; but they may still seem to express, or arouse, emotions, and thus be subject to ethical or aesthetic standards. And it is suggested that they may have considerable value, as means of moral inspiration, or even as works of art. In this way, an attempt is made to compensate the metaphysician for his extrusion from philosophy.

--A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936)

*. . . One wants to be able to walk
By the lake at Geneva and consider logic:
To think of the logicians in their graves
And of the worlds of logic in their great tombs.*

--Wallace Stevens, "Esthétique du Mal" (1944)

Translation: Bad Aesthetics

Over the course of fifteen cantos, Wallace Stevens's "Esthétique du Mal" laments the ontological problems of evil and pain, meditates on the palliative efficacy of Christian doctrine, ponders the relationship of bodily appetites to ineffable mental hungers, mourns soldiers fallen in combat, contemplates the aftermath of a post-Manichean universe, allegorizes reality as a vast, maternal female body, toys with solipsism and *samsara*, applies a strange torque to the rhetoric of the Russian revolutionary Victor Serge, and concludes with a stentorian ode to physical sensation in a fallen world. The poem, which Stevens completed in 1944, began with a commission from John Crowe Ransom, then editor of *The Kenyon Review*, who was in search of creative responses to the consuming

events of World War II.¹ But, if anything, its genesis in the generic conventions of war poetry only poses new questions about the poem's departures from the languages of witness, elegy, trauma, fear, and (on occasion) brash jingoism that characterize modern, American poetries of conflict.² What does "Esthétique du Mal" mean? That is, *what does the title mean?* And also *what should readers make of the poem it introduces?* Interpreters of the poem have usually Englished the phrase as "Aesthetics of Pain" or else "Aesthetics of Evil" (pain and evil are very nearly convergent in Stevens's lexicon), a close translation that affirms Stevens's claim in the "Adagia" that "French and English constitute a single language" (*Opus Posthumous* 202). And yet, taken in conjunction with the poem's sprawling kaleidoscope of topics, the phrase "esthétique du mal," a Baudelaireian reverberation which Stevens himself felt was "not quite right" (*Letters* 469) remains an awkward mystery.³

Critics of the poem have correctly identified it as a gallimaufry. Helen Vendler's *On Extended Wings* (1969) sees "Esthétique" as "at once the most random and most pretentious of Stevens' long poems" (206). Echoing her sentiments, Joseph Carroll writes in *Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction* (1987) that "Stevens' determination to speak "in sounds not chosen" . . . result[s]" in the case of Esthétique, "in poetry that is merely disconnected and obscure" (187). Meanwhile, in *Wallace Stevens and the Actual World* (1990) Alan Filreis has, less severely, diagnosed the poem's overstuffed quality as a function of the "pressure to conform to the [war poem] genre distinctly impressed upon the poem's structure." We should be unsurprised, he writes, that the poem "must be formally fifteen different things in as many cantos" (142). But the distance from unsurprised to understanding is conspicuous. One of the major puzzles of this poetic congeries is that it ultimately fails to articulate a solution to

¹ In *Wallace Stevens and the Actual World* (1991), Alan Filreis documents the poem's genesis in Ransom's request. Stevens's inspiration, in Filreis's account, derives from a letter to the editor of *The Kenyon Review* from a soldier who found "the poetry in *Kenyon Review* lamentable in many ways because it is cut off from pain" (qtd. In Filreis 134).

² Stevens's sense of war as mediated conflict—violence at distance—identifies him, rather, as part of the tradition of post-Romantic writers living, in the words of Mary Favret, "through but not in a war" (*War at a Distance* 9).

³ In a letter to Ransom, Stevens declared the title "not quite right in the sense that anything of that sort seems to be not quite right now-a-days, but . . . better than any substitute that I have been able to think of" (*L* 469). By "anything of that sort," Stevens seems to have comprehended general Frenchness, the reference to Baudelaire, and the practice of referring to anything so frivolous as aesthetics in a poem war.

its nominal problem: the problem, that is, of the existence of pain and evil. Arguably, it is a little unfair to expect any poem—even poetry itself—to offer much in the way of a practical resolution to this particular conundrum. But that’s not to dismiss the critique entirely. Readers entering the poem with the expectation of an overarching rhetorical coherence are bound to leave disappointed. Nonetheless, it’s worth asking if reorienting that expectation might clear the way for a reassessment of “Esthétique’s” aesthetic possibilities and hermeneutic potentials.

My project here is not to argue the question of value—though these observations may make different kinds of evaluative claims possible—but to ask, instead, whether we might understand the miscellaneous quality of the poem a little better if we were to focus our reading less on “mal” and more on “esthétique.” What if, in encountering this title, we were to table the question of whether the poem develops a coherent argument about an “aesthetics of evil?” What if we were to consider, instead, the question of how the poem demonstrates or critiques—forgive the translator’s shifty *pas de chat*—a “bad aesthetics” or “wrong aesthetics?”

In stressing the “aesthetic” part of the title, I don’t want to excise, even were it possible, the sociopolitical underpinnings of the poem from the calculus of interpretation. (“Esthétique” was always and will always be a war poem.)⁴ Nor do I want to obscure Stevens’s serious treatment of the problem of pain in a haze of belletristic speculation. I do want to ask how reading the poem primarily as a collection of notes and queries on the powers and limitations of the category of the aesthetic—and secondarily as a sort of lopsided theodicy—might change our ideas both about how

⁴ A number of critics, including Milton J. Bates, Jacqueline Vaught Brogan, Eleanor Cook, Alan Filreis, Stefan Holander, and James Longenbach have done valuable work on Stevens’s political context—and his self-professed political positions. One lesson that comes from this necessary criticism lies with the difficulty of winnowing out the ideological commitments of the poetry. Stevens’s writing on war and its politics is often some of his most opaque, an occlusion that owes, at least in part, to his distance from the theaters of witness. Consider, for instance, the rather disagreeable abstractions of “Poetry and War” (1942), in which awareness war’s existence seems to constitute a heroic endeavor: “[T]he poetry of war as a consciousness of the victories and defeats of nations, is a consciousness of fact, but of heroic fact, of fact on such a scale that the mere consciousness of it affects the scale of one’s thinking and constitutes a participating in the heroic” (OP 241-42).

to receive “Esthétique” as a piece war writing and about the forms and effects of modern aesthetics more generally.⁵

I don’t deploy this gambit without good reason: in a letter from late July, 1944 (one month after Stevens received the commission for “Esthétique”) Stevens notes, rather ambiguously, that he is “thinking of aesthetics as the equivalent of *apérçus*, which seems to have been the original meaning.” Likewise, he remarks, “I don’t know what would happen if anybody tried to systematize the subject, but I haven’t tried” (*Letters* 469). For Stevens, aesthetic discourse refers to a set of somatic “*apérçus*” (immediate perceptions and impressions—“revealing glimpse[s]” or “insight[s]” if one uses the Oxford English Dictionary definition) that exists in some kind of contentious or dialectical relationship to questions of system and systematization. In some ways, this vision of aesthetics restates the opposition between subject and object that attaches to modern anxieties about how to relate self and system: aesthetics as the perpetual avatar of the subjective and form or system as the representative of objective possibilities.⁶ “All of us understand what is meant by the transposition of an objective reality to a subjective reality,” Stevens tells us in “The Irrational Element in Poetry” (1936), “[t]he transaction between reality and the sensibility of the poet is precisely that” (*Opus*

⁵ Stevens was quite familiar with the conventions of theodicy as genre. In “A Collect of Philosophy” (1951), his meditation on the contrasts and likenesses between poetry and philosophy, he quotes a long passage of Leibniz’s *Theodicy* as an example of poetic philosophizing, by which he means philosophy that employs figurative thinking:

We know a very small part of eternity, which is immeasurable in its extent . . . Nevertheless from so slight an experience we rashly judge regarding the immeasurable and eternal, like men who, having been born and brought up in prison, or perhaps in the subterranean salt mines of the Sarmatians, should think that there is no other light in the world than that of the feeble lamp which hardly suffices to direct their steps. If you look at a very beautiful picture, having covered up the whole of it except a very small part, what will it present to your sight . . . but a confused mass of colours laid on without selection and without art? The experience of the eyes in panting corresponds to that of the ears in music. Eminent composers very often mingle discords with harmonies so as . . . to prick the hearer, who becomes anxious as to what is going to happen and is so much more pleased when presently all is restored to order; just as . . . we delight in the show of danger that is connected with performances on the tight-rope, or sword-dancing; and we ourselves in jest half let go a little boy, as if about to throw him from us, like the ape which carried Christiern, king of Denmark, while still an infant in swaddling clothes, and then, as in jest, relieved the anxiety of everyone by bringing him safely back to his cradle. (*Opus Posthumous* 268)

⁶ Although, as we’ll see, “Esthétique” ultimately repels any crude division of perception from that which enmeshes it.

Posthumous 224). Stevens hasn't attempted to systematize aesthetics in "Esthétique," he writes. But the sentiment that aesthetics, so conceived, might somehow elude or resist system plays into a larger tension in the Stevens oeuvre: the instinctive force of the poetic imagination balanced against the rationalizing totalities of philosophical method, the interchange between the liquid motions of *apérçus* and the formal systems of reason that they seem at once to evoke and flee.⁷

Consider, for example, the supreme fiction of "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction," that "first idea," an "imagined thing," which asks for "[l]ogos and logic," a "crystal hypothesis" (387) whose content the poem never articulates. Why should it? The *apérçu*, that which is imagined, concerns form: in this case, the idealized "if/then" of the unvoiced "crystal hypothesis." An ideal hypothesis—which, unlike particular hypotheses, cannot be qualified, challenged, or overturned by accrued material observations—remains ideal—total in form—only so long as it is silent, innocent of any specific content. For Stevens, the conceptual lives in perception's blind spot and the continual quandary of experience lies with the question of access to those things that we know or believe to be true and remain, nonetheless, invisible to see. This is the crux of the aesthetic dilemma and, arguably, encodes the problem of pain. For, as the poet William Bronk, one of Stevens's aesthetic inheritors, writes in a letter from 1967, some poetries deal merely in "all of those things of which we have concepts but which we find non-existent or unapproachable [] and . . . our experience of finding them so" (qtd. in Cid Corman's "William Bronk: An Essay" 38). In this articulation of the predicament of feeling about thinking, Bronk's impossible yearning for contact with the abstract by means of the particular and the sensuous sheds light on Stevens's own craving to attain truth by means of beauty. And yet, the resolution of subjective perceptions and objective universals—a dream-vision that constitutes, for all intents and purposes, a modern, humanist theory

⁷ Stevens sometimes articulates the relationship between poetry and philosophy as a commonality of method and a divergence of employment: "The habit of forming concepts unites [poets and philosophers]," he writes (also) in "A Collect of Philosophy." "The use to which they put their ideas separates them" (276).

of everything—remains elusive, seems, even, to encrypt its own elegy. This desire for abstraction is troubling when weighed against the force of history and personal experience it often seems to sacrifice or obscure—troubling but real—and honored as real by Stevens’s poetry. And an understanding of the allure of the unified field is an essential instrument for parsing the Stevensian usage of aesthetics.

Bad Aesthetics in Translation

My appeal is to “aesthetics” as a flexible and muscular discourse with a deep network of troubling-but-real cultural engagements. My concern lies primarily with those engagements that describe a relationship to embedded, historical form. To turn to aesthetics in the current critical climate, even accounting for the powerful resurgence of aesthetic theory in the past few years, is difficult. In a way, my need to offer these disclaimers about “muscularity” and “power” makes its own case for a critical reorientation towards aesthetic theory.⁸ The unspoken assumption in much contemporary criticism is that an application to the aesthetic is synonymous with mistiness and weakness—qualities traditionally feminized and, because feminized, bad, wrong, *mal*—another kind of aesthetics of pain. (“Bad” and “wrong” are, I note, words generally weaker in affect than “pain” or “evil.”) As the scholar Marc Redfield writes in *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2003), aesthetics is a discourse “involving the senses, and thus a subordinate helpmeet to the sterner realms of ethics and epistemology[.]”

Furthermore, aesthetics possesses

enduring associations with femininity in the history of metaphysics and has specific historical ties to the ambiguously gendered eighteenth-century discourse of sensibility. The imperative to (re)masculinize aesthetics is one of Western high culture’s leitmotifs over the past two centuries[.] (35)

⁸ For just a few examples of recent calls for aesthetic recuperation and refiguration, see Isobel Armstrong’s *The Radical Aesthetic* (2000), Jonathan Loesberg’s *A Return to Aesthetics* (2005), Sianne Ngai’s *Our Aesthetic Categories* (2012), Jacques Rancière’s *Aisthesis* (2013), and Nick Zangwill’s *Aesthetic Creation* (2007).

Redfield draws attention to the disquieting gender binary that, over the years, has been used to devalue aesthetic concerns and ways of being, as well as the set of performative codes that constitute “femininity,” broadly conceived. He also points out criticism’s misguided corrective: “remasculinization” as recuperation. For the representation of aesthetics as a feminized discourse often implies an associated political inertia. In *Aesthetics and its Discontents* (2004), the philosopher Jacque Rancière describes how aesthetics has been held responsible both for art’s betrayal of autonomy and for having “misled us with its fallacious promises of the philosophical absolute and social revolution” (14). So, Rancière reasons, aesthetics has proven a useful scapegoat both for its inability to preserve the singularity and strangeness of art and also, paradoxically, for its failure to advance the kind of art that would prove its purchase on the world by inciting revelations and revolutionary acts.⁹

Since its emergence in the Enlightenment, the signal characteristics of modern aesthetic discourse have been its perpetual need of rescue—and, when it threatens to exert too much force in the world, its perpetual susceptibility to censure—as if the word aesthetics were a secret synonym for *zugzwang*. If, as Redfield asserts, Western high culture has tried and failed to recuperate a phantom “good” aesthetics by waging a campaign of progressive remasculinization, then there are excellent grounds for investigating both the reverberations of that failure and the myriad permutations of “bad” aesthetics it entails. (Indeed, the remasculinizing impulse constitutes, in itself, a special category of bad aesthetics and Stevens’s poetry, which often deals with gender in odd and disturbing ways, is hardly blameless in this regard.)¹⁰ The answer to the queasy problem of how to

⁹ For Rancière, what aesthetic discourse has “striven to articulate is not the fantasy of speculative minds, but the new and paradoxical regime for identifying what is recognizable as art . . . ‘Aesthetics’ is not the name of a discipline. It is the name of a specific regime for the identification of art” (*Aesthetics and Its Discontents* 8).

¹⁰ Since the late 1980s, scholarship has implicated Stevens’s use of gender in a project of remasculinization that attempts to recuperate the “feminized” discourse of literature. Frank Lentricchia identifies this dialectic in a rather perverse essay in *Ariel and the Police* (1989). More recent criticism by James Longenbach, Ann Mikkelson, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, and Malcolm Woodland has striven to contextualize—and sometimes interrogate—Stevens’s assembly and deployment of gender binaries. See Longenbach’s *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things* (1991), Mikkelson’s “Fat! Fat! Fat! Fat! Fat! Wallace

deal with our aesthetic shame is not, of course, to reinforce the reductive binary that pits, for example, the Sublime (good, redemptive, masculine) against the Beautiful (ambiguous or evil, seductive, feminine).¹¹ But attending to the way discourse has used and perpetuated these gendered modes of description may give us the knowledge we need to disrupt them. For the full spectrum of aesthetic events that permeates our lives ranges from the ecstatic to the positively unpleasant—and in order to see where this continuum of experiences warps or exceeds the pat description of a gendered figure, we must first learn what these descriptions have illuminated in the name of a good aesthetics and what places they leave in shadow.

A bad aesthetics is one that falls outside the usual narrative of our aesthetic discontents and also one that makes visible, in some way, the limitations of that narrative. “Esthétique du Mal” dramatizes the history of sensible wounds (and wounded sensibilities) entrenched in aesthetic discourse far more vividly than it does the problem of evil. So if the poem is engaged in a project of aesthetic salvage, as Stevens’s note about *apercus* would indicate, then one of its principal criteria would seem to be a study of the all the ways in which pain underwrites the fundamental embarrassment of our appetite for the yields of perception.

What do we have to gain by an experiment in bad aesthetics? In reading “Esthétique” as a trial of this kind, we may be able to stop asking it for what it cannot (and perhaps should not) deliver—a water-tight case for the nature and ontology of pain and a clear plan of action for how to be and what to do in a world that permits its existence. “Esthétique” offers, rather, both more and less: a registration of the affects we might experience, the forms in which we might frame them, and the judgments we might make if we take *mal* (pain, wrongness, evil) as an *a priori* phenomenon and

Stevens’s Figurations of Masculinity” in the *Journal of Modern Literature* (2003), Blau DuPlessis’s *Genders, Races, and Religious Cultures in Modern American Poetry* (2001), and Woodland’s *Wallace Stevens and the Apocalyptic Mode* (2005). See, also, Stevens’s essays, “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” (1942) “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet” (1943) in *The Necessary Angel*.

¹¹ See Gillian White’s *Lyric Shame: Producing the 'Lyric' Subject of Contemporary North American Poetry* (2014) for a discussion of a similar predicament in the discourse of lyric poetry.

allow ourselves to suffer its tutelary force. If “Esthétique” is a somewhat various pedagogue (“Clouds are pedagogues” [CP 384]), perhaps this variousness is, in the end, one of its primary lessons. Under the tutelage of pain: miscellany. Whether this miscellaneity is, in the end, a coping strategy, a site of resistance, or merely the effect of a bad aesthetics taken to a logical (I invoke the word deliberately) extreme—whether it is none of these things, any one of these things, or some combination or them all—this is the story my chapter must tell.

Bad Judgments

In previous chapters of this project, I have developed a narrative about how modern, post-Kantian (which is to say post-Romantic) aesthetic discourse drifts away from *The Critique of Judgment’s* account of a discursive matrix in which aesthetic experience and logical form are uneasily woven together, even though concerns about how to reconcile the subjective with the objective are persistent and troubling for cultural actors in modernity. This question of reconciliation, which lies at the heart of logical modernism, carries particular weight for early twentieth-century readers and writers of poetry (a term—“poetry,” that is—often synonymous with “aesthetic.”). While the architects of modern close reading (Laura [Riding] Jackson, I.A. Richards et al.) strive, variously, to break or reform the Kantian knot of perceptual encounter and objective truth encoded in the phrase “subjective universality,” Gertrude Stein sometimes valorizes and sometimes satirizes a Kant-like distinction between aesthetic knowledge and logical knowledge. In this consideration of Stevens’s “bad aesthetics,” I complicate my story of modern poetry’s troubled relationship to the logical by setting the Kantian articulation of the *sensus communis* next to Stevens’s reflections on the double-bind of sense-ascendant and truth-transcendant. As Bart Eeckhout remarks, Stevens “grew up at a time when neo-Kantians were everywhere, and Stevens’ worldview and concerns unmistakably stand in a

Kantian tradition” (“Stevens and Philosophy” 110), so the juxtaposition between Kantian terms and Stevensian poetics is more than notional.¹²

If we interpret “Esthétique du Mal” as an entry in logical modernism, an experiment in bad aesthetics rather than a theodicy, we can then understand how it invokes the word “logic” to gesture at the distance between the individual’s *apérçus* and an imagined, universal community based on a common, dispassionate (and in this sense objective) judgment. “Esthétique” argues, rather, that in the act of mourning that distance we may attune ourselves to lesser (though no less significant) and more localized possibilities for intersubjective connection. Stevens’s turn to a bad aesthetics also represents another significant maneuver in his career-long negotiation with Romantic aesthetics, embodied most overtly here by the revolutions, lakes, and clouds of the fourteenth canto (*CP* 324–25). “Esthétique” not only elegizes Romanticism’s varied poetic logics but also makes a case for how modern poetry should look when it encounters modern pain. My analysis begins with the poem’s opening stanzas as a centering gesture, then moves to consider striking moments in three cantos occurring towards the end of the fifteen-part poem: XII, XIV, and XV. These cantos of “Esthétique” feature Stevens’s most frequent appeals to logic as a term of art and also some of his most powerful appeals to aesthetic feeling. His habit of posing the former next to the latter asks us to consider both how he is deploying the word “logic” and what role logic might play in a universe structured by a bad aesthetic.

Before I embark on these readings, one last, brief elaboration on a term of art—*sensus communis*—will be necessary to orient the exploration. For Kant, the best end of aesthetic experience lies in what he calls the *sensus communis aestheticus*. By this phrase, Kant means not “common sense” in the ordinary usage but rather the imagined community we might enter into if—freed of interest and

¹² In the course of his argument, Eeckhout cites a letter from Kenneth Burke to Allen Tate from 1944. “Is not a bit ironical,” Burke wonders, “to see a supposedly fairly relatively new poet like Stevens trying to explain his supposedly, fairly relatively new esthetic by discovering the Kantian line-up somewhat more than 150 years late?” (qtd. in Eeckhout 110).

the particulars of cultural enmeshment—we were able to weigh our judgement “not so much with the actual, as rather with the merely possible, judgements of others . . . putting ourselves in the position of everyone else” (*Critique of Judgment* §40). Although it originates with individuated sensuous experience, the utopian vision of the *sensus communis aestheticus*—which demands that the perceiver shift from a personal judgment of taste about an object to a frame in which *all possible* judgements of taste about an object become visible—eventually discards sense experience so that what remains is a kind of fantastical pleasure, just and objective in that it might, theoretically, be accessed by everyone and experienced by everyone in the same way. So aesthetics gives way to ethics.¹³

Kant is careful to distinguish this utopian vision of universally communicable sensuous pleasure from the *sensus communis logicus*, a utopian vision of universally communicable reason: “Taste may be designated a *sensus communis aestheticus*, common human understanding a *sensus communis logicus*” (§40). And for Kant, when it comes to imagining the grounds for universal community, it is common, conceptless pleasure “in a given representation”—common taste “without the mediation of a concept”—that links people more immediately and more closely than the capacity for general intellection:

[T]aste can with more justice be called a *sensus communis* than can sound understanding . . . the aesthetic, rather than the intellectual, judgment can bear the name of a public sense, i.e. taking it that we are prepared to use the word sense of an effect that mere reflection has upon the mind; for then by sense we mean the feeling of pleasure” (§40).

Kant differentiates the “public sense” of aesthetic judgment from the power of common cognition (using, albeit, a definition of sense carefully restricted to disinterested mental operations) because, as Rowan Boyson writes in *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment Idea of Pleasure* (2012), the pleasure in which aesthetic judgment is based “must take pre-eminence over conceptual communicability [,] [being]

¹³ For Kant, the end game of this rhetorical move lies in the establishment of the categorical imperative.

free rather than determined.” And yet, Boyson reminds us, “despite wishing to separate [the *sensus communis aestheticus* from the *sensus communis logicus*], Kant cannot avoid reminding us of their interplay”

(43). The “subjective conditions of this faculty of aesthetic judgment,” Kant writes,

are identical with all men in what concerns the relation of the cognitive faculties, there brought into action, with a view to a cognition in general . . . otherwise men would be incapable of communicating their representations or even their knowledge. (§39)

And so, the *Critique* features, as Boyson frames it, pervasive division and resuturing of logic and aesthetics with “frequent slippage between imagined and actual communities” so that “the separation of the cognitive and social dimensions of common sense from any purely aesthetic one is difficult and undecided” (43). In other words, the temptation to erase the distinction between common thinking and common feeling—*sensus communis logicus* and *sensus communis aestheticus*—follows from Kant’s own tendency to show us all the ways in which they are implicated in one other. The construct of the *sensus communis* conceals within itself appeals to both aesthetic experience and intellection.

This distinction between common thinking and common feeling, mostly collapsed by later theorists in their deployments of the term *sensus communis*, matters to Stevensian aesthetics in that it encapsulates the same facultative divisions that give Stevens such chagrin over the course of “Esthétique: “The mind, which is our being, wrong and wrong,/The genius of the body, which is our world,/Spent in the false engagements of the mind” (Canto IV, *CP* 317).¹⁴ The poem’s bad aesthetics begin by asking whether any sort of *sensus communis* is possible when its basic tenets have evolved out of recognition, the “wrongness” of the mind (our capacity for universal reason) thwarting the “genius” of the body for pleasure, the basis of “good” aesthetic experience. In the space of the poem, common thinking has failed to build the *sensus communis*—we are at war and

¹⁴ Philosophers and theorists who have inherited the concept of the *sensus communis* as community sense often collapse this distinction for their own purposes. See, for example, work by Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas, and Jean-Francois Lyotard.

“[l]ife is a bitter aspic” full of fallen paratroopers (C.XI, 322). Common feeling has, similarly, left its promise unfulfilled, in that the poem tells us we have not yet accounted for the way pain (“[p]ain killing pain upon the very point of pain” [C.I, 314]) might serve as the source of “public sense” as easily as pleasure, more easily perhaps.

What kind of *sensus communis* might come into existence if we took pain as the basis for aesthetic judgment alongside or instead of pleasure? “Good” aesthetic judgments would no longer be possible, at least not in the way that Kant conceived them, nor would the Kantian *sensus communis*. But perhaps it would become possible to employ “bad” aesthetic judgments—judgments derived from our pain—to form new grounds for sympathizing and communicating, not in the ideal and total sense demanded by the *sensus communis*, but in ways that are irreducibly local, minor, and particular. For, although the poem begins with the tropical philosopher-poet immured on his balcony in the shadow of the volcano, it ends in something like paradise (though paradise, it must be admitted, is not very like itself). And in “Esthétique” the final paradise is plural: “So many selves, so many sensuous worlds” (C.XV, 326). *Ad astra, per aspera*: to paradise by way of a volcano or two.

Paragraphs on the Sublime

Stevens inaugurates his bad aesthetics by exposing the limitations of the inherited aesthetic category of the sublime, central both to Enlightenment philosophy and to Romantic poetics. “Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger,” writes Edmund Burke in *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), “that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*” (Section VII). The sublime encounter, which begins with a reaction of terror in response to a phenomenon of great magnitude or power (a mountain, a storm, a whale), eventually culminates with the perceiving subject’s (pleasurable) realization that the mind is capable of comprehending the vastness or dynamism of the inciting object and, thus, achieving mastery over it. It is an aesthetic

response that confirms the self in its powers with respect to what is other than the self and, at the same time, a process of ethical conditioning focused on the unit of the subject. In Stevens's poetics the terms of this response prove tempting but impoverished, in the end, by the demands of modernity.

One of "Esthétique's" few constant phenomena is the tropical figure who appears on a balcony in the first stanza, the poet-philosopher. Helen Vendler takes this figure to be Stevens's literary avatar in "Esthétique" (as in his other poems) while Alan Filreis and Paul Bauers understand the man on the balcony as a parodic stand-in for Eliot and the New Critics, whose "utopian nostalgia" ("The Politics of Reticence" 22) was the object of Stevens's ire.¹⁵ My reading of the poem suggests that it's a little of both; in some cantos it's useful to identify Stevens with the poet-philosopher and in others with his antagonists. But readers should be wary of assigning a regular, allegorical referent to this figure, whose inconsistency is, I argue, part of the poem's fruitful badness.

In this incarnation, the poet is pictured "at Naples writing letters home/And, between his letters, reading paragraphs/On the sublime" (313). In the background, the rumblings of a volcano threaten the pursuit of these genteel activities: "Vesuvius had groaned/For a month" (C. I, 313). In fact, Mount Vesuvius had erupted on May 18th, 1944, not long after Allied forces had brought the Neapolitan region of Italy under their control, which makes "Esthétique's" volcano not merely a convenient figuration but also a bearer of very particular historical content. As Rachel Galvin notes in "Less Neatly Measured Common-Places: Stevens' Wartime Poetics" (2013), the New York Times (a paper Stevens read daily) reported the "sublimity of the eruption . . . under a headline employing military language: "Vesuvius Erupts in Violent Action" (37). The confluence of war (action in Italy), geological event (Vesuvian eruption), and high aesthetic encounter (sublimity) scripted by this headline finds its counterpart in "Esthétique."

¹⁵ Ibid. Filreis's *Wallace Stevens and the Actual World* (1991); see, also, Bauers's "The Politics of Reticence: Wallace Stevens in the Cold War Era" (1993) in *Twentieth Century Literature* and Helen Vendler's *On Extended Wings* (1969).

While the scene of the poet by the volcano operates on a number of levels, the one most significant for the purposes of this chapter lies with its invocation of the sublime, an aesthetic category that, as a slew of critics including Mary Arensburg, Harold Bloom, Bart Eeckhout, Jacek Gutorow, and Rob Wilson have suggested, persistently fascinated Stevens even though he periodically doubted its fitness as modern (rather than Romantic) representation: “I suppose that the way of all mind is from romanticism to realism, to fatalism, and then to indifferentism, unless the cycle re-commences and the thing goes from indifferentism back to romanticism all over again” (*L* 350). In “Esthétique,” the poet reading by volcano-light (“the sultriest fulgurations, flickering” [C. I, 313]) may long for the sublime progression, terror in the face of “violent eruption” that eventually gives way to self-knowledge and control, but a crucial prerequisite of the sublime encounter is lacking: distance.

For Burke, sublime experience depends on our understanding that the thing of magnitude—whether earthquake or great beast—cannot actually harm us: “When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances . . . they may be, and they are, delightful” (*Inquiry* Section VII). Similarly, for Kant,

[t]he astonishment amounting almost to terror, the awe and thrill of devout feeling, that takes hold of one when gazing upon the prospect of mountains ascending to heaven, deep ravines and torrents raging there, deep shadowed solitudes that invite to brooding melancholy, and the like—all this, when we are assured of our own safety, is not actual fear [.] [r]ather it is an attempt to gain access to it through imagination, for the purpose of feeling the might of this faculty in combining the movement of the mind thereby aroused with its serenity, and of thus being superior to internal and, therefore, to external nature [.] (*The Critique of Judgment* §29)

In “Esthétique du Mal,” however, the “assur[ance] of our own safety” is a tricky proposition, a “part of the sublime/From which we shrink” (C.I, 314). We learn that “[t]he volcano trembled in another ether,/As the body trembles at the end of life” (C.I, 314). In the field of the poem, the image of the volcano converges with the image of a body quivering with knowledge of its own mortality so that

any separation between mindful observer and object of magnitude disappears. The poet-philosopher projects his vulnerability onto the landscape and, moreover, it is only this projection of pain that forges any connection between human actors: “It was almost time for lunch./Pain is human” (C.I, 314). Our daily bread (*pain* is, after all, French for bread), *mal* and our ability to color the world with our *mal* link us too closely with indifferent Vesuvius (“Except for us, Vesuvius might consume/In solid fire the utmost earth and know/No pain” [C.I, 314]) and too closely with one another.

“It is not only that there are more of us and that we are closer together,” Stevens writes in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” an essay read first read as part of a lecture series at Princeton University in 1940, when debates about whether the United States would enter World War II raged fiercely.¹⁶

We are close together in every way. We lie in bed and listen to a broadcast from Cairo, and so on. There is no distance. We are intimate with people we have never seen and, unhappily, they are intimate with us. (*The Necessary Angel* 18)

In *The Violence Within/The Violence Without: Wallace Stevens and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Poetics* (2003), Jacqueline Vaught Brogan argues that it is only with the advent of World War II that Stevens finally begins to write poetry *of* his climate rather than against it as his work becomes “increasingly engaged with the actual or political world” (10). Stevens’s rather xenophobic resistance to Cairene radio marks a poet on the verge of an aesthetic sea change—confronting an “unhappy” intimacy in which the lives of others cannot be dismissed and making, at the same time, a tacit admission that this intimacy must be addressed. “Esthétique” represents, in many ways, Stevens’s labored attempt to deal with collective pain and, simultaneously, with his sense that the mere fact of this pain is constantly unraveling the means by which it might be represented. To think the *sensus communis* under

¹⁶ In *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things* (1991), James Longenbach documents the poet’s contradictory positions on the United States’s entry into the Second World War. Of particular note is a questionnaire Stevens filled out for the *Partisan Review* in which he opined that the nation should remain uninvolved in the conflict unless it planned to “dominat[e] the world that comes out of it” (qtd. in Longenbach 32).

conditions of modern war is to confront the dissolution of its basic terms. If the lack of distance between our modern *mal* and our modern selves deprives us of the catharsis of the sublime—or else distorts it beyond recognition—then we require new aesthetic configurations and quite possibly new selves.

The World in Categories

A bad aesthetics, as I've defined, it exposes (volcano-like) the faults not only in inherited aesthetic traditions but also in the lust for the dispassionate and the empirical that has dogged aesthetic discourse at least since its rise to prominence in the Enlightenment. As “Esthétique du Mal” enters its final cantos, Stevens turns to a conditional metaphysics—abstract and grim—that firmly dismisses the possibility of a *sensus communis* based in justly distributed aesthetic pleasure. In doing so, Stevens restates the logically modern dilemma of the mismatch between part and whole, subjective experience and objective knowledge. The end of the poem, tonally variegated, hovers longest and most profoundly in the elegiac mode. And to understand how “Esthétique” frames the break between the felt and the known is to arrive at a richer understanding of what, exactly, the poem is mourning.

By the twelfth canto, “Esthétique du Mal” has entered, entirely, the poet-philosopher's interior world—and this canto, it's worth noting, may be one in which it's worth allying that figure with Stevens's aesthetic and ideological targets rather than with the poet himself. The resultant expanse of rhetoric resembles what we would call, in a prose narrative, free indirect discourse:

He disposes the world in categories, thus:
The peopled and the unpeopled. In both, he is
Alone. But in the peopled world, there is,
Besides the people, his knowledge of them. In
The unpeopled, there is his knowledge of himself.
Which is more desperate in the moments when
The will demands that what he thinks be true? (C. XII, 323)

“World,” always, in Stevens, a word that signals the shadow of totality (the first idea, supreme reality) is, for the poet-philosopher a construct that demands categorization, division into parts that allow for a greater understanding of the whole. The activity of categorization, in this context, recalls the categorical realism of Aristotle, which holds (in the words of Amie Thomasson) that “[a] system of categories is a complete list of highest kinds or genera” and that “a system of categories undertaken in [the] realist spirit would ideally provide an inventory of everything there is, thus answering the most basic of metaphysical questions: “What is there?” ” (*The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*).¹⁷ The poem’s invocation of the philosophical exercise of categorization is emblematic of its larger, structural patterns, in which assemblages of semantic and aural resonance offer an inventory of what is that consistently *fails* to account for the totality of what is, to achieve the ideal catalogue in which nothing is missing. Indeed, this turn to the utopian conceits of the metaphysical may signal how the poem resists the pretensions of Eliotic modernism—which championed Donne and other metaphysical poets—in that “Esthétique” constructs a complex metaphysical system only to show us its defects and, ultimately, to dismiss it as untenable.¹⁸

Like the sum of a person, a unit that always exceeds the sum of descriptors applied to it—*tall, ugly, sympathetic, febrile*—the sum of a world surpasses its listable components. (*Parts of a World*, recall, is the name Stevens gave to a collection of poetry published in 1942.) An aesthetics of pain, then, is one that makes us aware that knowledge of a whole world might be possible—or at least thinkable—while reminding us that any categorical inventory is bound to collapse just short of a single totality at the distant point where description fails. We cannot know everyone and everything; we can know only that everyone and everything are there to be known. In every world the poem gives us, this state of affairs, fundamentally tragic, remains the same.

¹⁷ Thomasson, Amie, "Categories," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

¹⁸ In a letter to Henry Church, Stevens declares Eliot “a negative rather than a positive force” (L 378). Another letter (to William Van O’Connor) from 1950 remarks that Eliot and Stevens “are dead opposites” and Stevens has been doing “about everything [Eliot] would not be likely to do” (L 677).

Categorization yields two possible worlds: the “peopled” and the “unpeopled.” The latter is the world of the solipsist, the former of his antidote. In a peopled world, other lives count as mind-independent entities. Reality cannot be delimited to mental constructions. In an unpeopled world, mind is all the matter because mind *is* all the matter. Stevens toys with committing to each of these worlds in turn:

Is it himself in them that he knows or they
In him? If it is himself in them, they have
No secret from him. If it is they in him,
He has no secret from them. This knowledge
Of them and of himself destroys both worlds,
Except when he escapes from it. To be
Alone is not to know them or himself. (C. XII, 323)

The *apérçu* that gives rise to pain in the peopled world lies with what knowledge of the self and of others is ultimately possible there. In the peopled world, the poet-philosopher knows “they in him[self],” that is, the constituents of his consciousness are dependent on what others know and feel, an assemblage of selfhood that disconcerts because, in a world where knowledge is distributed in this fashion, it is possible one might have “no secret from them,” no truly inviolable private self. Meanwhile, the solipsist’s unpeopled world is all “himself in them” and, as a result, the mind-dependent entities in that world enjoy “no secret from him.” The burden of all that knowledge “destroys” both visions of reality. Easier, though perhaps not much more palatable, to assume the nihilist’s portion, to “escape” into a world where it’s possible to refuse the messy conditions both for self-knowledge and knowledge of others—a gross impulse but one, the poem argues, worth an attempt at understanding.

A bad aesthetics admits gross impulses, not always with the promise of understanding. (Plato: “The sophist takes refuge in the darkness of Not-being” [*The Sophist* 263]) Nonetheless, “Esthétique,” in its registration of the dubious desire to reject personal knowledge of all kinds, offers a window into the way concerns about what kinds of intersubjective relationships are possible

may—in the elaboration of a bad aesthetics—bleed over into logical and metaphysical concerns. Indeed, Canto XII lays out a tripartite system of possible worlds—the peopled, the unpeopled, and the world in which the poet is alone—that echoes Gottlob Frege’s conceit of the three realms. In the seminal essay “Thought” (1918), the German logician sets himself the task of refuting the psychologism of thinkers like J.S. Mill, who, to Frege’s mind, understood logical truth merely as a function of the way human minds *happen* to work rather than as an entity with its own extra-psychological reality.

Frege’s logic takes its cues from Kant’s argument that we ought to think about logic’s end game as the formation of a science of judgment (another subterranean connection between the Kantian mobilization of judgment and modern formations of objectivity). As Frege defines it, logic has “much the same relation to truth as physics has to weight or heat” and its ultimate task is to “discern the laws of truth” (“Thought” 325). A major postulate of the modern logic Frege helped to build—and moreover, one that differentiates it from classical logic or contemporary logic—is its insistence that there is only one logic and, ultimately, one set of truths it describes. For Frege, modern logic’s elegant parsimony required that thoughts—which “stand in the closest connection with truth” (342)—possess a reality independent of psychology, an actuality that, although different from the actuality of things, does not rely on any given thinker. The thinker activates a thought by performing it but the thought does not originate with her: “the thinker does not create [thoughts] but must take them as they are” (345). But if thoughts possess actuality, if we thinkers only summon them up like insubstantial rabbits from an equally insubstantial top hat, does this imply that we must supply our metaphysics with a Rabbit Heaven? (Stevens: “And to feel that the light is a rabbit-light,/In which everything is meant for you/And nothing need be explained” [CP 209].) Frege thought so—he concludes in his essay that in order for logical truths to possess mind-independent reality, to transcend the limits of any given thinker, they must enjoy a definite ontological status.

Accordingly, he disposes the world in categories, thus: the first realm (the world of material objects), the second realm (the world of “sense impressions, of creations of [] imagination, of sensations, of feelings and moods, a world of inclinations, wishes and decisions [334]), and the third realm containing logical truths (the Pythagorean theorem is Frege’s example) that cannot be perceived by the senses. The things of this third realm are “timelessly true, true independently of whether anyone takes [them] to be true” (337), Rabbit Heaven.

For Frege, all three realms exist simultaneously and only the second realm is dependent in that our sensations and cognitions rely on the perceptible objects of the first realm and the thoughts that reach us from the third. Meanwhile, for the poet-character of Canto XII, struggling with the same dilemma about what truths might persist apart from the self, the choice is among mutually unsustainable worlds. The peopled world and the unpeopled world cancel one another out and the third world, in which one is alone, obliterates the first two. “[P]oetic truth,” Stevens writes in “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet,” “is an agreement with reality . . . [the] difference between philosophic and poetic truth . . . is the difference between logic and empirical knowledge” (54). And so the ultimate truth that a poem can deliver derives from *apérçus*—empirical in the sense that they derive from *a posteriori* experience rather than *a priori* ratiocination—and communicates sensations, images, and feelings. And yet, in the course of the same essay, Stevens contradicts himself, aligning poetic truth more closely with logical truth:

the imagination never brings anything into the world but that, on the contrary, like the personality of the poet in the act of creating, it is no more than a process, and desiring with all the power of our desire not to write falsely, do we not begin to think of the possibility that poetry is only reality, after all, and that poetic truth is a factual truth [.] (59)

At times in “The Figure of Youth,” poetic truth resembles the empirical matter of Frege’s second realm, at others the logical objects of Rabbit Heaven, which exist beyond and apart from us,

“fact[s] . . . beyond [our] perception . . . and outside the normal range of our sensibility” (60), somewhere in the ether, waiting to be grasped.

Canto XII of “Esthétique” reflects the instability of poetic truth in Stevens’s prose writing: is it logical or empirical, subjective or objective?¹⁹ In describing its possible worlds as mutually exclusive, the poem fails to resolve that question and this, indeed, is a key feature of its operation as bad aesthetics. Stevens describes the impossible price exacted by such an unforgiving metaphysics: “Yes, but/What lover has one in such rocks,” the canto concludes, “what woman,/However known, at the center of the heart?” (C. XII, 323). The conceit collapses as the canto juxtaposes the desire for shared objective truths (the kind that might cement a Kantian *sensus communis*) and the desire for shared affective truths (a lover in the rocks, a woman at the heart’s center) in opposition. Whatever else this iteration of the poet-philosopher is, he is caught at a Morton’s Fork and this unresolved opposition constitutes, in itself, a poetics. If “Esthétique” offers readers no way to imagine a single world in which shared aesthetic judgments might form the basis of a universal community—and simultaneously validates the craving for a supreme fiction, a unifying objective truth—then this tension is, in the end, the source of its power as elegy. The impossible, absent thing is the *sensus communis* and poetry’s role, “Esthétique” tells us, is to mourn it and then to look for alternatives. As the poem enters its penultimate canto, XIV, Stevens introduces a convenient shorthand for the lacuna between subjective truth and objective truth, the word logic. But first, a few words about one of modern logic’s primary concerns, the nature of truth and the relationship of language to it. One of the major consequences of contextualizing philosophical logic with respect to poetic logic, as we’ll see, is that it becomes possible to read claims about literary truth through theories of philosophical truth.

¹⁹ What matters for Stevens—perhaps—in the end—is that it’s *possible* to confuse poetic truth with logical truth. See the account of subjective universality and reading practice in Chapter One, “The Clumsy Attempt: Modern Criticism & the Beauty-Truth Equivalence.”

An Agreement With Reality

In the Wallace Stevens papers maintained in the archives at the Huntington Library in California are several sheets of notebook paper titled “On Poetic Truth” and penciled over in Stevens’s finicky, insurance man’s hand (WAS 4093). The words are not his own but, rather, copied from an essay by Hywel David Lewis that first appeared in *Philosophy*, the journal of the British Institute of Philosophy, in 1946. In his 1948 essay “About One of Marianne Moore’s Poems,” Stevens uses the Lewis piece to claim for Moore’s “He ‘Digesteth Harde Yron,’” a poem about an ostrich, a power of transmutation in which mere facts, mere particulars, give us access to a larger universe of things that reasoning cannot reach: “There is in reality an aspect of individuality at which every form of rational explanation stops short” (*The Necessary Angel* 93). Moore’s “aesthetic integration is a reality” (95), Stevens tells us, and aesthetic integration (after Moore and Lewis) proves necessary to Stevens’s conception of how art might rejuvenate the modern subject’s sense of historical and communal connection in a post-war world.

Section two of the essay interpolates the narrative of Stevens’s 1946 visit to the habitation of his forebears, the old Zeller house in Pennsylvania, which belonged to a family of religious refugees who fled to America in 1709.²⁰ Subsequently, Stevens journeys to the book exhibition of the American Institute of Graphic Arts at the Morgan Library in New York where

[t]he brilliant pages from Poland, France, Finland and so on, books of tales, of poetry, of folk-lore, were as if the barren reality that I had just experienced had suddenly taken color, become alive and from a

²⁰Many of Stevens’s poems of the forties dwell on questions of genealogical, geographical, and historical continuity. See, for instance “The Bed of Old John Zeller” and “Dutch Graves in Bucks County.” The deaths of Stevens’s four siblings were still fresh memories in the early forties. His older brother, Garrett Stevens Jr., died in November of 1937, John Bergen Stevens (his younger brother) in 1940, Elizabeth Stevens MacFarland (his younger sister and last surviving sibling) in 1943. His youngest sister, Mary Katharine Stevens, had died while serving as a Red Cross Volunteer in France in 1919. It is partly the swift succession of deaths in the late nineteen-thirties and early forties that accounts for Stevens’s late-blooming obsession with genealogical research. “Esthétique’s” elegiac tone surely takes something from this other legacy of mourning.

single thing become many things and people, vivid, active, intently trying out a thousand characters and illuminations. (102)

Stevens's journeys to Pennsylvania and New York—seemingly unrelated to the writing on Moore that bookends them—trace a movement from religiously inflected melancholy (in the spare divinity of the land around the Zeller homestead) to humanist reawakening among the artists' books at the Morgan Library.²¹ While the Pennsylvania trip impresses upon Stevens a sense of reality as “desolation that penetrated one like something final,” the Morgan Library exhibit transforms this sense into a vision of lively, cosmopolitan multiplicity in which acts of transcultural identification are suddenly possible.

Not without its ethical pitfalls, this image of the library as an instrument of pluralist, empathic sensibility implicitly puts across the idea that the truths of art may serve as the fulcrum for an “aesthetic integration” that might build community across national lines. This gush of post-war optimism feels, perhaps, a little too confident in light of the bad aesthetics Stevens elaborates over the course of “*Esthétique du Mal*” (drafted about three years before the essay on Moore—is it possible to forget pain so quickly?). However, Stevens's faith in poetic truth and aesthetic integration relies on a rejection of the universalized *sensus communis* that evolves directly from “*Esthétique*’s” suspicions about the upper limits of communal agreement and objective truth.

In recent decades, the fortunes of the category of literary truth have declined, often in parallel with those of the category of aesthetics and not least because both categories ask their handlers to engage with some messy claims about the epistemological limits of art.²² Arguably, the modern power of these categories peaked in the mid-twentieth century. The publication of

²¹ The Cummington Press edition of Stevens's *Esthétique du Mal* was displayed March 15–April 14th, 1946 at an exhibition organized by the American Institute of Graphic Arts. Illustrated by the artist Wightman Williams, the British press's 1945 edition of *Esthétique du Mal* was chosen by the AIGA as one of the fifty best books of the year. *The Letters of Wallace Stevens* gives the site of display as the New York Public Library (523).

²² See work by Charles Altieri, Frank Ankersmit, Jukka Mikkonen, Jacques Rancière, and Mario J. Valdés for several more recent perspectives on the doomed linkage between aesthetics and literary truth.

ambitious post-war studies by John Hospers (1946) and Monroe Beardsley (1958) signaled the high-water mark of the currency of truth in art and aesthetic experience for Anglo-American critics and theorists. Meanwhile, Continental philosophers like Heidegger and Adorno began to doubt the validity of these ways of knowing. In the wake of this doubt, poststructuralist theory reframed questions about truth and validity in aesthetic experience as problems of discourse, hermeneutics and history rather than problems centered on the mediation of the subjective and the objective. And, in light of these claims, literary critics have understandably turned a jaundiced eye towards the possibility that literature yields any kind of knowledge beyond the expression of ideology or its own motive processes. But, as Lambert Zuidervaart argues in *Artistic Truth: Aesthetics, Discourse, and Imaginative Disclosure* (2004), “the issues traditionally addressed under the label of “artistic truth” have not disappeared” (1), issues like how to place art in social context and how to value different modes of interpretation. And to remember how crucial were the terms of the subjective and the objective to practicing modernist poets is to learn something about the persistence of this binary even now, especially when it comes to the uses of poetry.

“Esthétique du Mal,” as my analysis of Canto XIV will demonstrate, makes a strenuous attempt to adhere to the division between poetic truth and philosophical truth Stevens propounds in the essays of *The Necessary Angel*, products, likewise, of the war-time context. “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet,” for example, stresses these varieties of truth as two halves of a totality that never quite coheres: “if we say that the philosopher pursues truth in one way, and the poet in another, it is implied that both are pursuing the same thing, and we overlook the fact that they are pursuing different parts of a whole” (54). In establishing his definition of poetic truth, Stevens invokes Bertrand Russell’s *Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* (1940)—as well as Russell’s conception of truth as an “agreement with reality.” Russell’s terms furnish, for Stevens, evidence that the debate about what constitutes truth for philosophers is still contentious and active, clearing the way for his

own curious construction of poetic truth as (recall) “an agreement with reality brought about by the imagination” (54). “Imagination” is, here, the novel addition. By designating imagination an ambassador—the mechanism by which an agreement with reality gets negotiated—Stevens claims poetic truth as a limit case of what William James would call the “rationalist” account of truth. He hints at a poetic truth that, because governed by the image-making faculty, differs in process-of-becoming from logical truth but hardly rejects its basic premises.

Stevens’s insistence that poetic truth “agree” with reality demonstrates that his engagement with Russell’s questions about the nature of truth is slightly more than casual. In *Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*, Russell grapples with the verificationist formulation of truth put forward by logical positivists like A.J. Ayer, who popularized the philosophy of the Vienna Circle among English speakers. Verificationism—a rather unfashionable theory of meaning in contemporary philosophy—derives from Ludwig Wittgenstein’s Tractarian picture-theory of language and posits that statements are meaningful only if they can be proven decisively true or false. The conception of truth on which verificationism rests conjectures that a statement is true either because tautological (i.e. by definition) or else because it corresponds to (or pictures) a fact or state of affairs. (For example, the statement that “the blackbird sat in the cedar-limbs” is true only if there is a world in which there is a blackbird and some cedar-limbs and the blackbird is related to the cedar-limbs by sitting in them. If any of the terms of the statement—subject, object, and predicate—are wrong or missing, then the statement is false.) Statements concerning metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics thus become meaningless in that they can be declared neither true nor false by virtue of definition and certainly not by virtue of correspondence.

W.V.O. Quine would deliver a scornful indictment of verificationist principles in his 1951 essay “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” effectively dismissing this version of truth in favor of a pragmatist outlook. But throughout the forties, when Stevens was wrestling with the question of

truth in poetry, Russell's struggle with the verification principle by no means cleared the way for a summary rejection of the logical positivist vision of truth. For even though, in Russell's view, "those who make "verification" fundamental overlook the real problem," the issue of correspondence theory is still essential to any attempt at parsing truth and falsehood. The matter of the "relation between words and non-verbal occurrences in judgments of perception" (*Meaning and Truth* 308) presents a significant obstacle to the development of a coherent discourse about truth.

Even though Stevens maintains a distinction between philosophical truth and poetic truth, his insistence that poetic truth "agree" with reality resonates with the correspondence theory of truth advanced—and then endlessly qualified—by Wittgenstein, Russell, and G.E. Moore in the first decades of the twentieth century. This borrowing from logical discourse speaks both to Stevens's commitment to carving out a role for poetry based on the kinds of truths it has to offer and also to how that commitment depends, to a large degree, on the terms set out by early analytic philosophy, which conceive of truth (at least in part) as a correspondence between words and the objects and events given to us by perception.²³

²³ A letter to Henry Church from January of 1946 recommends an "enchanted review of Professor Cohen's *Preface to Logic*" from the *Sewanee Review* (L 521). We might speculate that what Stevens found so enchanting about the review lay in its description of Cohen's resurrection of the logical realism of Frege and early Russell. The reviewer, Huntington Cairns, sees in Cohen an advocate of the reality of logical truths and cites, in the course of his review, Russell's statement of apostasy:

At the time when I wrote Principles [of Mathematics], I shared with Frege a belief in the Platonic reality of numbers, which, in my imagination, peopled the timeless realm of Being. It was a comforting faith, which I later abandoned with regret" (qtd. in Cairns 157).

In "About One of Marianne Moore's Poems," Stevens declared his allegiance to the reality of Rabbit Heaven and to poetry as a conduit to it:

[F]or Plato the only reality that mattered is exemplified best for us in the principles of mathematics. The aim of our lives should be to draw ourselves away as much as possible from the unsubstantial fluctuating facts of the world about us and establish some communion with the objects which are apprehended by thought and not sense. (*The Necessary Angel* 95)

Nor is “The Figure of the Youth” the only essay in which Stevens reveals an awareness of the problems and possibilities that logical discourse presents. In “Effects of Analogy” (1948), he pauses to reject the British analytic philosopher Susan Stebbing’s definition of analogy in *Logic in Practice* (1934) as too “narrow” (*The Necessary Angel* 110) for his purposes, juxtaposing this dismissal to the literary theorist Kenneth Burke’s review of Rosemond Tuve’s *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery* (1947). Burke’s review denounces

those who would confine logic to science, rhetoric to propaganda or advertising, and thus leave for the poetic a few spontaneous sensations not much higher in the intellectual scale than the twitchings of a decerebrated frog. (qtd. in Stevens 111)²⁴

Stevens says nothing explicitly about his decision to pose Stebbing’s *Logic* next to Burke’s importation of logic into the literary context (he is more concerned with the visceral effects of Burke’s twitching, decerebrated frog). However, his skepticism of the definition of analogy offered by *Logic in Practice*, taken together with Burke’s ready espousal of the operations of reason in poetry, suggests Stevens’s ambivalence about the application of logic to art and also his consciousness of the challenges analytic methodology might propose for a poetry whose worth is rated by its claims to a kind of truth-value.²⁵ Such an ambivalence also lends ballast to the idea that much of what Stevens resisted about metaphysical poetry—and about its modern, Eliotic revivalists—had to do with its dependence on logical rhetorical structures.

And yet in “Imagination as Value,” Stevens states overtly his suspicions of a discourse that would require language-users to abandon the propositions of metaphysics as meaningless. He calls upon A.J. Ayer’s *Language, Truth and Logic*, which speaks of the metaphysician as “a kind of misplaced poet” whose statements, although they have no meaning, being neither true nor false,

²⁴ The review appeared in *Accent*, VII (Winter, 1948).

²⁵ See “The Irrational Element in Poetry” (1936), in which Stevens’s definition of the irrational evokes the same correspondence theory implicit in his articulation of poetic truth: “the irrational element in poetry is the transaction between reality and the sensibility of the poet from which poetry springs” (*Opus Posthumous* 224).

“may have considerable value [] as means of moral inspiration or works of art” (qtd. in Stevens 137). Stevens accepts Ayer’s compensatory theory of poetic value even as he goes on to lament—in recondite fashion—the limited role for art, the product of imagination-as-metaphysics, in a logically positivist worldview. Citing a letter about Ayer’s work to the *New Statesman*, Stevens reminds his audience that the consequence of taking logical positivism seriously is that any discussion of God—a metaphysical term—is meaningless because statements about God’s existence possess neither truth nor falsity and thus all conversation about God’s existence, whether for or against, is “twaddle” (qtd. in Stevens 138). “What is true of one metaphysical term,” Stevens concludes, “is true of all” (138). The value in metaphysics, here, has less to do with the rhetorical structures of metaphysical poetry and more to do with the unnameable and transcendent conditions, “calculations beyond analysis” (154) that lie outside logical positivism’s strictures on meaning.

For imagination-as-metaphysics—and for poetry as a function of imagination—to “survive logical positivism” unscathed, it must, somehow, define for itself a sphere of poetic truth that adheres to reality despite being neither true nor false by logical standards—a version of the poetry-as-pseudo-statement theory of value put forth by I.A. Richards and drawn, in its turn, from early analytic models of truth. The imagination must also “cleanse [itself] of the romantic,” which, in “Imagination as Value,” Stevens takes to mean “a failure of the imagination . . . as sentimentality” (138). For Stevens, in other words, poetry must be irrational but true, metaphysical in the sense of possessing what Ernst Cassirer calls “universal metaphysical value” (qtd. in Stevens 136), Romantic in that (Cassirer again) “[t]he true poem is . . . the universe itself, the one work of art which is forever perfecting itself” (qtd. in Stevens 136), and unromantic in that it must be feeling but unsentimental. This is imagination as a value of logical modernism: an approach to a supreme fiction enmeshed in the question of how, beyond philosophical truth, to bridge the gap between local and global meaning. If there is some irony in the poet’s appropriation of the assumptions of logical

positivism (a correspondence theory of truth centered on a subject-object divide) to weather the assault of logical positivism, we might put it down to Stevens's resigned feeling that in order for poetic truth to agree with reality, it must participate in the abstractions of its climate.

Worlds of Logic

Victor Serge said, "I followed his argument
With the blank uneasiness which one might feel
In the presence of a logical lunatic."
He said it of Konstantinov. Revolution
Is the affair of logical lunatics.
The politics of emotion must appear
To be an intellectual structure. The cause
Creates a logic not to be distinguished
From lunacy . . . ("Esthétique du Mal" C. XIV, 324)

How far is it possible to share a sense of truth—and with how many? Who decides whether a poem “agrees with reality” in the first place? Canto XIV of “Esthétique du Mal” raises serious questions about the threshold power of Stevens’s “aesthetic integration” as an approach to *sensus communis*.

The intrusion of Victor Serge, the Russian anarchist, revolutionary, and writer, into “Esthétique’s” tapestry of mournful opacities feels like the arrival of an uninvited guest at a funeral. Although the poem often reads as if each canto has gatecrashed the last, in Canto XIV the shift in register from the abstract register of “[t]his maximum, an adventure to be endured/With the politest helplessness” (C. XIII, 324) to the baldly concrete “Victor Serge said” is especially striking, abrupt as a cement wall encountered in a fog. The soft sibilance of the previous canto yields to the vigorous “v” of “Victor Serge” just as the unmoored “man [] reclining . . . in his Mediterranean cloister” of Canto XIII gives way to the flatly referential name of the expatriate Russian revolutionary.

Canto XIV has occasioned much critical discomfort over the years, partly because of the abrupt change from mellifluous conceptual speculation to historically specific exemplification, partly because of the nature of the example Stevens chooses: Victor Serge was a figure of some

significance to the literary left from the late 1930s and throughout the 1940s, known to American audiences primarily through the publication of his writing for *Politics* and the *Partisan Review*.²⁶ Serge's cameo in "Esthétique" forces a confrontation with the complexities of Stevens's marbled political orientation. Communism is a just a new romanticism[,]" the poet writes in a letter from 1940:

I believe in any number of things that so-called revolutionists believe in, but I don't believe in calling myself a revolutionist simply because I believe in doing everything practically possible to improve the condition of the workers, and because I believe in education as the source of freedom and power, and because I regret that we have not experimented a little more extensively in public ownership of public utilities (L 351).

Victor Serge's presence in "Esthétique" provides a difficult reminder that Stevens's politics sometimes seemed (a tricky feat) to list left and right simultaneously.

The poem quotes, in slant fashion, from Serge's essay, "The Revolution at Dead-End," which the poet encountered in the June, 1944 issue of the Dwight MacDonalD edited *Politics*. Condemning Konstantinov, a "sadistic magistrate" (*Memoirs of a Revolutionary* 237) of the Cheka (the secret police created by Lenin), Serge tells of how "I follow his chain of reasoning with the secret uneasiness that one feels in the presence of some lunatic logician" (239). Stevens's invocations of Konstantinov, a party-line Stalinist, and Serge, an avatar of the anti-Stalinist left, have provoked several involved debates both about the politics in Stevens's poetry and about politics in poetry more generally.

James Longenbach maintains that "Stevens twists Serge's point into a condemnation of political labyrinths in general" and "artistic labyrinths" as well (*The Plain Sense of Things* 242). Harold Bloom considers Canto XIV an "uneasy . . . anti-Marxist polemic" (*Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* 324) while Paul Bauers reads it as "less "anti-Marxist" than specifically anti-Stalinist," an

²⁶ Dwight MacDonalD, the editor of *Politics* and the *Partisan Review*, not only published the writing that would eventually become Serge's posthumously published *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* (1951), he and his wife Nancy also set up the *Partisan Review* Fund for European Writers and Artists, which was intended to relieve the poverty of refugees from totalitarian regimes. Serge was their first beneficiary. See Susan Weissman's *Victor Serge: The Course is Set on Hope*, p. 245.

expression of Stevens's "pragmatic pluralism" ("The Politics of Reticence" 24). Meanwhile, Alan Filreis worries that the canto's "disingenuous, muscular irrationalism" obscures the "genuine pathos" of the poem's finale (*Wallace Stevens and the Actual World* 142), while, at the same time, arguing that

Stevens's "interest" in the left was created by his unconscious habituation to a literary world that had already been shaped by the left. He realized the contingent relation between what he deemed the special romanticism of American communists and the polemical poetic movement towards things as they are . . . [an] emerge[nce] from the neoromantic moment. (*Modernism from Right to Left* 179).²⁷

Filreis draws attention to the unpredictable association between the "special romanticism" Stevens assigns to leftist politics and the fidelity to reality he feels to be poetry's special task. This reading offers an elegant means of processing Stevens's contradictory ideological commitments—a constant navigation between the golden birds of utopia and the blackbirds of Connecticut—and also gestures at "Esthétique's" weird linkage of romantic politics and Romantic poetics. For, despite various critical attempts to effect Stevens's ideological recuperation, condemnation, or complication through this canto—many persuasive—these readings tend to privilege the politics in the poetry rather than the poetry of the politics.

When Stevens quotes Victor Serge's horror at Konstantinov's "logical luna[cy]," he is still very far from allying himself with the totality of Serge's revolutionary positions. There is, in fact, a way in which we could read the proper name Victor Serge as abstracted rather than indexical and this reading takes color from the seemingly paradoxical phrase "logical lunatic." What "Esthétique" wants from Victor Serge (whose name encodes sonic echoes of "victory" and "surge") may have as much to do with the epithet Serge applies to Konstantinov as it does with the historical figure. And attending to the way the poem appropriates Serge's rhetoric also encourages a reading that

²⁷ Stevens's ambivalence about Marxist thought sometimes shaded into outright antipathy—a hostile review of *Ideas of Order* in *New Masses* (the cultural journal of the Communist Party of the United States [CPUSA]) discerned in Stevens's poetry the specter of fascism. The review, by one Stanley Burnshaw, so unsettled Stevens that he composed the long poem "Owl's Clover" in response. Several critics find in this episode evidence for Stevens's post-thirties disillusionment with the literary left. (See Filreis's entry in *The Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens*, pp. 38-39.)

contextualizes the canto with respect to the poem at large rather than detaching it as unmoored polemic. When Stevens employs proper nouns—place-names and peoples’ names, real, mythical and invented—they often bear only a slight connection to their referents. Proper nouns, in Stevens, often resemble the Proustian place-names of *Swann’s Way*, which the narrator uses to imagine locales he’s never seen purely on the basis of the prosody of their names: “Bayeux, so lofty in its noble coronet of rusty lace, whose highest point caught the light of the old gold of its second syllable; Vitré, whose acute accent barred its ancient glass with wooden lozenges” (251).²⁸ Like Proust’s proper nouns, Stevens’s are often at risk of semantic drift, multiplying imaginative, connotative possibilities rather than fining them down to a single, indexical referent.²⁹

I’m not suggesting that it’s entirely futile to track Stevens’s political commitments through his poetry—indeed, this line of inquiry has produced a range of valuable insights—only that, in this instance, delineating “Esthétique’s” engagement with Victor Serge has often meant disregarding how the poem *disengages* the name of Victor Serge for its own purposes. If we understand “Victor Serge” as an ambiguously referential term, one that does not attempt to denote, exactly, the person and positions of Victor Serge the man, it primes us to think about how the poem uses the Serge quotation to contemplate, explicitly, a central issue of modern logic: the question of how language “agrees,” to use Stevens’s verb, with realities external to it, the correspondence theory of truth.

What is a “logical lunatic” and why, according to Stevens, is Konstantinov a perfect example of the species? In the poem, “[r]evolution,” which seems, here, to stand in for Stalinist totalitarianism more generally, “[i]s the affair of logical lunatics” (*CP* 324). Serge, as he appears in the

²⁸ In *Wallace Stevens and the Aesthetics of Abstraction* (2010), Edward Ragg discusses the curious status of Stevens’s proper nouns with regard to France and the French language. Stevens often tries, according to Ragg, “to wrest a piece of France and project it into [his] own backyard” (144)—emphasis on projection. Stevens’s “invented place-name[s] (or other proper noun[s]),” Ragg writes, possess “only a passing, even eccentric, relationship with France.”

²⁹ Depending on the name in question, the polysemy of the proper noun has potentially troubling implications: failures of reference often look like cultural appropriation or an exercise of dominance. One might make this argument, for instance about the ambiguous repetition of the place-name “Tehuantepec” in *Harmonium’s* “Sea Surface Full of Clouds” (*CP* 98-102), whose referential function weakens as the poem progresses. Stevens spent a long vacation in Tehuantepec in 1923 but the poem often obscures the biographical context.

poem, can “follow” Konstantinov’s “argument” because it is internally coherent—it possesses the validity of a logical argument but its premises are false. Because it does not correspond to external objects, it can make no significant claim to truth-value, poetic or philosophical, and, in this, lies its lunacy. The community in communist ideology depends, in Stevens’s view, on universalizing, idealistic promises it can’t possibly fulfill: “it seems to take little or no effort to convince people that communism means an escape from poverty and a refuge from misfortune” (L 532). Whatever *sensus communis* might be possible, it will not, in the poem’s judgment, be a communist *sensus communis*. The poem regards Konstantinov’s unstated “argument” as one based on false premises and arguments from false premises it rejects as lunacy. “The politics of emotion must appear/To be an intellectual structure” (324) in a logical lunatic’s paradigm because the lunatic has rationalized his feelings according to internal impulses that possess no worldly referents.

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Hannah Arendt theorizes that totalitarian societies are characterized by their “logicality,” ideological claims to “total validity” that become the “nuclei of logical systems in which, as in the systems of paranoiacs, everything follows comprehensibly and even compulsorily once the first premise is accepted” (458). The “insanity” of these ideologies is a direct function of their “curious logicality,” which, in Arendt’s view, expresses “totalitarian contempt for reality and factuality (459). Logicality assumes, rather than a correspondence theory of truth, a coherence theory of truth, in which “the truth of any (true) proposition consists in its coherence with some specified set of propositions” (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*).³⁰ “Esthétique’s” logical lunacy is, in essence, a variation of Arendt’s logicality, a critique of the coherence theory of truth as a viable paradigm for poetic and philosophical discourses and an expression of contempt for any politics that breaks its agreement with reality through the corruption of a utopian desire.

³⁰ Young, James O. “The Coherence Theory of Truth,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.).

And yet, Stevens's own desire for utopia is not unmixed, as the canto's first hinge, marked by an ellipsis would suggest:

. . . One wants to be able to walk
By the lake at Geneva and consider logic:
To think of the logicians in their graves
And of the worlds of logic in their great tombs.
Lakes are more reasonable than oceans.

The poem moves from “logical lunacy,” with its untenable, totalizing coherence, to a lake at Geneva where, suddenly, logic becomes a desirable object of contemplation. The scene is a lake at Geneva, a place Stevens never visited but one that held for him a powerful literary attraction, not least because of its association with the utopian visions of the Romantic poets.³¹ The young Wordsworth walked the length of Lake Geneva just before he traveled to France and fell in love with revolutionary politics.³² Coleridge decried the incursions of the new French Republic into Swiss territories in “France: An Ode.”³³ The Villa Diodati—where Byron, Polidori, Claire Clairmont and the Shelleys famously resided in 1816—stands on the shores of Lake Geneva. The Shelleys, in particular, picked up Wordsworth's Rousseauvian idealization of Swiss culture and government in their *History of a Six Weeks' Tour* (1817) and it was the Swiss landscape that gave rise, of course, to Percy Bysshe Shelley's “Mont Blanc” (1817) and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818).³⁴

The “logicians in their graves” are not logicians (in the narrow sense) but poets. And the “worlds of logic in their great tombs” are the poetics (in the broad sense) buried with them, systems of aesthetics, reasoning, and politics that may still be coherent but are no longer correspondent to

³¹ Switzerland is something that one ought to think about in the summer-time,” Stevens writes in a letter from 1948, “it is so much more agreeable to think about Lake Geneva at this time of the year than it is to think about the rue de Babylone, nicht wahr?” (*L* 594). The association with Swiss neutrality during the Second World War is probably inevitable and also suggests the utopian desire to transcend violent conflict.

³² See Alan Liu's *Wordsworth, the Sense of History* (1989), p. 570. Wordsworth's *Descriptive Sketches* (1793) joins an egalitarian fantasy of Swiss peasant life with a concluding encomium to the revolution in France.

³³ See *S.T. Coleridge* (2001) by Sunil Kumar Sarker, pp. 231-232.

³⁴ Byron's “Manfred” also had its genesis in the 1816 Swiss tour. See Jerome McGann's *Byron and Romanticism* (2002), p. 30.

reality. In retracing Wordsworth's steps, the walker by the lake confronts lake poet logic—and with it the mingled lures and hazards of Romantic ways of conceiving the world from “entombed” poetic forms that no longer seem to adhere to reality to what Stevens calls the “new romanticism” of Communist ideology. In Stevens's work, romanticism is, as Joseph Carroll notes “a living tradition.” And it manifests everywhere from the poet's obsession with a supreme fiction to his sense that “romantic visionary poetry constitutes the highest form of imaginative achievement” (“Stevens and Romanticism” 101). But “Esthétique” argues that it's better to speak of Stevens's romanticism as undead or, like Schrödinger's cat, alive and dead at the same time.

For Stevens, the category of the romantic is always under pressure, so that “[w]hat one is always doing is keeping the romantic pure[,] eliminating from it what people speak of as the romantic” (*L* 277). And one of the most troubling things about this category, so essential to poetry, is “how subject the romantic is to change[,] tremendously alive one day and a curiosity the next” (*L* 478). The image of the logicians' graveyard delivers both an occasion for elegy and a sense that the thing the elegy memorializes is dead only intermittently. Stevens's own indebtedness to Romantic poetics—and his sense of his career as a sort of Romantic afterlife—suggests that the parts of Romantic aesthetics that might hold promise for modernity cannot achieve new life at the expense of their perils. Modern poetry that trucks with Romantic aesthetics always already runs the risk of badness.

“Lakes are more reasonable than oceans,” the canto's second hinge declares. “Hence,

A promenade amid the grandeurs of the mind,
By a lake, with clouds like lights among great tombs,
Gives one a blank uneasiness, as if
One might meet Konstantinov, who would interrupt
With his lunacy. He would not be aware of the lake.
He would be the lunatic of one idea
In a world of ideas, who would have all the people
Live, work, suffer and die in that idea
In a world of ideas. He would not be aware of the clouds,
Lighting the martyrs of logic with white fire.

His extreme of logic would be illogical. (325)

Clouds matter both to Stevens's lexicon and to those of the major Romantic poets. For Wordsworth, a cloud is a lonely thing, for Stevens (often) a proxy for pedantry, reasoning removed from use: "Funest philosophers and ponderers,/Their evocations are the speech of clouds" (*CP* 55). As they haunt the walker's promenade, the "clouds like lights" induce a "blank uneasiness" that foretells the possible presence of Konstantinov, who might pop out of the shadows like a reanimate corpse to "interrupt/[w]ith his lunacy." It's as if the presence of this Romantic trope summons the logical lunatic and his utopian fictions, the bad Romanticisms Stevens wants to "purify."

In "Esthétique," the romantic never lives very far from its worst excesses. If lakes are more reasonable than oceans (theaters of war at the time of "Esthétique's" drafting), then it is because, for Stevens, the best of lacustrine poetics elevates sensuous singularity, locality, plurality, and correspondence to singular, local, and plural realities. The worst Romanticisms, meanwhile, threaten to subsume all in their totalizing, coherence-theory logic.

Konstantinov "would not be aware of the lake" in its irreducible particularity because his preoccupation with an abstract, totalizing narrative precludes a sensitivity to the phenomenal. And it's in this imagined heedlessness that the "lunatic of one idea" resembles the darkest-timeline version of a poet obsessed with a supreme fiction. Konstantinov is what the poet of one idea might become if his poems failed to agree with reality. Like Isaiah Berlin's Tolstoy, the figure of the poet in "Esthétique du Mal" is caught between claiming allegiance to the fox ("who knows many things") and the hedgehog ("who knows one big thing" ["The Hedgehog and the Fox" 1]).³⁵ In a sense, the

³⁵ Berlin's half-facetious essay, published in 1953, divides major intellectual and literary figures into two camps:

[T]here exists a great chasm between those, on one side, who relate everything to a single central vision, one system, less or more coherent or articulate, in terms of which they understand, think and feel—a single, universal, organising principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance—and, on the other side, those who pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory, connected, if at all, only in some de facto way, for some psychological or physiological cause, related to no moral or aesthetic principle.

ethics of a supreme fiction are the central problem of Canto XIV and the question to which its politics, rightly or wrongly, are in service.

Milton J. Bates writes of how the supreme fiction expresses the marriage of idealist philosophy (descended from Plato through Descartes and Kant) and pragmatism propounded in the work of George Santayana, philosopher and friend to Stevens. “According to Santayana,” Bates relates, “poetry and religion are both human fabrications, designed to express and at least partly to satisfy our longing for the ideal.” As many of the tenets of organized religion fray under the influence of modernity, “poetry must step forward to provide us with a new mythology” (*The Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens* 49). For Stevens, working towards a theory of a supreme fiction, the key to a new mythology lies somewhere between resuscitated Kantian idealism, which tells us we never experience the things of the world unmediated, and Jamesian pragmatism, which tells us we must behave as if the things of the world correspond to our perceptions of them—if, that is, we hope to trust in a basis for shared knowledge and sympathy. “A good idea,” Bates writes, “is one that *works* in the actual world,” (49) one whose internal validity connects it with empirical precepts and, in this way, makes possible the intersubjective field of a stipulated *sensus communis*.

Stevens’s criteria—“*It Must Be Abstract*” (CP 380), “*It Must Change*” (389), “*It Must Give Pleasure*” (“Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” [1942] CP 399)—differentiate the supreme fiction from Konstantinov’s single, lunatic idea—but not by much. The logicity of totalitarian ideologies depends, after all, on abstraction and mutability; such an ideology is capable, by Arendt’s thinking, of abstracting any fact and twisting its connotations to suit its own purposes so that the real becomes a moving target (“mutable,” to use Stevens’s term). What keeps a supreme fiction from converting to

These last lead lives, perform acts and entertain ideas that are centrifugal rather than centripetal; their thought is scattered or diffused, moving on many levels, seizing upon the essence of a vast variety of experiences and objects for what they are in themselves, without, consciously or unconsciously, seeking to fit them into, or exclude them from, any one unchanging, all-embracing, sometimes self-contradictory and incomplete, at times fanatical, unitary inner vision. The first kind of intellectual and artistic personality belongs to the hedgehogs, the second to the foxes[.] (“The Hedgehog and the Fox” 2)

logical lunacy is the third term: pleasure, the disinterested delight that composes the basis for Kantian aesthetic judgments and, by means of these, the formation of the *sensus communis*. But in “Esthétique du Mal,” where pain rather than pleasure becomes the foundation of intersubjective communication, the supreme fiction is, itself, in danger of Romantic corruption. A consuming logical lunacy blots out all it cannot subsume: “[Konstantinov] would be the lunatic of one idea/ In a world of ideas” and the fellow-feeling on which his idea depends is pain (Canto XIV 325). “[He] would have all the people

Live, work, suffer and die in that idea
In a world of ideas. He would not be aware of the clouds,
Lighting the martyrs of logic with white fire.
His extreme of logic would be illogical.

The canto offers a worst-case scenario of an aesthetics of pain in which communal suffering in one idea creates fellow-feeling at the expense of difference, “a world of ideas.” Logical lunatics do not perceive the impartial, academic clouds that illumine ideology’s victims, the “martyrs of logic,” and still less do they perceive the paradox of their own structuring illusions, the “illogical logic” of extremity.

If pain can only make us agree about itself (that suffering exists and that no one can quite know how it exists for anyone else), then “Esthétique” argues that we must agree to disagree. The ideal intersubjective pleasure of the *sensus communis* may be unavailable to us. But if we can deploy the epistemological limits of our experience of *mal* to accept paradox and multiplicity, then all is not lost. Subjects can still connect with one another in the limited and local—though desperately important—ways available to us given the sole, dubious equalizer of human experience: the common denominator of the body. “The greatest poverty,” Canto XV prophesies, “is not to live/In a physical world” (325). Moreover, a poem that is fifteen different things in as many cantos formally enacts the irreconcilable jostling of “[s]o many selves, so many sensuous worlds” (C. XV 326) as

they find themselves pushed into contact by logos and logic, the “thesis,” strangely, improbably, which may at last be “scrivened in delight” (326).

For in *logos* (the word), as “Esthétique du Mal” understands, is the origin of logic and logic (reasoning), is no more and no less than that which makes a world. In “Esthétique,” a world is never singular but plural, insufficient on its own. In order for a world to live, to escape entombment in the logicians’ graveyard, it must imagine itself, as no world has yet, out of a desire for totalizing abstractions and into a sensuous community: “The adventurer/In humanity has not conceived of a race/Completely physical in a physical world” (XV 326). Ultimately, the reality with which poetry agrees is the patchy, diverse, and imperfect mediation of sensuous experience rather than the grandeur of the absolutely true idea. Apart from suggesting Stevens’s temporary turn away from the allure of the supreme fiction, “Esthétique” contends that the way in which poetry will “survive” logical positivism—to use the poet’s verb—will be through the embrace and expression of the full range of sensuous knowledge, pain included. And these “completely physical” truths of the *apérçu*—aesthetic knowledge, by Stevens’s lights—will require an act of faith, for their truth cannot be proven by logical standards, only affirmed by the imaginative act of guessing at the pain of others inasmuch as our own perceptions of *mal* allow.

In other words, “Esthétique du Mal” accepts the terms of modern logic’s articulations of truth. And because it accepts these terms, it abandons the idea that absolute, logical truth and relative, sensuous truths can ever achieve a full reconciliation—that a theory of everything will ever account for both the kinds of truths we get from poetry and the kinds that science and philosophy provide. For, in the end, subjective truth and objective truth correspond to different parts of reality—and yet poetry’s great trick is to allow us to believe in subjective truths with the same fervor with which we believe the earth is an oblate spheroid. And the poem’s construction of this partial metaphysics utterly precludes any reading that would seek in it a universalized prescription for *mal*.

“One might have thought of sight, but who could think/Of what it sees, for all the ill it sees?” the final canto asks. (“Our moods do not believe in each other,” as Emerson opines [“Circles” 150].) Perceptions of pain, which undergird each of the poem’s fifteen cantos, foreclose the remembrance of pleasure. But this forgetting or blotting out is not the absence of possibility but a presence in its own right, the storm that temporarily interrupts the signal. “Speech found the ear, for all the evil sound” (XV 326), even though “evil sound” might have hindered our ability to imagine the delights of the word. If “Esthétique du Mal” amounts to an experiment in bad aesthetics, then its project lies not merely in making visible the difficulties of attending simultaneously to aesthetics and concepts—poetic truth and logical truth—but also (counterintuitively, perhaps) in valorizing uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts as forms of experiential truth in their own right and essential to modern poetry’s fractious agreement with reality.

CODA

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A Secret Affinity

There was and always will be a secret affinity between symbolic logic and poetry.

—*Susan Howe*, *Pierce-Arrow* (1999)

If logical modernism identifies an epistemic virtue significant to twentieth-century poetry's practice and reception, then, in a larger sense, I am arguing, simply, that the discourse of poetry possesses an interest in epistemic virtues—in knowing as well as feeling, in truth as well as beauty, in corresponding to reality as well as reimagining it. What do we know through poetry and how do we know it? Moreover, can we call what we know through poetry “true?” And, if so, in what senses?

This project originated, as so many others have before, with a question about the uses of poetry both for readers and for poets. As I researched the complex interplay of aesthetic history, analytic truth, and poetic production, reception, and circulation, I noticed a marked tension in early twentieth-century debates about what poetry is and does, a tension centered on the philosophical question of how language corresponds to the things of this world, how it “agrees with reality,” to use the phrase that caused such acrimony between William James and Bertrand Russell. Inflected by contemporaneous philosophical approaches to aesthetics and theories of truth, modern uses of poetry combine the construction and preservation of exemplary aesthetic objects (as facilitators of individual moral development and communal cultural solidarity) with the desire, at times

contradictory, to employ poetry as an epistemological device, an awkward hybrid of the particular and the universal.

What's more, this clumsy *mélange* of poetic functions pertains directly to the methodological foundations of literary studies: the paradoxes of early close reading center on attempts to preserve the significance of aesthetic response and to translate culturally structured reactions to art into a kind of standardized, intersubjective truth. Poetry furnished the primary case studies for these critical efforts, which we would do well to credit with the co-production of what we now read as modern poetry. And in the various scholarly writings of I.A. Richards, William Empson, Laura (Riding) Jackson, and others, which creatively (although always imperfectly) attempted to valorize poetry as a discourse productive of both emotion and knowledge, the origins of contemporary disciplinary anxieties are clearly visible: anxieties about the ethics and significance of aesthetics, the ethics and significance of historical context, the ethics and significance of literary truth, and the ethics and significance of literary modernism. If modern poetry was made by its readers as much as its writers, then historical models of critical praxis should be accounted for in our contemporary conception of twentieth-century poetry and its uses.

Ian Hacking writes of the Vienna Circle's verification principle, which tells us a proposition's significance depends on its method of verification, that "the possibilities for truth, and hence of what can be found out, and of methods of verification, are themselves molded in time" (*Historical Ontology* 4). Borrowing Foucault's "historical ontology" coinage, Hacking contends that different historical conditions make possible different ideas of seemingly a-historical, ontological concepts like absolute truth. A complimentary methodology, historical epistemology, "assumes," in the words of Mary Poovey, "that the categories by which knowledge is organized . . . inform *what* can be known at any given time, as well as *how* this knowledge can be used" (*A History of the Modern Fact* 7). These related critical practices, more familiar, perhaps in the context of history of science and philosophy

than in the context of literary studies, provide forceful precedent for the procedural investments of my own project: a trial in historical aesthetics that tests the theory that the language by which aesthetic discourse organizes itself in any given period modulates what objects and processes it's possible to understand as art, the range of responses we are able to access where art is concerned, and the cultural effects of those objects, processes, and feelings.

Pursuing an inquiry in historical aesthetics, *An Agreement with Reality* illustrates the contingency of modern poetic practice, use, and interpretation on debates about literature's claim to truth (an equally malleable concept) and investigates the network of epistemic virtues at play in the poetry of logical modernism. In Chapter One I perform an archaeology of early close-reading manuals, demonstrating how (primarily British) professional readers in the nascent discipline of literary studies situated their theories of aesthetic value in relation to analytic models of truth, while, simultaneously, revealing the persistence of this tendency in "distant reading," a contemporary alternative to close reading. My second chapter proceeds to examine Gertrude Stein's poetry in the context of Transatlantic theories of truth, disclosing, in the process, Stein's skillful manipulation of twentieth-century philosophy and Romantic poetics. The concluding chapter, on the poetry of Wallace Stevens, considers the clash between ideals of fact and ideals of feeling in Stevens's "bad aesthetics."

In returning to the basis of the persistent critical problem of how literary scholars should use history—and if they should use aesthetics at all—my methodology proposes one way of navigating the anxiety that excessive attention to form slights history and excessive attention to history slights form. That this problem is possible as a problem owes to the logically modern dilemma of poetry's connection to assorted epistemic virtues; the poem acts as the arena where poets and readers test the ability of the subjective to accommodate the objective, of the imagined to correspond to the real. To understand the opposition between formalist approaches to literature and historical-ideological

approaches as the result of crossings between modern aesthetic discourse and modern truth discourse is to see how this naturalized assumption actually relies on a tradition of irreducibly complex interchanges that stress, if anything, the conditional affiliation between form and history. If, indeed, a solution exists to the problem of how to balance form and history, then it will likely derive from a reassessment of the terms of the debate. Forms *are* historical. And to use them thus is neither wrong nor unserious so long as the first remembers the last. Form, as I have tried to show, nearly always remembers history. History does not always return the favor.

Susan Howe's *Pierce-Arrow* (1999) is both a poetic memoir and a meditation on the life of the ill-starred logician C.S. Peirce, whose logical diagrams are nearly as mysterious to Howe as his marriage to an enigmatic woman named Juliette. In her introduction to the volume, Howe proclaims that "[t]here always was and always will be a secret affinity between symbolic logic and poetry" (ix). One thing this might mean—there are many—is that even when systems of formal logic agree with reality (which they sometimes do), even when poetry agrees with reality (which it sometimes does), there is no guarantee that either (no matter how internally consistent) will yield a complete picture of the world of its genesis. If so, this "secret affinity" is not necessarily a weakness in that it challenges scholars of poetry to make silence, uncertainty, and inconsistency—the *failure* of correspondence—fruitful elements of our own agreements with reality.

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