Modernism after Nietzsche: Art, Ethics, and the Forms of the Everyday

by

Brian C. Valentyn

Department of English
Duke University

Date: _________________________

Approved:

___________________________
Michael Moses, Supervisor

___________________________
Toril Moi

___________________________
Thomas Pfau

___________________________
Thomas Ferraro

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English in the Graduate School of Duke University

2012
ABSTRACT

Modernism after Nietzsche: Art, Ethics, and the Forms of the Everyday

by

Brian C. Valentyn

Department of English
Duke University

Date:_______________________

Approved:

_________________________
Michael Moses, Supervisor

_________________________
Toril Moi

_________________________
Thomas Pfau

_________________________
Thomas Ferraro

An abstract of a dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English in the Graduate School of Duke University

2012
Abstract

This dissertation uses Nietzsche’s writings on truth and metaphor as a lens through which to reconsider the contribution that modernist art sought to make to both the understanding and, ultimately, the reconstruction of everyday life. It begins with a consideration of the sentiment, first articulated on a wide scale by the artists and philosophers of the romantic era, that something essential to the cohesion of individual and social experience has been lost during the turbulent transition to modernity. By situating Nietzsche’s thought vis-à-vis the decline of nineteenth-century idealism in both its Continental and Victorian forms, I demonstrate how his principal texts brought to an advanced stage of philosophical expression a set of distinctly post-romantic concerns about the role of mind and language in the construction of reality that would soon come to define the practice of modernism in philosophy and the arts. Nietzsche’s contribution to moral philosophy is typically regarded as a skeptical, and even wholly negative, one. Yet a central element of his thought is obscured, I argue, when we fail to account for its positive conviction that “higher” moralities are, or ought to be, possible.” Because his philosophy attempts to diagnose “genealogically” the concrete social, historical, and psychological conditions under which truth-relations are generated and maintained within a given cultural framework, it is in fact every bit as constructive as it is deconstructive, involving a sustained and ethically significant reflection on the character of normativity itself.
This initial confrontation with Nietzsche’s philosophy sets the stage for the studies of individual artists—the American poets Ezra Pound and Wallace Stevens, as well as the Swedish filmmaker Ingmar Bergman—for whom these traditionally epistemological concerns about the nature of representation also shade naturally into the domain of ethics. In these chapters, I demonstrate how aesthetic modernism produces a range of sophisticated responses to the predicament of relativism that Nietzsche articulated while reaching sometimes radically different conclusions than Nietzsche about the nature and extent of human agency in the modern world. This enables us to see how modernism makes an essential contribution to what the philosopher Charles Taylor has characterized as the broader cultural effort to “overcome epistemology” by exploring the structures of intentionality and fostering in us a basic “awareness about the limits and conditions of our knowing”—a project to which modernist art and philosophy both make essential contributions.
# Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................ iv

List of Figures ................................................................................................................................. vii

Introduction: What We Talk About When We Talk About Modernism........................................ 1

1. “The poets of our life”: Re-constructing Nietzsche’s Modernism ............................................. 20

2. “A painted paradise at the end of it”: Humanism and Other Ideas of Order in the Poetry of Ezra Pound .................................................................................................................. 63

3. “Beyond us, yet ourselves”: Wallace Stevens’ Cultural Poetics ................................................. 98

4. Living with Others: Modernist Form and the Problem of Interpersonal Communication in Bergman ........................................................................................................................................ 177

Bibliography .................................................................................................................................... 241

Biography ......................................................................................................................................... 255
List of Figures

Figure 1: Minus as Romantic Artist................................................................. 196
Figure 2: Minus and Karin ............................................................................ 204
Figure 3: In the Belly of the Beast................................................................. 205
Figure 4: Thomas’ Recitation...................................................................... 212
Figure 5: Jonas’ Suicide.............................................................................. 217
Figure 6: Thomas and Marta in the Schoolhouse ......................................... 222
Figure 7: A Dichotomous Pair..................................................................... 226
Figure 8: Face to Face.................................................................................. 229
Figure 9: Tanks Passing ............................................................................... 232
Figure 10: Looking In .................................................................................. 232
Figure 11: Words in a Foreign Language.................................................... 237
Introduction: What We Talk About When We Talk About Modernism

I understand by “morality” a system of evaluations that partially coincides with the conditions of a creature’s life.
—Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*

The people grow out of the weather;
The gods grow out of the people.
Encore, encore, encore les dieux…
—Wallace Stevens, “Loneliness in Jersey City”

No claim in Dostoyevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*, a novel fraught with ideological conflict, has remained as provocative, or as prone to misinterpretation, as Ivan Karamazov’s conclusion that without God “everything is permitted.” Like Nietzsche’s contemporaneous pronouncement, “God is dead,” this claim has entered so completely into the cultural imagination that it is often invoked with little regard to its original context and, as a consequence, taken to be either celebratory in character or, equally wide of the mark, a merely disinterested observation that the values which have sustained religious belief have vanished altogether from the Western cultural landscape. Both interpretations fail utterly as characterizations of these thinkers’ positions. Dostoyevsky, to be sure, flirted with socialism in his twenties and continued throughout his career to exhibit a particular fascination with those aspects of modern life that seemed to present an impediment to religious belief and morality. However, this picture of Dostoyevsky as a political radical is complicated by the religious conversion he underwent during his imprisonment and ten years of political exile for his involvement in the underground
Petrashevsky Circle, after which, in 1859, he returned to Saint Petersburg and became openly critical of the utopianism of the progressive political and philosophical movements of the day. And Nietzsche, despite his steadfast opposition to the “life-denying” asceticism he identified at the core of religious belief and practice, took pains to emphasize that it was indeed the Christian notion of the soul, with its emphasis on personal accountability and moral self-surveillance, that generated the profound, if “pathological,” sense of interiority characteristic of modern individualism—out of which he believed a new and powerful form of post-subjective agency might emerge.

It may be true that Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky both regarded religion as something marked for extinction, but this is neither where their originality nor their contribution to modern thought lies. Their writings, like those of a handful of their contemporaries—Flaubert, Baudelaire, and Mallarme in France; James in England; Ibsen in Norway; Gogol and Chekhov in Russia; and even the later, candidly skeptical Emerson in America, to name a few of the most prominent—remain relevant not only for their considerable literary and philosophical merits but because such qualities have come to seem inseparable from these authors’ participation in a deeply ambivalent turn within modernity itself, one marked by a newfound dissatisfaction with the brand of Enlightenment optimism that had peaked in spectacular fashion with idealist philosophy and aesthetics in the early nineteenth century before ossifying by midcentury into a sentiment now commonly referred to as “Victorian morality.”¹ It is this critical-

¹ Alasdair MacIntyre has usefully characterized the moral system that predominated among both the Victorians and their Continental contemporaries as part of an “encyclopaedic” outlook on human life, a “unitary conception of reason as affording a single view of a developing world within which each part of
antagonistic turn, which not only retains but amplifies the romantic preoccupation with the relation between aesthetic form and perception, that signals the emergence of what I want to call “modernism,” provided that this much-disputed term can be extended to cover a broader disciplinary and historical terrain than traditional definitions, which have tended to limit modernism to an early-twentieth-century movement in the arts, have allowed. This is true even of the vast majority of revisionist accounts that, over the past two decades, have looked increasingly to material culture and a wide range of socioeconomic factors (e.g., Lawrence Rainey’s *Institutions of Modernism*; Michael North’s *Reading 1922*; Vincent Sherry’s *The Great War and the Language of Modernism*), or drawn on the critical resources of poststructuralism in the attempt to offset the predominantly formalist emphasis of the modernist discussion from the era of New Criticism through deconstruction. Whatever their merits, such accounts have also tended to reproduce an all-too-familiar narrative of the emergence (around the time of the First World War), peak (1922), and decline (sometime during the thirties, but certainly by the outbreak of World War II) of modernism: a narrative that stems more or less directly from the major modernists’ own vociferous attempts at self-promotion and definition, ranging from Pound’s imagist slogan, “make it new,” to more explicitly historicizing claims such as Wyndham Lewis’ emphasis on the “men of 1914” or Virginia Woolf’s

the enquiry contributes to an overall progress and whose supreme achievement is an account of the progress of mankind” (Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Three rival versions of moral enquiry : encyclopaedia, genealogy, and tradition* [Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990] 32.) Throughout this period, he notes, morality constituted “a distinct and relatively autonomous area of beliefs, attitudes, and rule-following activity, ordered in accordance with a scheme of rigid compartmentalization of life” and ultimately subject to rational justification (26).
contention that “[o]n or about December 1910 human character changed.” While nothing could be more modern, which is to say, more in keeping with the spirit of self-determination that has occupied such a central place in political and philosophical discourse since the Enlightenment, than asserting one’s autonomy in the face of history and cultural precedent, the widespread critical acceptance of this chronology has created a caricature of Anglophone modernism that also fails to account for the emergence of a comparable modernist sensibility in other national literatures, philosophical traditions, and art forms (in which this sensibility sometimes takes hold much earlier, as in music and the visual arts, or much later, as in film). Thus, the advantage to reopening the categorical boundaries of modernism in a way that could account for, or at any rate, not rule out in principle, all of these diverse forms is that it facilitates the discovery of thematic and methodological affinities which can enhance our understanding of individual works while, at the same time, drawing our attention to the matrix of social,

---
2 An adherence to this timeline can be seen even in studies such as Tyrus Miller’s *Late modernism: politics, fiction, and the arts between the world wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), which have sought to extend the scope of modernism by identifying a “late modernist” phase between modernism and postmodernism. Despite the potential of such scholarship to highlight important continuities between these periods, continuities that have been obscured by postmodernism’s largely successful attempt to differentiate itself—more on ideological grounds than on formal ones—from the anti-democratic authoritarianism of many of the high modernists, this scholarship also has a tendency to reinforce existing characterizations of these periods, which it can only bridge by first fixing historically (in Miller’s case, before and after World War II). There are, of course, notable exceptions to this tendency. Both Matei Călinescu, in *Five faces of modernity: modernism, avant-garde, decadence, kitsch, postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), and Fredric Jameson, in *A singular modernity: essay on the ontology of the present* (London : New York: Verso, 2002), insist on the importance of considering modernism against the larger backdrop of modernity itself. Peter Nicholls’ *Modernisms: a literary guide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), despite its more limited historical focus, attempts to account for the plurality of modernist origins in different national literatures with an eye to the conflicted social and political landscape of nineteenth-century Europe. And Charles Altieri’s *Painterly abstraction in modernist American poetry: the contemporaneity of modernism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989) demonstrates in painstaking and provocative detail how modernism’s rejection of nineteenth-century idealism often conceals its concern with, and continuation of, some of the central problems posed by romantic aesthetics—a series of developments I consider in greater detail in Chapter One.
historical, and economic forces whose interaction produced, and continues in various ways to sustain, the complex and deeply reflexive relationship between modernism and modernity.

If pressed to provide a working definition of modernism along these lines, we might say that it is the set of cultural operations and expressions (artistic, philosophical, and so on)—the cultural means—by which modernity grasps itself as a problem and attempts, quite literally, to come to terms with itself. To forestall an obvious objection, I should add that this activity of “coming to terms with itself” need not imply a world-historical process through which modernity, as in Hegelian teleology, arrives at a state of complete and transparent self-understanding. (After all, it would seem to be one of the characteristic anxieties of modernist thought that history might turn out to consist of a mere sequence of events, a progression without progress.) I mean only to suggest with this expression a growing awareness of the kinds of processes, such as language or history, through which thought is mediated, together with a conviction that any description of individual and social experience must now find a way to account for these factors if it is to be compelling. Another, potentially more problematic, implication of the above definition might be that modernism so conceived would threaten to subsume both romanticism and postmodernism. Yet the justification for posing the problem this way is not to do away with these periodizations altogether but rather to draw out the often profoundly dialectical continuities linking them together despite—indeed because of—the fact that their representative thinkers so often claim to have initiated a radical
reassessment of the cultural tradition, whether that reassessment is believed to mark an end or a new beginning.\textsuperscript{3}

One immediate implication of regarding these movements as overlapping phases in the evolution of a larger self-critical tendency within modernity itself is that the philosophical and aesthetic idealisms of the romantic era begin to seem indispensable for an understanding of the critique of rationalist metaphysics (what Heidegger will call “substance metaphysics” and Derrida the “metaphysics of presence”) now widely associated with modernism and postmodernism. This is the course charted by the philosopher Robert Pippin, who, in studies such as \textit{Modernism as a Philosophical Problem} and \textit{Modernism as Idealism: Hegelian Variations}, begins with the observation that aesthetic modernism is marked by a deep suspicion of the normative claims essential to European modernity, including, above all: the idea of self-determining subjectivity, the reliance on liberal-democratic forms of government, and faith in social progress through scientific and technological innovation. Yet Pippin is quick to emphasize that “some aspect of this sort of mood (the experience of modernization as a kind of spiritual failure, of modernity as loss) has been quite prominent in much European high culture of the late eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries.”\textsuperscript{4} By extending the category of modernism beyond the aesthetic sphere in the attempt to account for these larger social

\textsuperscript{3} Viewed in this light, postmodernism, which retains many of the basic formal and stylistic strategies of modernist critique while abandoning the lingering idealist yearning for totality and transcendence, should come to look more like the ideological streamlining of modernism than its actual supersession. For modernism, conceived now in the broader sense, could not be over until modernity itself either came to an end—or developed a clear conscience.

and cultural developments, he argues that the idealisms of Kant and Hegel can and should be read as initial responses to the “same” ongoing crisis in Enlightenment self-understanding that will occupy Nietzsche and Heidegger at a later stage in its development, only to be taken up again, with a slightly different methodological emphasis, by poststructuralism and its various offshoots at the end of the twentieth century, including new historicism, cultural studies, and postcolonialism. While my own approach in what follows is largely in keeping with Pippin’s attempt to expand the historical scope of modernism by treating it less as a discrete movement or period than a philosophical problem of far-reaching cultural significance, I am nonetheless hesitant to claim Kant and Hegel as modernists; despite their effectiveness at exposing the limitations and historical contingency of human knowledge, respectively, their philosophical systems still gesture in many ways toward a rationally-structured objectivity to which our ideas, however formative or historically determinate in character, may (at least in this qualified sense) be said to correspond. In fact, as Toril Moi has

---

5 While acknowledging that “it would certainly be a mistake to pretend that everything... somehow depended on such philosophical controversies, that the question of the sustainability or legitimacy of modernity is nothing but a ‘philosophical problem’,” since political, economic, and technological transformations all clearly inform these controversies, Pippin reminds us that the philosophers under consideration were, after all, “reflective participants in these changes,” even to the extent that “we can see best in such philosophical controversies some of what is going on elsewhere, in art, literature, and politics, as well as in the postmodern foundations of contemporary dissatisfactions” (ibid., xviii, xiii.). He also stresses here that “the emphasis now on new methodologies and research programs (‘new historicism,’ ‘cultural studies,’ ‘post-colonialism’) has not altered the nature or depth of the tone” of this ongoing crisis in modernity’s self-understanding (xii).

6 Pippin’s larger concern with demonstrating the relevance of Kantian and Hegelian philosophy to ongoing cultural debates seemingly leads him to gloss over the aspects of these systems most indebted to rationalist metaphysics. He says nothing, for instance, of Kant’s controversial appeal to “noumena,” and rejects outright the standard, universalist reading of Hegel’s world-historical teleology, arguing that “there simply is no Hegelian guarantee or deduced necessity that human history is progressive” (ibid., 74).
demonstrated in her work on Ibsen,\textsuperscript{7} one of the defining features of early modernism in the arts would seem to be its extension of the critique of rationality initiated by the idealisms of the romantic era to these idealisms themselves, along with the various attitudes about art and morality that had become attached to them over the course of the nineteenth century. If this rejection of idealism is not always as explicit in the artistic modernism of the twentieth century, it is, as I will demonstrate in chapters two through four of this study, still very much implicit in the premium that so-called high and late modernism place on experimentation in their continuing effort to unlock “new” and viable ways of perceiving and communicating through the destabilization of received forms.

It is also within the context of this critique of idealism, whose underlying rationalist metaphysics begins by the latter half of the nineteenth century to lose its cultural viability, that an event like the convergence of Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky on the metaphor of the death of God becomes fully intelligible. Far from a literal-minded report on the demise of organized religion, this formulation represents, on the one hand, a conviction that the faith in reason which the Enlightenment had offered in place of religious belief had somehow managed to undermine itself, and, on the other hand, a willingness to confront the predicament of relativism, whose emergence both men took to coincide with the collapse of this rational infrastructure.\textsuperscript{8} And yet, however remarkable

\textsuperscript{7} Toril Moi, Henrik Ibsen and the birth of modernism : art, theater, philosophy (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

\textsuperscript{8} While in extreme cases this predicament was capable of giving rise to a mood of spiritual despondency (a species of abject or “passive” nihilism, as opposed to the “active” nihilism that Nietzsche sympathizes with in the works of his middle period), it more generally took the form of ideologies both found equally
these affinities may be, a telling theological distinction between the two thinkers needs to be observed. For Dostoyevsky, the God in question is still understood largely in religious, and even specifically Christian, terms: “Western Europe is tottering to its fall,” he affirms in a letter to the Russian critic Nikolay Strakhov, because “the peoples have lost Christ.”

Like T.S. Eliot, who in middle age espoused a reactionary (“royalist”) politics and an orthodox (“Anglo-Catholic”) faith—both seemingly at odds with his experimental poetics—Dostoyevsky was convinced that the dwindling of Christian sentiment would have a corrosive effect on individual and social experience, generating a moral vacuum so pervasive that neither liberal nor socialist optimism would be able to overcome it. For Nietzsche, however, the departed “God” in this aphoristic equation is no longer reducible to the Judeo-Christian deity. Despite its religious resonance, its primary function is to serve as a placeholder for the various concepts that modern philosophers, in their rejection of Christian doctrine, had often unwittingly raised to the status of metaphysical absolutes: “it does not have to be religious dogma,” he affirms in the Untimely Meditations; “it can also be such bogus concepts as ‘progress,’ ‘universal education,’ ‘national,’ ‘modern state,’ ‘cultural struggle.’” And this is consistent with his larger contention that Christianity is, at bottom, a “Platonism for the people,” a more accessible iteration of the underlying principles of Western thought, which has sought since...

---

unsatisfying, such as utopian socialism or its opposite, a pragmatic affirmation of liberal-democratic principles, which Nietzsche repeatedly criticized as the path of “the last man.”


antiquity to establish through the universalization of its ideas and values “a separate world… a place it took to be so firmly set that, standing upon it, it could lift the rest of the world off its hinges and make itself master of it.”

In many ways, Nietzsche’s project can be accurately characterized in terms of its inclination to interrogate such metaphysical absolutes at “ground level” by undercutting their claim to universality and exposing, through a consideration of the concrete conditions of their emergence, the social and historical contingency of conceptual thought. What makes Nietzsche the exemplary modernist philosopher—as opposed to, say, Kant and Hegel—is his rejection of all transcendent foundations and systems of explanation, as well as his unyielding antagonism toward the Western metaphysical tradition in its various philosophical and religious manifestations while initiating a self-consciously rhetorical form of critique whose emphasis on the relationship between language and cognition anticipates the deconstructive approaches of postmodernism. At the same time, however, this antagonism toward all things metaphysical, together with his insistence that modernity, despite its claims to progress, actually represents a stage of decline in which the most basic principles of the tradition begin to undermine themselves, has resulted in a widespread misconception of Nietzsche as a kind of carefree nihilist and sower of unreason that poststructuralist appropriations of his thought have done little to offset. If today there seem to be almost as many “Nietzsches” as there are readers and

---

13 For an account of the importance of Nietzsche’s literary style and the central role it assumes in the process of “fictionalist” self-creation that he advocates in the writings of his middle and later period, see Alexander Nehamas, Nietzsche, life as literature (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985).
interpreters of his philosophy, and if this inexhaustibility of interpretive potential seems to be in keeping with both the perspectivist epistemology he advocated as well as his tendency, especially pronounced in the writings of his middle period such as The Gay Science and Thus Spake Zarathustra, to present himself as a Dionysian “free spirit” and a philosopher of many faces, many “masks,” I am nonetheless in agreement with Richard Schacht that the reception of Nietzsche’s thought towards the end of the twentieth century, although a significant improvement on earlier attempts to cast him as a proto-fascist, has often pushed so far in this direction that it has obscured his larger moral-philosophical project, central to which was his—essentially positive—conviction that “higher moralities are, or ought to be, possible.”¹⁴

My attempt in Chapter One to clarify this implicitly “constructive” dimension of Nietzsche’s thought in relation to the prominence he gives to the aesthetic thus provides the initial step in a larger inquiry into the cultural stakes of modernism itself. Nietzsche’s call at the end of The Birth of Tragedy for a “Socrates who practices music”¹⁵—one of the earliest expressions in his work of the necessary confluence of art and philosophy—assumes its distinctive shape in “On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense” with his conclusion that truth and value are intertwined, and thus vitally “metaphorical.” Humans, he asserts, are “aesthetically creating beings,” beings that not only in an anthropological

---


¹⁵ Nietzsche, "The Birth of Tragedy," 98. Although it is clear that Nietzsche is in favor the emergence of this hybrid figure, he poses the issue in the form of a series of questions: “will this ‘turning’ lead to ever-new configurations of genius and especially of the Socrates who practices music? Will the net of art, even if it is called religion or science, that is spread over existence be woven even more tightly and delicately, or is it destined to be torn to shreds in the restless, barbarous, chaotic whirl that now calls itself ‘the present’?”
sense but even to a greater or lesser extent as individuals may be said to fashion the realities they inhabit by imposing interpretive form upon the various aspects of their world. Despite my insistence that Nietzsche was never able to come to terms with the ineradicably social dimension of language, thought, and world that his critical-diagnostic investigations so consistently reveal, I also emphasize how this strategic conflation of truth and aesthetic creation is incompatible with the widespread misunderstanding that his project consists fundamentally of the attempt to replace the Apollonian order of existing institutions and systems of understanding with a permanent Dionysian irrationality. Indeed, because his philosophy attempts to expose “genealogically” the concrete social and psychological conditions under which truths are generated and maintained within a given cultural framework, it is potentially every bit as constructive as it is deconstructive, involving a sustained and ethically significant reflection on what Schacht calls the “general character of normativity.”\textsuperscript{16} The crucial idea is not that moralities are somehow merely relative or conventional but rather that they operate, as Nietzsche says, “in the service of life,” making available to us certain ways of organizing, understanding, and acting within the world.

By situating Nietzsche’s thought vis-à-vis the decline of nineteenth-century idealism (in both its Continental and Victorian forms), I attempt to demonstrate how his writings both inaugurated and brought to an advanced stage of philosophical expression a set of distinctly post-romantic concerns about the role of mind and language in the construction of reality that would come to define modernism in philosophy and the arts.

\textsuperscript{16} Schacht, "Nietzschean Normativity," 154.
While he rejects the underlying idealist metaphysics of the romantic tradition, he also radicalizes many of its epistemic strategies, including its characteristic appeal to aesthetic form as a means of negotiating the subject-object dichotomy, and incorporates them into his sweeping critique of received metaphysical positions. Because truth and value are inseparable for Nietzsche, epistemological concerns tend to shade naturally into the domain of ethics. Indeed, his insistence on overcoming the predicament of nihilism into which he believed Western civilization had fallen came to depend on the emergence of a new kind of hybrid artist-philosopher figure who would be capable of generating and proliferating the kinds of cultural values that might make this possible.\(^{17}\) And as we will see, his suggestion that once the constructedness of these moral and conceptual frameworks is revealed, they might actively be altered in accordance with some conception of human flourishing finds a direct parallel in the avant-garde movements of the twentieth century. By insisting throughout on the significance of the Apollonian dimension of Nietzsche’s philosophy, I ultimately wish to underscore the extent to which modernism’s assault on convention cannot simply be reduced to a species of radical skepticism, or anarchism, or even a phenomenological vitalism that aims to bring us into

\(^{17}\) Accounts, such as that of Nehemas, which have addressed the literary dimensions and applications of Nietzsche’s thought have done so largely with an eye to this idea of self-fashioning rather than to how literature and art provide models of value that might, as many of the modernists hoped, contribute to a larger project of cultural revitalization. Two exceptions are John Burt Foster, *Heirs to Dionysus: a Nietzschean current in literary modernism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981) and Robert Gooding-Williams, *Zarathustra’s Dionysian modernism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001). Foster’s study is focused on establishing the nature and extent of Nietzsche’s influence on an international group of modernist writers—Gide, Lawrence, Malraux, and Mann—all of them novelists, who have acknowledged an indebtedness to his philosophy. Gooding-Williams’ framing of modernism as a problem of broad cultural and philosophical significance is in line with my own, but his central focus in this study is on demonstrating the importance of value-creation to Nietzsche’s project through a close, section-by-section reading of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 
direct and unmediated contact with the real. These familiar characterizations fail to account for how such an iconoclastic aesthetic could so consistently generate within itself a countervailing “rage for order,” one that, particularly between the World Wars, came to regard aesthetic form as a means of modeling social, political, and economic relations.

Modernism is destructive, even inherently so, I want to suggest, but in the sense that atom-smashing is destructive: formal experimentation becomes for it a mode of inquiry into the relationship between truth and value more generally, including the fundamental role that culture plays in establishing the shared frameworks of understanding and belief within (and against) which various “forms of life” become possible for us in the first place.

Chapter Two considers how Ezra Pound’s radical formal experimentation in texts like *The Cantos* sought to reflect the fragmentation of late modernity while at the same time developing strategies for textual “coherence” that he believed could serve as model for both self-development and social order. I show how this idea derives from his effort throughout the 1910’s and 1920’s to arrive at a mode of communication based on the principle of “direct presentation,” which was aimed at capturing in art the dynamism of natural processes while resisting ideological abstraction (an endeavor that becomes all the more ironic in light of his outspoken support of Italian fascism during the 1930’s and 1940’s). By tracing these preoccupations to the debate that emerged between the “humanist” and “anti-humanist” factions within the imagist movement prior to the First World War, I identify in Pound’s aesthetic theory a basic confusion as to whether the relations he perceived between the juxtaposed segments of *The Cantos* had their source in
nature itself, as he often suggested, or whether such order is instead something imposed on nature though the willful, value-legislating activity of the artist and the cultural forms employed in such acts of creation. Indeed, this tension between natural and constructed form is never resolved in The Cantos. Yet by attending to these competing conceptions of order, we are at least able to discern with greater clarity how Pound begins during the middle and later stages of the poem’s composition to take responsibility for what he had written, to make good on his contention that modernist art could contribute to a project of cultural renewal by projecting—or retrieving from the past—viable forms of individual and cultural experience.

In Chapter Three, I examine how Wallace Stevens’ conflicted relationship to both his romantic inheritance and his modernist contemporaries provides the grounds for his reevaluation of the expressive mode of subjectivity associated with the lyrical form. My claim is that critical attempts over the past few decades to cast him as Pound’s antithesis, a kind of belated romantic who recoiled from the “pressure” of external reality, including the concrete demands of social and political life, by seeking refuge in an interior world of his own imaginative creation, fail to do justice to the broader cultural stakes of Stevens’ project. Not only was Stevens acutely aware of the persistence of idealist motifs in his own writing; he was also actively engaged in the process of coming to terms with their basic limitations. His poetic inquiries into the interdependence of language, thought, and world, although never reducible to a series of philosophical theses, constitute series of demonstrative explorations of the ways in which the world becomes intelligible to us—indeed, takes shape as a world—through the medium of language. “The fundamental
difficulty in any art is the problem of the normal,” he insisted.\textsuperscript{18} I consider how this concern puts Stevens’ work into productive conversation with the philosophy of Heidegger and Wittgenstein, who in their later writings arrive at an understanding of the sociality of form more nuanced than the accounts of Nietzsche or his poststructuralist adherents, in whom it still functions primarily as a cultural artifact codifying power-relations that tend in the final analysis toward exploitation. Finally, I show how this sustained hermeneutical engagement with language leads Stevens in the poems of the late 1930’s and beyond to attempt to salvage a viable conception of individual and collective identity, one based on a form of transcendence no longer grounded in the theological or rational absolute but rather in the ideologically contested terrain of modernity itself. For Stevens, this turns out to be an ideal “beyond us, yet ourselves,” a culturally sustaining fiction of the human that we can consent to and acknowledge as such.

Chapter Four identifies a similar turn toward the social in the films of Ingmar Bergman, the Swedish director whose advocacy of the “chamber film” during the early 1960’s coincides with a newfound intimacy of expression that would define his mature style, breaking calculatedly with cinematic conventions in order to foreground the problems that modern life poses for our ability to forge and sustain meaningful relationships. Focusing primarily on his Trilogy, which comprises \textit{Through a Glass Darkly}, \textit{Winter Light}, and \textit{The Silence}, I argue that Bergman’s emphasis on the materiality of film becomes the basis of an extended meditation the inherent limitations, and enabling possibilities, of embodiment itself. While many of his earlier films

demonstrate a similar concern with the impediment that our physical and psychological separateness as embodied agents poses for our ability to make ourselves known to others, the Trilogy’s preoccupation with the nature of representation, both within and beyond the frame, yields what one might call a provisional “solution” to this dilemma by finding in language (and other media) a repository of shared criteria for understanding the world.

By giving serious consideration to Bergman’s claim that his goal in the Trilogy was less to depict the emptiness of a world from which God had departed than “to dramatize the all importance of communication, of the capacity for feeling” among human beings,\(^\text{19}\) I consider the implications of this affirmation of the inherently public character of thought and expression for our understanding of the inquiry into normativity that the experimental strategies of modernism make available to artist and audience alike.

However we choose to define it historically, methodologically, and geographically, then, it is clear that modernism did not emerge \textit{ex nihilo}. Its principal developments become intelligible only when situated within the larger, and still ongoing, crisis of representation characteristic of post-Enlightenment modernity. Charles Taylor has characterized this shift in critical practice as part of a broader effort to “overcome epistemology” by rethinking the model of disengaged subjectivity that has underpinned modern scientific and philosophical inquiry since Descartes. Such criticism, he notes, has moved in two general directions over roughly the past century. The first, epitomized by poststructuralist thinkers in the line of Foucault and Derrida (and more recently, I would add, by theorists of affect such as Brian Massumi whose work demonstrates a particular

indebtedness to Deleuze), takes its cues from what Taylor calls “a certain reading of Nietzsche.”20 Because this school regards knowledge fundamentally as an instrument of power, it takes upon itself the—implicitly ethical—task of destabilizing the culturally ubiquitous signifying systems it sees as containing the forces constitutive of subjectivity. Central to its appeal is an ideal of aesthetic self-making according to which the individual will, once released from these regimes of signification (or having at least attained a certain critical distance from them), finds itself at liberty to generate new concepts, new experiential possibilities for itself to inhabit. The other school, among whose representative figures Taylor includes Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and the later Wittgenstein, also takes the Enlightenment conception of rationality as detached and apodictic certainty to be inadequate for grasping our dynamic relationship to the world. But rather than casting uniform suspicion on all forms human rationality, or choosing to regard them as so many socially constructed systems that have managed, illegitimately, to essentialize themselves, it maintains a basic conviction that “through a clarification of the conditions of intentionality, we come to a better understanding of what we are as knowing agents—and hence also as language beings—thereby gaining insight into some of the crucial anthropological questions that underpin our moral and spiritual beliefs.”21

Nietzsche’s thought, like the vast majority of modernist activity in the arts, tends to be situated ambivalently between these two extremes. Yet as the following chapters demonstrate, this constitutive tension between the centrifugal and the centripetal

---

21 Ibid., 14.
dimensions of form often proves to be a productive one for modernism. My aim is not to establish direct lines of influence between Nietzsche and the artists whose careers I consider but rather to underscore their often pronounced thematic and methodological affinities. By engaging in a similar reassessment of the nature of truth, value, and representation, aesthetic modernism produces a series of sophisticated responses to the predicament of relativism while reaching sometimes radically different conclusions than Nietzsche about the nature and extent of human agency in the modern world. In doing so, it makes a vital contribution to the effort to overcome epistemology by fostering what Taylor calls an “awareness about the limits and conditions of our knowing,” the implications of which extend into every aspect of human life and society. This, I suggest, is the task of philosophical modernism and—in a much less programmatic sense—the project of modernism in the arts, as well.

22 Ibid.
1. “The poets of our life”: Re-constructing Nietzsche’s Modernism

Nature is a temple from whose living columns
Commingling voices emerge at times;
Here man wanders his way through forests of symbols
Which seem to observe him with familiar eyes.
—Baudelaire, “Correspondences”

Philosophy has been sought so long in vain because man has sought it by the path of science rather than the path of art.
—Schopenhauer

…we want to be the poets of our life—first of all in the smallest, most everyday matters.
—Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

However novel it may strike the contemporary reader, Nietzsche’s suggestion that truth is the product of aesthetic creation has a series of clear precedents in the modern aesthetic tradition from Baumgarten through Schopenhauer, a tradition whose underlying idealist metaphysics he rejects but whose strategies he radicalizes and incorporates into his critique of received metaphysical and moral positions. Thus, in order to expose with any real fidelity the stakes of Nietzsche’s intervention, including its significance for modernist art and theory, it will be first necessary to trace in broad strokes the series of theoretical developments that contributed to the radical transformation and reinvention of the concept of the aesthetic during the first half of the nineteenth century. Critics since M.H. Abrams have noted how art during this period sheds its ancient association with mimetic illusion, a paradigm that had persisted in the neoclassicism predominant
throughout much of eighteenth-century Europe, and comes instead to embody a kind of synthetic intellectual activity that Schelling would call a “unique organon of cognition,” which the romantics believed could serve as a corrective for the excesses of empiricist and rationalist philosophy alike. ¹ But its significance, of course, was not merely cognitive. Equally important is the fact that modern aesthetics, beginning with Kant, but especially with Schiller and the generation of “Jena Romantics” after him, including Hegel, Schelling, Novalis, and the brothers Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel, takes on a deeply ethical and progressive function that extended beyond the fine arts into virtually every aspect of human life and culture, coming to represent the primary catalyst for both individual development and social change. These developments form the immediate cultural backdrop against which Schopenhauer’s notion of an amoral “world will” would emerge as a decisively pessimistic counterpoint, paving the way for Nietzsche’s early, existentialist notion of nature as fundamentally “tragic” and contradictory, a state of affairs made bearable by the intelligible order we impose on it through our aesthetic and rational constructions.² ²

In the latter part of this chapter, I examine in detail Nietzsche’s theory of language, including his appeal to the metaphorical character of all conceptual

¹ For Abrams, see The mirror and the lamp: romantic theory and the critical tradition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953). Richard Rorty’s Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979) has served a similar function in the world of Anglo-American philosophy by tracing the historical development of this crisis in representationalist epistemology as well as demonstrating its relevance to more recent theoretical and cultural debates.
² An additional reason for insisting the importance of these developments—which have remained largely within the purview of romantic studies—is to combat what Moi characterizes as the “historical amnesia” among scholars of modernism, whose neglect of nineteenth-century idealism in recent decades has perpetuated a problematic, and largely unexamined, opposition between modernism and realism (Moi, Henrik Ibsen and the birth of modernism: art, theater, philosophy: 1-7.)
understanding and symbolic communication, in terms of its significance for modernism in philosophy and the arts. Philosophers from Gilles Deleuze and Paul de Man to Alexander Nehamas and Alasdair MacIntyre have identified Nietzsche’s insistence on the metaphoricity of truth as a key stage in the development of his later genealogical approach to the study of moral phenomena. What has not received sufficient attention, however, is how Nietzsche’s own attempts to articulate this position often explicitly foreground the substantive contribution that an art like modernism could hope to make to the understanding, and ultimately, the reconstruction, of everyday life and experience. My contention is thus twofold: that renewed attention to the vitally constructive dimension of metaphor in early texts such as The Birth of Tragedy and “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense” can contribute to a fuller understanding of Nietzsche’s project while, at the same time, throwing into productive relief the social stakes of modernist experimentation, which his writings both embody and seek to come to terms with theoretically.

***

While Descartes is generally credited for the “subjective turn” that would come to define modern philosophy from the Enlightenment onward, his desire to bolster the new science of Copernicus and Galileo by securing an incontestable foundation for human knowledge also led him to endorse a model of cognition that, in its adherence to a Platonic conception of truth as logical-mathematical certainty, excluded out of necessity all operations he considered to be “merely” subjective—beginning with the concrete character of sensory experience itself. By the mid-eighteenth century, however, the theoretical viability of any such sharp ontological divide between subject and object came to appear dubious: this model, along with the seemingly insurmountable problems of mind-body interaction it generated, had been responsible for many of the aporiai that hampered the rationalist systems of Leibniz and Wolff as well as the empiricist philosophy of Locke (which had been pushed to its ultimate, subjectivist conclusion by Berkeley and Hume). And it is exactly this issue that modern aesthetics as a distinct branch of philosophical inquiry was intended to address. Baumgarten's landmark Aesthetica (1750, 1758) was not, as one might expect, devoted primarily to the consideration of art, but rather to reinforcing the rationalist scaffolding of modern philosophy through the attempt to develop a logic proper to sense cognition (aisthanomai in Greek meaning simply “to perceive or feel”). Central to his effort to “carve out a sphere in which perception will enjoy a certain autonomy,” however, was an appeal to a kind of beauty that consisted in the ordering and “perfection” of the senses, thus

suggesting the applicability of the arts to this investigation. Although Kant would take issue in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) with what he considered to be Baumgarten’s inconsistent use of the term “aesthetics,” charging that it verged too closely “on what others call the critique of taste,” it is this newly-expanded conception of the aesthetic, which, in the wake of Edmund Burke, had also drawn into its orbit the category of the sublime, that ends up providing the general orientation for his *Critique of Judgment* (1790), the seminal text of the romantic aesthetic tradition.

If aesthetic judgments for Kant seem to involve the beauty of nature just as often as they involve the beauty of art, this is because his focus in the Third Critique, as in the two that preceded it, remains firmly on the subjective processes involved in acts of judgment, not on the qualities of the specific objects that give rise to them. Indeed, Kant’s “Copernican revolution” in philosophy consists largely in his realization that the mind, rather than passively receiving sense-impressions from the external world (as the empiricists would have it), actually plays an active role in shaping that reality, such that what we perceive is to a great extent a function of how we are predisposed to perceive it.

---

5 As Andrew Bowie has observed, “Baumgarten regards empirical perception as an inherent part of the truth of our relationship to the world, which is why he dignifies aesthetics with a constitutive role in philosophy.” However, Bowie also notes how this basic incompatibility “between a conception of truth based on sensuous particularity and a metaphysical world order… does not become a problem for him” (*Aesthetics and subjectivity : from Kant to Nietzsche*, 2nd ed. [Manchester, UK ; New York: Manchester University Press, 2003]. 6.)


Even a brief synopsis of Kant’s larger system of “transcendental idealism,” which he develops in painstaking detail over the course of his three Critiques, dedicated to metaphysics, morality, and aesthetic judgment, respectively, would exceed the scope of this chapter. I will therefore restrict my focus to his central distinction between “determining” and “reflecting” judgments, in terms of which Kant’s relevance to idealist aesthetics, and, ultimately, to aesthetic and philosophical modernism becomes most readily apparent.

In the preface to the first edition of the Third Critique, Kant identifies aesthetic judgment as an “intermediary” between pure reason and practical reason: two distinct forms of cognition whose theoretical incommensurability had spawned a series of “antinomies” that modern philosophy had so far been unable to overcome. In fact, Kant observes that the privileging of one or the other of these forms of reason had resulted in a bifurcation within philosophy itself, producing, on the one hand, a speculative empirical philosophy that aims to discover fixed laws of nature and, on the other hand, a moral philosophy that begins with the intuition of freedom and seeks on that basis to establish the parameters of ethical action and responsibility. Yet despite their antithetical nature, the domains of pure and practical reason both involve the exercise of “determining” judgment, a process in which the mind subsumes a particular under a preexisting concept, as when, for instance, we identify the object standing in front of us as a “tree,” or when we apply a rule of morality to a concrete situation in which we find ourselves called upon to act.

---

8 Ibid., 55 (5: 167).
In the Third Critique, Kant introduces another, countervailing form of judgment called “reflecting” judgment, in which we are first confronted with an object and then forced to supply the missing concept. Even to characterize the process of reflection in these terms is still somewhat misleading, however, because the point is not to assign any determinant content to the particular, which would exhaust its interpretive potential by assigning it a fixed meaning. For Kant, the beautiful is precisely that “which pleases universally without a concept.” It does not consist in any property of the object, but rather in a self-reflexive operation of the mind, a pleasurable “free-play of the imagination and the understanding” that, once initiated, becomes interested only in sustaining and intensifying itself: “The consciousness of the merely formal purposiveness in the play of the cognitive powers of the subject… is the pleasure itself,” Kant writes. “We linger over the consideration of the beautiful because this consideration strengthens and reproduces itself.”

Several conclusions follow immediately from these revelations. On the basis of his assertion that we have no desire to possess the beautiful object itself, only a desire to experience the intellectual pleasure that its form occasions in us by setting in motion the free-play of the imagination and the understanding, Kant concludes that judgments of taste, while falling short of rational objectivity, are still critically “disinterested” in a way

---

9 Ibid., 104 (5: 219), my emphasis.
10 Ibid., 107 (5: 221), Kant’s emphasis. The notion of a play-drive (Spieltrieb) will return with particular force in Schiller’s *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, where it occupies the middle ground between the opposing forces of form and sense. For a recent discussion of the parallels between Kantian free-play and the philosophy of Derrida, see William D. Melaney, *After ontology : literary theory and modernist poetics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).
that transcends the merely individual and psychological.\textsuperscript{11} Since our individual needs and desires do not interfere with our contemplation of the aesthetic object, our responses in such cases can, and for Kant, always implicitly do, lay claim to what he calls a “subjective universality.”\textsuperscript{12} He elucidates this subtle but crucial distinction in a famous passage in which he appeals to our everyday experience in order to differentiate between such judgments of “taste,” which involve beauty, and judgments of mere “agreeableness”:

With regard to the agreeable, everyone is content that his judgment, which he grounds on a private feeling, and in which he says of an object that it pleases him, be restricted merely to his own person. Hence he is perfectly happy if, when he says that sparkling wine from the Canaries is agreeable, someone else should improve his expression and remind him that he should say “It is agreeable to me”…\textsuperscript{13}

Yet the case would be entirely different, Kant insists, if the beauty of something were in question: it would then be “laughable” if a man were to claim that “this object (the house we see, the coat that person wears, the concert we hear, the poem submitted to our judgment) is beautiful for me,” since “he must not call it beautiful if it merely pleases him.”\textsuperscript{14} While this argument is bound to seem less than compelling to the contemporary reader, who readily accepts that beauty—a word that has tellingly disappeared from our critical lexicon—exists only “in the eye of the beholder,” it is this basic claim to subjective universality, and hence, inter-subjective communicability, that renders aesthetic judgments of such extreme social and moral significance for Kant. In their

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{11} Kant, \textit{Critique of the power of judgment}: 100 (5: 214-15).
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 97 (5: 212).
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., Kant’s emphasis.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 98 (5: 212).
\end{flushleft}
ability to ignite the anti-objectivizing free-play of the cognitive faculties and bring this activity together with the feeling of universal communicability, aesthetic judgments allow us to read the beautiful in nature or art as a symbol of the morally good:

[T]he highest model, the archetype of taste, is a mere idea, which everyone must produce in himself, and in accordance with which he must judge everything that is an object of taste, or that is an example of judging through taste, even the taste of everyone. Idea signifies, strictly speaking, a concept of reason, and ideal the representation of an individual being as adequate to an idea. Hence that archetype of taste, which… cannot be represented through concepts, but only in the individual presentation, would better be called the ideal of the beautiful, something that we strive to produce in ourselves even if we are not in possession of it.

In this way, aesthetic judgments expose their normative function by revealing to each of us a sensus communis (a “shared sense,” or even, alternatively, a “sense of community”) that, as Kant contends, “in its reflection takes account… of everyone else’s way of representing in thought, in order as it were to hold its judgment up to human reason as a whole and thereby avoid the illusion which, from subjective private conditions that could easily be held to be objective, would have a detrimental influence on judgment.” Terry Pinkard sheds light on this dynamic as follows:

In making a subjective judgment about the beautiful, one is making a normative statement about how oneself and all others ought to experience something, not an empirical prediction about how others actually will react to the objects in question…. Such experience of the beautiful as universally communicable must therefore be structured by universal norms that cannot themselves be explicated as concepts.

---

15 Ibid., 106 (5: 221).
16 Ibid., 116-17 (5: 232), Kant’s emphasis.
17 Ibid., 173-74 (5: 293-4).
18 Terry P. Pinkard, *German philosophy, 1760-1860 : the legacy of idealism* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002). 69, 70. As Stanley Cavell emphasizes in his reading of Kant’s aesthetics, “even were agreement in fact to emerge, our judgments, so far as [they are] aesthetic, would remain as essentially subjective, in this sense, as they ever were… The problem of the critic, as of the
In this regard, the disinterestedness of aesthetic contemplation, which Kant characterizes in the Third Critique as “purposiveness without a purpose,” helps to foster what he had identified in both the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and the Second Critique as the basic character of ethical thought: our ability to regard others not as means but as ends in themselves. It is this insight, along with Kant’s conviction that aesthetic experience, through its production of the ideal of the beautiful, “provides the mediating concept between nature and freedom,” that sets the stage for subsequent German romantic thought, beginning with Schiller and Goethe.

While it is difficult to overestimate Schiller’s indebtedness to Kant in works such as *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1793, 1795) and *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* (1795), his emphasis is noticeably different, falling less on the normative dimension of aesthetic judgment as “universal subjective agreement” than on the nature and extent of human freedom and its complex relation to morality. Kant may have opened up this territory for further exploration in the Third Critique—as Paul Guyer explains, there is a sense in which for Kant “our disinterested affection for beauty prepares us for the non-self-regarding respect and love for mankind that is required of us by morality”19—but the

---

19 Kant, *Critique of the power of judgment*: xxvii. Guyer elaborates on this paradoxical relation between aesthetic disinterestedness and morality in Paul Guyer, *Kant and the experience of freedom: essays on aesthetics and morality* (Cambridge England ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), in which he attempts to vindicate Kant from the charge of formalism. His conclusion is that for Kant “paradigmatic judgments of taste are disinterested in their origin but can serve the supreme interest of morality precisely in virtue of their disinterestedness. At the most immediate level of response, aesthetic judgment must be free of external constraints, including the constraints of morality, but in virtue of this freedom the
exact relationship between these two domains of human experience remains largely uncharted at the end of that work. It is this connection between imaginative freedom and moral possibility in the face of natural determinism that Schiller takes as his point of departure in *Of Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, a text that provides a paradigmatic example of high idealist aesthetics against which later writers such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche would react.\(^\text{20}\) I will have the opportunity to return to this text in greater detail in Chapter III, in which I consider the relationship between the species of reflexivity that Schiller identifies in his writings and the self-conscious lyricism of Wallace Stevens in works like “Of Modern Poetry.” For now, I merely want to draw out the importance of his appeal to the aesthetic ideal as a transformative cultural force capable of reconciling the extremes of natural necessity and human freedom.

The essay begins with an extended reflection on the characteristically “modern” interest we take in unspoiled nature, from which our culture finds itself increasingly disconnected. This realization for Schiller is inherently bittersweet. However disheartened we are made to feel by our sense of postlapsarian separation from the natural environment and from earlier forms of civilization that appear to have existed with it in greater harmony, the critical distance this separation imposes also enables us to recognize that the splendor and perfection of nature, however admirable, are also the experience of aesthetic judgment can represent and in some degree prepare us for the exercise of exercise of freedom in morality itself” (96).

\(^{20}\) Nietzsche’s indebtedness to Schiller, particularly evident in early works like *The Birth of Tragedy*, is the subject of Nicholas Martin’s useful study, *Nietzsche and Schiller: untimely aesthetics* (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1996).
products of “necessity”: they cannot help but be what they are.\textsuperscript{21} We, on the other hand, are free, and—this is the crucial point—it takes a freedom like ours, which is the product of a higher, if “fallen,” form of introspective self-consciousness, to elicit the ideal from necessity. The ideal for Schiller, as for Kant, is never an empty, logical concept but rather a vision of moral perfection derived from the experience of nature, one that, qua ideal, can never be fully attained or implemented in the practical realm but which may nonetheless serve as a moral compass to guide our conduct in everyday life. For Schiller, this process of “elevating or idealizing [oneself] beyond any specific and limited actuality toward the absolute possibility”\textsuperscript{22} springs from a capacity for moral feeling which is common to all human beings. It is what prompts us to realize the ethical potential of what he calls our “human nature,” our existence as inherently “moral minds.”\textsuperscript{23}

If, as Kai Hammermeister suggests, romantic philosophy on the whole “esteemed art as the completion of philosophical investigation,”\textsuperscript{24} this sentiment seems to reach its peak in the early writings of Schelling, who, building upon the basic insights of Kantian and Fichtean idealism, makes aesthetic experience the centerpiece of his entire system.

---


\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 240. One might observe that this way of framing the problem is similar to twentieth-century existentialist accounts of “bad faith,” particularly Sartre’s in \textit{Being and Nothingness}, according to which consciousness (the “for-itself”) tries to defy its limitless freedom and possibility by assuming the objective stability that it perceives in the natural, nonhuman world (the “in-itself”). For Sartre, we take comfort in the specious sense of self-identity that arises during apperception, when consciousness mistakenly grasps itself as an object and seems to become both in-itself and for-itself—a soul, or what he facetiously calls a “little God.” Of course, Schiller’s conclusion is entirely different from Sartre’s. He considers the attempt to establish a moral harmony between the freedom of our minds and the completeness of nature to be our highest human calling; for him, there is no inauthenticity, no self-deceit, in this activity because we consciously and willingly subject ourselves to the moral force of the ideal that nature reveals to us.\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 181.

And “system” is indeed the correct word here. Contemporaries such as Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel looked to the fragment as an anti-systematic and anti-foundational principle of composition, one that, even as it gestured toward a certain kind of (pars pro toto) totality, could convey the finitude of the individual human perspective itself—a strategy that Nietzsche would adopt for essentially the same reasons during his middle period, and which figures so prominently in subsequent modernist experimentation across different media. Schelling, however, endorsed the idea of a rigorous, systematic philosophy, a fact that is evident even in his use of a term like Naturphilosophie to describe his ambitious and ever-evolving intellectual project. Whereas Kant had maintained that aesthetic judgment, regardless of its deeply reflective character, contributes nothing to cognition, Schelling seizes upon aesthetic experience as a means of dissolving (or at least rendering permeable) the boundaries of subject and object, claiming that only this hybrid form of cognition can provide direct, intuitive access to the “absolute”: the higher ontological reality that for him encompasses both of these domains. While art would remain an important feature of Schelling’s thought after the publication of The System of Transcendental Idealism in 1800, it loses its centrality shortly thereafter. Beginning with his 1802 lectures on art, aesthetic experience becomes increasingly subordinated to conceptual knowledge in a way that anticipates Hegel’s position on the relevance of art to cultural progress. Hegel, of course, will explicitly grant higher status to both religion and philosophy than to art in his dialectical system.

25 Kant, Critique of the power of judgment: 89 (5: 203-4).
26 Hammermeister, The German aesthetic tradition: 66. Indeed, many of Hegel’s positions, including the central notion that philosophy consists in a history of self-consciousness, owe much to Schelling, his former friend and Tübingen Seminary roommate.
And his well-known description of art’s ability to represent “even the highest ideas in sensuous forms, thereby bringing them nearer to the character of natural phenomena, to the senses, and to feeling” marks, along with the aesthetic theory of Schiller and Schelling, an important break with Kantian formalism by attributing positive ideational content to the art object in a way that foregrounds its historicity and socially transformative potential.

From almost the beginning, then, modern aesthetics can be seen as part of a concerted intellectual effort to bridge the divide between empiricism and rationalism that had become all the more pronounced during the eighteenth century, and which still persists in our shorthand distinction between “analytic” and “Continental” schools of philosophy. It sought to do so by reexamining the nature of human freedom and cognition in ways that offset the purely mechanistic conception of nature advanced by modern science. From a purely theoretical vantage point, the dilemma confronting first-generation romantics might be described as follows: In place of the socially-cohesive worldview generated by religious belief, modern philosophy had posited a subject (still widely conceived as a unified, metaphysical entity), one that, standing alone against a world of value-neutral material objects governed by mechanistic laws, now finds itself alienated both from other subjects and from the “true” nature of things (conceived as


28 Simon Critchley has been one of the most vocal advocates in recent years for rethinking and repairing this geographical-methodological divide, often by drawing on the resources of post-Kantian philosophy. On this issue, see Simon Critchley, *Very little--almost nothing : death, philosophy, literature*, 2nd ed. (London ; New York: Routledge, 2004), as well as his more recent overview and manifesto, *Continental philosophy : a very short introduction* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
objectivity in-itself). Yet it would be misleading to suggest that romantic philosophy encountered these developments in an atmosphere of pure theoretical speculation. It responded in different ways and with varying degrees of explicitness to pressing social, political, and economic developments, including revolution, industrialization, the rise of the middle class and liberal-democratic forms of government, widespread literacy, feminism, abolitionism, and the discourse of universal human rights, to name only some of the most consequential. If the appeal to aesthetic experience for these thinkers suggested a means of repairing the prevailing representationalist model of consciousness, the incoherence of which Hume had exposed from an empirical standpoint, it also suggested new ways of conceiving individual agency in its complex relationship to the products of nature and culture.

The “missing,” because often unacknowledged, theoretical link between the romantic tradition and the philosophy of Nietzsche—whose writings, I am suggesting, both embody and seek to come to terms theoretically with the formal experimentalism typical of modernism in philosophy and the arts—is Schopenhauer, the philosopher whom Nietzsche held in highest esteem during his formative years as a scholar. Schopenhauer’s philosophy does not constitute a break with the idealist tradition as much as a crucial shift in emphasis, a fact that he readily acknowledges in The World as Will and Representation. The result of this shift, however, is striking: a radically circumscribed vision of human agency that, by effectively reversing the romantic emphasis on freedom as the necessary precondition of both speculative philosophy and
moral choice, verges almost on naturalism.  

Beginning from Kantian premise that “everything that exists for knowledge, and hence the whole of this world, is only object in relation to the subject, perception of the perceiver, in a word, representation,” Schopenhauer begins to pull away from the idealist tradition by inserting in the place of the rational, self-conscious subject what Andrew Bowie has aptly identified as a “post-Hobbesian” conception of human agency, one whose defining principle, as a mere extension and instrument of the world will, is now only “self-preservation, not a capacity for self-transcending reason which can lead us to a moral goal.” This is not to say that Schopenhauer’s system dispenses with notions such as freedom and morality altogether. A certain limited freedom is indeed possible for the individual, yet, as Nietzsche will repeatedly point out, it is a deeply “reactive” and “negative” one, attainable through acts of ascetic self-denial that run counter to the demands of the will and provide a spiritual respite from the endless cycle of universal desire and suffering to which the body is predisposed.

It is difficult to overestimate the significance of Schopenhauer on Nietzsche’s development as a philosopher. He represented for the young Nietzsche a model of intellectual integrity, one who, like a tragic hero or martyr, “voluntarily takes upon

29 It should be noted, however, that Schopenhauer is equally critical of what he considered to be the naïve realism of science, an epistemological stance that “necessarily leads to materialism,” the “philosophy of a subject who forgets to take account of himself” Arthur Schopenhauer, *The world as will and representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne, 2 vols., vol. 2 (New York: Dover Publications, 1966). 13.
31 Bowie, *Aesthetics and subjectivity: from Kant to Nietzsche*: 263.
himself the suffering of being truthful.”  

This is especially remarkable, Nietzsche suggests in *Schopenhauer as Educator*, when one considers the intellectual milieu in which Schopenhauer came of age: “Despair of truth,” he writes, is the “danger” that “attends every thinker who set out from the Kantian philosophy,” adding that “if Kant ever should begin to exercise any wide influence, we shall be aware of it in the form of a gnawing and disintegrating skepticism and relativism,” and even then, “only in the most active and noble spirits.”  

This statement, however, contains an obvious irony: while only a select group of individuals is acknowledged to be capable of grasping the cultural and existential implications of Kant’s critical philosophy, the threat of “skepticism and relativism” he had become far more pervasive by 1874 than it had been a half century before, allowing for a wider reception of Schopenhauer’s reinflcetd Kantianism among younger generations of intellectuals than would have been imaginable in 1818, when the first edition of *The World as Will and Representation* was published in Germany.  

Despite its belated acceptance, Schopenhauer’s pessimistic philosophy casts a long shadow over late-nineteenth-century Europe, providing a jarringly deterministic counterpoint to the idealisms that flourished in the wake of Kant, and most of all to the teleological historicisms of Schelling and Hegel, which had begun to lose their appeal for many of Nietzsche’s generation. This was the generation that came of age in the aftermath of the failed Revolution of 1848, a time when the self-identities of the modern

---

33 Ibid., 140. Nietzsche here echoes one of Schopenhauer’s own assertions in the Appendix to *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol. 1: “The whole strength and importance of Kant’s teaching will become evident only in the course of time, when the spirit of the age, itself gradually reformed and altered in the most important and essential respect by the influence of that teaching, furnishes living evidence of the power of that giant mind…. Real and serious philosophy still stands where Kant left it” (416).
European nation states where solidifying in response to the social and economic reorganization spurred by modern capitalism and its attendant phenomena (industrialization, urbanization, middle-class professionalism, and so on), which had been well underway since the end of the eighteenth century. In this age of positivism and Realpolitik, when the revolutionary hopes that fueled so much of the philosophical and aesthetic innovation earlier in the century had been dashed, and with the moralistic dimension of idealism itself now coming to appear both naïve and confining—the new orthodoxy—\(^{34}\) it is easy to imagine how Schopenhauer’s proto-Darwinian conception of a blind, endlessly striving will as the driving force behind all natural phenomena, one that reaches into even the most advanced operations of the human intellect,\(^{35}\) might resonate as it did with several generations of post-romantic and modernist artists, including Richard Wagner, Thomas Hardy, Emile Zola, Edgar Allen Poe, Charles Baudelaire, Joseph Conrad, André Gide, Thomas Mann, W.B. Yeats, and Samuel Beckett.\(^{36}\) In the case of Nietzsche, a classical philologist by training but also an adventurous and eclectic

\(^{34}\) As Terry Pinkard notes, in addition to the utopian hopes of both the capitalist and socialist camps during the 1850s and 1860s, with which there exists an obvious connection to idealist philosophy, “there was likewise the anxiety provoked by all of the traditionalist responses to [idealism]… an anxiety that… has continually provoked its own call for a reassertion of the authority of reason, or nature, or tradition, which would somehow survive the kind of self-consciousness that Kantians and post-Kantians thought had come to be such an unavoidable norm about our world” Pinkard, *German philosophy, 1760-1860: the legacy of idealism*: 360. And it is in this spirit that we find the nameless protagonist of Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* mocking Schiller’s notion of the “beautiful and lofty,” which had by this time lost its revolutionary luster.

\(^{35}\) “The will, considered purely in itself, is devoid of knowledge, and is only a blind, irresistible urge, as we see it appear in inorganic and vegetable nature and in their laws, and also in the vegetative part of our own life. Through the addition of the world as representation [i.e., as represented and mediated by the intellect], developed for its service, the will obtains knowledge of its own willing and what it wills, namely that this is nothing but this world, life, precisely as it exists” (Schopenhauer, *The world as will and representation*, 1: 275.).

reader, the temptation is especially strong, given the frequent references in his writings to Kant, Schiller, and Hegel (or to positions associated with them), to overestimate the degree of his actual exposure to these thinkers’ work. In fact, his conception of this tradition was shaped almost entirely by his encounter with Schopenhauer. Yet perhaps for this very reason, Nietzsche’s philosophy almost from the very beginning comes to represent not merely another development within post-Kantian idealism or even (as often appears to be the case) a straightforward rejection of it, but rather a metastasization of its basic approaches and principles, including the epistemological and ethical significance of aesthetic experience.

* * *

By the middle of the nineteenth century, then, the high-romantic conception of nature as an extra-rational but still intuitively graspable whole, a providential harmony of forces radiating with moral significance, begins to give way—in contexts where it is not simply displaced by positivism—to a sense of nature as unpredictable, indifferent, and irreducibly plural: a transition that David Wellbery has usefully characterized as one from a broadly “endogenous” to a “constructivist” understanding of form. It is this basic concern with the rational inaccessibility and amorality of nature that provides Nietzsche’s

---

David E. Wellbery, “Romanticism and Modernity: Epistemological Continuities and Discontinuities,” *European Romantic Review* 21, no. 3 (2010): 276. For Wellbery, the constructivist model not only predominates throughout the twentieth century but also continues in many ways to define our contemporary theoretical climate.
point of departure in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). Here, in the form of the dichotomy of
the Dionysian and the Apollonian, Nietzsche adopts virtually without modification
Schopenhauer’s ontology of the will and the radically instrumentalized notion of human
rationality attached to it. Although he introduces this dichotomy as a means of accounting
for the emergence of tragic drama in ancient Greece, it almost immediately takes on a
much broader significance. For it becomes clear that these categories are to be understood
not only aesthetically but ontologically, as opposing tendencies or drives “which burst
forth from nature herself.”

Contrary to prevailing assumptions about *The Birth of
Tragedy*, Nietzsche’s aim is not to suppress the Apollonian in favor of the Dionysian but
rather to acknowledge their coexistence within every individual and culture, and to argue
for the necessity of striking a balance between them, as Attic tragedy had done so
spectacularly. However, it is also undeniable which of the two tends to occupy the bulk
of his critical attention in this context. He explicitly identifies the Dionysian drive as “the
foundation of all existence” and “the eternal and original artistic power that first calls the
whole world of phenomena into existence.”

More or less synonymous with
Schopenhauerian will, Dionysus here represents the seething primordial oneness of an
endlessly self-differentiating nature, what Nietzsche at one point calls “the primal unity,
its pain and contradiction.”

So compelling is Nietzsche’s account of the Dionysian as a necessary irrationalist
counterpoint to the excesses of Enlightenment rationalism that one needs to read

---

38 Nietzsche, “The Birth of Tragedy,” 38.
39 Ibid., 143.
40 Ibid., 49.
somewhat against the rhetorical grain of the text in order to grasp its other key aspect, which emerges most fully in the figure of Apollo. While the Dionysian may constitute for Nietzsche the general condition of nature itself—and indeed, on a physiological level, of humanity as well, insofar as our bodies and drives are seen as extensions of this basic principle—he also recognizes that this ecstatic state in which the principium individuationis breaks down, dissolving the “illusory” boundary between subject an object and revealing to us the sheer contingency of nature, is nonetheless an exceptional one for human beings, who dwell, as he insists, almost entirely within the orderly, intelligible world of forms and concepts. This is precisely the domain of Apollo, “the shining one” (an appellation that allows Nietzsche to pun on Schein and scheinen, which can also refer to “appearance” and “semblance”). Apollo comes to represent not only the principle behind aesthetic form, which for Nietzsche culminates in sculpture and the plastic arts, but also, and more generally, the formative power of the human mind itself, which projects order—and meaning—from a finite spatiotemporal perspective upon the fundamentally extra-rational and amoral flux of nature. With this gesture, Nietzsche exposes his indebtedness to the entire idealist tradition, but above all to Schopenhauer, who, as we have seen, both radicalized and reinflected the basic Kantian thesis that the mind makes a fundamental contribution to what it experiences. While Kant’s concern with this world-generating subjective activity was primarily intellectual, “a question of the basic or ‘a priori’ structures of experience needed for a coherent cognitive life,” Schopenhauer, in an important shift of emphasis, “considers these structures to be
primarily enablers of action rather than knowledge.”^41 For Schopenhauer, our predisposition to experience the world as consisting of distinct objects stems from our even more fundamental need to act upon individual, recognizable things in ways that might bring about the satisfaction, however temporary, of our various needs and desires.

If there is also for Nietzsche a definite sense in which this interpretive imposition of concepts, although a constitutive feature of human experience, removes us from the deeper Dionysian truth of being—which is what motivates his celebration of music as an inherently non-representational art form capable of giving direct expression to the will—this picture is complicated by his insistence in several key passages within The Birth of Tragedy that “it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified.”^42 The Dionysian may reveal to us the “terrible” and groundless essence of nature, yet it is only through the process of Apollonian transfiguration that life is made meaningful and worthwhile. The implications of this insight are numerous but might be said to branch out in two general directions. On the one hand, it leads Nietzsche to speculate about the theoretical underpinnings of modernity itself, which he identifies in a species of “Socratic optimism” that by the fourth century BC had already eroded the tragic worldview through a process of idealization and rational description, setting the stage for the “life-denying” asceticism of Christianity and its eventual metastasization into Enlightenment rationalism and the increasingly positivistic character of modern science—all of these constituting so many stages in the development of a larger cultural

^42 Nietzsche, "The Birth of Tragedy,” 52, emphasis retained.
tendency Nietzsche would label the “will-to-truth.” On the other hand, it also suggests an intimate connection between aesthetic creation, language (understood as symbolic communication in the broadest possible sense), and everyday experience.

Citing the dual character of the Apollonian as representation and transfiguration, Ivan Soll notes that Nietzsche “conceives of the Apollonian world of art and dreams not really as the opposite of the everyday world, but rather as the heightened expression and further development of tendencies already present in it…. What distinguishes the Apollonian world… from the everyday world is only that ‘joyous necessity’ in which ‘there is nothing indifferent and unnecessary’.” In other words, the Apollonian drive, which in art generates forms that transfigure the inexplicable and uncontrollable aspects of existence into order and beauty, is different only in degree, not in kind, from the basic “illusions” (the world-organizing conceptual and narrative frameworks) that structure everyday life. I want to take up this suggestion, both because it will allow us to see the relevance of Nietzsche’s view of ordinary experience to the development of modernist constructivism and because it will help us, at the same time, to steer clear of some of the looser appropriations of Nietzsche’s thought in recent years, which have placed such great emphasis on the critical and semiotic dimension of his texts that their implications for life, including a certain vitalistic conception of human flourishing in the wake of traditional moral frameworks, have been obscured.

44 Sarah Kofman makes a similar observation in Nietzsche and metaphor, trans. Duncan Large (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1993).
45 Perhaps the most notable of these semiotically oriented readings (which I hesitate in grouping together under the heading of “poststructuralism” because I do not feel that the readings of theorists such as
Nietzsche’s most direct statement of the inseparability of truth and value in terms of its relationship to aesthetic creation occurs in the provocatively titled “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense,” a text that, in its brevity, wit, and blatantly iconoclastic rhetoric, reads almost like a modernist manifesto. If in The Birth of Tragedy Nietzsche had suggested that we can at times experience the world as it is in itself—the undifferentiated and contingent flux of becoming—by the time of this essay, composed the following year for his never-finished Philosophenbuch, he has become tellingly reticent about such ontological issues. The terminology of Apollonian-Dionysian is also conspicuously absent. Nietzsche is now content to refer only to “the mysterious ‘X’ of the thing-in-itself” (a formulation reminiscent of Kant’s noumenon as well as Locke’s empiricist description of substance as something “I know not what”) and seems...
concerned primarily with the failure of linguistic concepts to capture the full range of corresponding sensations and emotions that stem from one’s concrete experience of an object, event, or situation. “Like form,” he suggests, “a concept is produced by overlooking what is individual and real [des Individuellen und Wirklichen], whereas nature knows neither forms nor concepts.” Although this claim about what nature “knows” is arguably ontological, Nietzsche’s reference to the “individual and real” gestures only toward that which is phenomenologically present in our experience but which, because it cannot be communicated through pre-existing concepts, tends to escape our notice. It is an attempt to underscore the particularity and difference that, so Nietzsche is claiming, get suppressed in favor of the “abstract” universality of the concept itself. And he concludes on this basis that “the entire material in and with which the man of truth, the researcher, the philosopher, works and builds, stems, if not from cloud-cuckoo land, then certainly not from the essence of things,” for “between two absolutely different spheres, such as subject and object are, there is no causality, no correctness no expression, but at most an aesthetic way of relating.”

“On Truth and Lying” is teeming with the verbal pyrotechnics for which Nietzsche is known. But what makes the piece exceptional, even within Nietzsche’s oeuvre, is how directly the performative and self-reflexive dimension of his writing (just beginning to come into its own during this period, when Nietzsche was lecturing on

---


48 Ibid.
rhetoric at the University of Basel) coincides with the central claim of the essay, which asserts—in propositional form—the fundamentally figural character of truth:

What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms, in short a sum of human relations which have been subjected to poetic and rhetorical intensification, translation and decoration, and which, after they have been in use for a long time, strike a people as firmly established, canonical, and binding; truths are the illusions of which we have forgotten that they are illusions, metaphors which have become worn out by frequent use and have lost all sensuous vigor….

Although he will pursue this insight to its most extreme constructivist consequences, Nietzsche was by no means the first to argue for the essentially metaphorical nature of language and thought. With its roots in the nominalist revolution at the very outset of modernity, similar strains of this argument, as both Derrida and de Man have emphasized, can be found in Vico, Condillac, and Rousseau. It is also present in Herder’s *On the Origin of Language*, and even more vividly, in Shelley’s *Defence of Poetry*, where Shelley affirms both that “poetry is connate with the origin of man” and—in terms remarkably similar to Nietzsche’s—that language itself is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things and perpetuates their apprehension, until the words which

49 Ibid., 146.
50 Louis Dupré describes how Ockham’s philosophy departed from the epistemology of classical thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle, for whom “knowledge rested on the assumption that the real is intrinsically intelligible and hence that the mind merely actualizes what is already potentially cognizable. Ockham no longer takes such a built-in harmony between mind and nature for granted” (Louis K. Dupré, *Passage to modernity: an essay in the hermeneutics of nature and culture* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993]. 39.). See also Michael Allen Gillespie, “The Nominalist Revolution and the Origin of Modernity,” in *The theological origins of modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).
represent them, become, through time, signs for portions or classes of thoughts instead of pictures of integral thoughts…

To be sure, Shelley’s effort to establish a connection between the metaphors of the poet and the trans-empirical “essence” of nature, as well as the deeply moral significance that he associates with the act of aesthetic creation, whereby “the poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one,” differ drastically in their basic orientation from Nietzsche’s full-blown constructivist position. For Nietzsche’s emphasis by the time of this essay is no longer primarily on rendering permeable the boundaries between subject and object (the feature of *The Birth of Tragedy* that linked it directly to the romantic tradition) but instead on underscoring the extent to which any conception of “objectivity” to which we might appeal exists only as a complex anthropocentric projection whose parameters have been fixed by language and tradition. Taken together, Nietzsche’s reference to the trans-human world as an “indefinable ‘X’” and his thesis of the metaphoricity of truth point to an understanding of nature as an *aesthetically generative* ontology: a kind of ambient Rorschach test onto which we project a set of conceptual coordinates that language codifies, and then, “after they have been in use for a long time, strike a people as firmly established, canonical, and binding.”

What I want to suggest, with Wellbery and Altieri, is that this understanding of form as something fundamentally constructed, something imposed by human beings with various degrees of self-awareness upon a natural world now considered both malleable and amoral, is also the model that underwrites the vast majority of modernist

---

experimentation in the arts. Not only would the acceptance of such a criterion render more permeable the historical boundaries of modernism, which tend to differ widely across national and linguistic contexts; it would also enable us to distinguish more effectively a number of “early modernist” figures, including Baudelaire, Flaubert, Dostoyevsky, Ibsen, and James, from both their romantic precursors and their late romantic, or broadly “Victorian,” contemporaries. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, a particularly radical strain of constructivism emerges in the works associated with symbolism, decadence, and fin-de-siècle aestheticism, which defined themselves in opposition to the naturalism of Zola. Their unofficial doctrine of “art for art’s sake” reaches its peak in Wilde’s deliberate reversal of the mimetic model, which since the time of Plato had subordinated aesthetic form to its representational content. Only a derivative kind of art would want to imitate life, Wilde contends in “The Decay of Lying,” because life itself consists fundamentally of “the desire for expression, and Art is always presenting various forms through which this expression can be attained.” For Wilde, truth itself therefore becomes “entirely and absolutely a matter of style.”

Nietzsche would no doubt agree with the general thrust of this statement. However, he is also quick to emphasize, even in the early writings, that existing communicative forms are not as easily or spontaneously altered as this notion of expression seems to suggest. For Nietzsche, such forms always reflect the disposition of the culture that continues—because they have proven to be an effective means of sustaining that culture, or, at any rate, the interests of its dominant members—to utilize

---

them. They are interwoven the various concrete social and pragmatic contexts, the Wittgensteinian “forms of life,” in which they originate. By attempting to reshape, quite literally, the terms of the discussion, the modernist seeker of new forms will therefore constantly find himself or herself running up against not only the limits of communicability (and intelligibility) but also what, from this radical perspective, becomes the tremendous inertia of the status quo.

Nietzsche’s later writings are marked by an increasing sensitivity to exactly these difficulties, leading ultimately to the development of his genealogical method, which both acknowledges and attempts to think critically about the inseparability of truth and value within the larger trajectory of Western cultural history. As a critical narrative that exposes the historical contingency and evolution of a particular system of values, such as those of the Judeo-Christian tradition, genealogy emerges for Nietzsche as the temporal analogue, or diachronic extension, of metaphor. It is an outlook that also finds expression in Ibsen’s Dr. Stockmann, who, in An Enemy of the People, exclaims to an uncomprehending mob of his fellow townsman that

\[
\text{when a truth’s grown old, it’s gone a long way toward becoming a lie.... The truths accepted by the masses now are the ones proclaimed basic by the advance guard in our grandfathers’ time. We fighters on the frontiers today, we no longer recognize them. There’s only one truth that’s basic in my belief: that no society can live a healthy life on the bleached bones of that kind of truth.}\]

\[54\]


48
What Nietzsche, Ibsen, and Wilde all crucially underscore, however, is that this affirmation of relativism need not imply arbitrariness. Even if we acknowledge that the truth- and value-frameworks constitutive of our everyday existence are the historically contingent, or “socially constructed,” inventions of human beings, this does not make them any less real, any less necessary to the life of the individuals and communities whose flourishing they serve in various ways either to promote or impede. Viewed in this light, even a notion such as “expression,” which always involves a certain reliance on the conventions governing the interactions between the members of a society, would appear to be every bit as much a social phenomenon as it is an individual one.

By underscoring the persistence of this Apollonian dimension of Nietzsche’s philosophy, I do not mean to suggest that he ever overcame his profound ambivalence regarding the role that he understood language to play in determining the general parameters of human thought and action: an ambivalence reflected in the varying assessments of this dynamic which one finds scattered throughout his writings. He will grant, for example, in one of his more charitable moods, that language is a repository for “the spiritual activity of millennia.” Yet his insistence in Twilight of the Idols, a much later text, that it “was invented only for what is average, medium, communicable,” something that in the hands of metaphysicians becomes “a crude fetishism,” is admittedly more representative of Nietzsche’s polemical stance on this issue. And such

57 Ibid., 482.
remarks also establish a telling continuity with the resolutely nonconformist depiction of language in “On Truth and Lying,” one that culminates, as I now want to show, in a paean to the experimental strategies soon to be employed on a much wider scale by aesthetic modernism.

* * *

When Nietzsche speaks of our tendency to forget that established truths are the products of a metaphorical (or more precisely, a metonymical) process of interpretive selection and universalization, he is not describing any actual event, but rather an allegorical one, a primary mode of repression that he seems to regard as a necessary condition for civilized life itself: “only because man forgets himself… as an artistically creative subject, does he live with some degree of peace, security, and consistency.”  

Nietzsche contends that humans, as inherently social beings who have both a practical need and a social obligation to adopt the “customary metaphors” transmitted through language, have ascended to more advanced forms of social organization by making their actions increasingly “subject to the rule of abstractions; they no longer tolerate being swept away by sudden impressions and sensuous perceptions; they now generalize all these impressions first, turning them into cooler, less colorful concepts in order to harness

the vehicle of their lives and actions to them.” This process is only accelerated by the emergence of science, whose function, he suggests, is not fundamentally to alter but merely to streamline and extend “that great columbarium of concepts, the burial site of perceptions”—which is why he insists that science is no less anthropomorphic for having accomplished this feat. Sarah Kofman explains Nietzsche’s reasoning on this matter as follows: “Science’s only advance on ordinary language is that it describes the ‘world’ ‘better’… in a more systematic, refined, and masked manner. It eliminates any anthropomorphisms which were too apparent, so as better to hide its metaphorical nature and pass off its interpretations as truths.” Nietzsche’s claim is that in a cultural atmosphere dominated by the scientific spirit, such as one finds both in late antiquity and in Enlightenment modernity, the basic interpretive-constructive drive that has been subordinated to this process of abstract, logical classification and refinement “seeks out a channel and a new area for its activity and finds it in myth and art generally.”

It is here, in the final pages of “On Truth and Lying,” that the relevance of Nietzsche’s constructivist thesis to modernism becomes most apparent. He affirms that the metaphorical drive, having been relegated for so long to the domain of art, is now becoming increasingly volatile, even destructive, intent on “constantly confus[ing] the cells and the classifications of concepts by setting up new translations, metaphors, metonymies; it constantly manifests the desire to shape the given world of the waking human being in ways which are just as multiform, irregular, inconsequential, incoherent,

---

59 Ibid., 146.
60 Kofman, *Nietzsche and metaphor*: 63.
charming and ever-new, as things are in a dream.” This image allows Nietzsche to envision a new type of artist-philosopher whose “liberated intellect” would take “that vast assembly of beams and boards to which the needy man clings” and use it “as a mere climbing frame and plaything on which to perform its most reckless tricks.” This hybrid figure, the modernist *par excellence*, then “smashes this framework, jumbles it up and ironically re-assembles it… guided, not by concepts, but by intuitions.” By combating our habitual tendency to subsume experiences under preexisting concepts, the immediacy and force of sensation can now be more completely experienced and expressed, Nietzsche suggests, but *not through ordinary language*. On this point he is adamant:

No regular way leads from these intuitions to the land of the ghostly schemata and abstractions; words are not made for them; man is struck dumb when he sees them, or he will speak only in forbidden metaphors and unheard-of combinations of concepts so that, by at last demolishing and deriding the old conceptual barriers, he may do creative justice to the impression made on him by the mighty, present intuition.

This desire to capture in art the concrete, phenomenological texture of our experience is what informs a great deal of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century modernism. It is especially apparent in the first, vitalistic wave of so-called high modernism in the years leading up to World War I, a period characterized by the emergence of a number of related aesthetic and philosophical movements, including phenomenology in Germany, Bergsonism in France, futurism in Italy, and imagism and its various offshoots in the Anglo-American world, as well as the cross-pollination of these theories across national and linguistic borders. Central to all of these movements is a notion of creative

62 Ibid.
63 Ibid., 152.
destruction, of “defamiliarization,” which seeks to engage the life-world outside the conceptual “prison-house” imposed on it by language and traditional forms of representation. At the same time, the method of productive recombination that Nietzsche alludes to, a method born of the “desire to shape the given world of the waking human being in ways which are just as multiform, irregular, inconsequential, incoherent, charming and ever-new, as things are in a dream,” resembles not only the compositional strategies of symbolism and decadence, with which he would have had at least a passing familiarity, but also, and perhaps even more strikingly, those of surrealism and dada, which it prefigures.

Because I cannot hope to illustrate all of these claims here, I want to consider one especially representative case that also anticipates themes that will be central to my discussion of Ezra Pound in Chapter One—namely, that of T.E. Hulme, the British poet, philosopher, critic, and co-founder (with Pound) of imagism. Before his untimely death in the trenches of World War I, Hulme composed a handful of essays and lectures that came to play a key role in defining the theory and practice of modernist writing in the Anglophone world. Hulme read widely in Continental philosophy, and his synthesis of the ideas of Bergson (whose Introduction to Metaphysics Hulme translated into English

---

*64* Erich Heller usefully juxtaposes this idea of language as a so-called prison-house with Nietzsche’s comments on ordinary language in *The Will to Power*, 522: “Now we read disharmonies and problems into things because we think *only* in the form of language—and thus believe in the “eternal truth” of “reason” (e.g., subject, attribute, etc.) *We cease to think when we refuse to do so under the constraint of language*; we barely reach the doubt that sees this limitation as a limitation. *Rational thought is interpretation according to a scheme we cannot throw off*” (Erich Heller, *The importance of Nietzsche : ten essays* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988]. 152, Nietzsche’s emphasis).
in 1912), Sorel, Worringer, and Husserl had a direct and appreciable impact on authors such as Pound, Wyndham Lewis, and T.S. Eliot, with whom he associated in London. What is of primary interest to the current discussion, however, is that Hulme’s critical writings also evince a particular fascination with the relationship between formal experimentation, ordinary language, and cognition. He contends in “Romanticism and Classicism,” for instance, that “plain speech is essentially inaccurate” because it fails to do justice to the immediate data of consciousness, arguing that “it is only by new metaphors… that it can be made precise.” In the attempt to offset what struck him as the subjectivist effusions of romantic poetry, Hulme advocated for an aesthetic that would revive the classical ideals of impersonality and restraint:

The great aim is accurate, precise and definite description. The first thing is to recognise how extraordinarily difficult this is. It is no mere matter of carefulness; you have to use language, and language is by its very nature a communal thing; that is, it expresses never the exact thing but a compromise—that which is common to you, me and everybody. But each man sees a little differently, and to get out clearly and exactly what he does see, he must have a terrific struggle with language, whether it be with words or the technique of other arts.

Aesthetic experimentation for Hulme, as for Nietzsche, is a process that facilitates the artist’s “struggle” against the conventions of the medium. It enables the artist to achieve a certain critical distance from existing linguistic and conceptual frameworks, one that allows him or her to arrive at a more faithful, and affectively dynamic, apprehension of the particular: what Nietzsche, as we have seen, calls “the mighty, present intuition.” Of

---


course, there exists a palpable tension between Hulme’s claim that the “communal” aspect of language, which “expresses never the exact thing but a compromise,” and his suggestion that this thing can be captured and, to some extent, communicated through the poet’s skillful violation of conventional modes of representation. Although Hulme describes this process as a countermeasure to the abstractionist tendencies of romanticism (which he accuses of metaphysical overreaching in its unceasing quest for the “infinite” and the “one”), its emphasis on the importance of the individual vision as well as its tendency to draw attention to the energies brought to bear in the construction of the artwork in a way that invites us to reflect on the relationship between form and intelligibility itself would also appear to be deeply continuous with the basic methods and aims of romantic aesthetics from Kant and Schiller onward.

For constructivist modernism, formal experimentation becomes the central component of a much larger project of cultural criticism and renewal, or what I referred to at the outset as the cultural equivalent of atom smashing. With this metaphor, I mean to draw attention to how modernist art constitutes a highly reflexive way of feeling and thinking that never simply dissolves into philosophical argumentation but rather, by exploring and emphasizing the possibilities of the medium, stands to reveal something of how individual and social realities are constructed. Altieri has provided what is perhaps the most cogent definition of this process: “the deliberate foregrounding of the syntactic activity of a work of art.” While conceding that “most significant art makes internal relations within the work the basic interpretant of the concepts it takes as its subject,” Altieri affirms that modernism “is distinctive in the level of resistance it pursues. It hopes
to alter, not only what we think, but also how we understand who one becomes as one adapts these various logics for identifying and sorting the elements of experience.” In a similar manner, Robert Pippin describes our encounter with such works of art as an encounter with “forms of mindedness,” an expression that underscores the inherent sociality of form while drawing our attention to how the concrete, intellectual-affective syntheses generated for us by these works provide insight into the basic frameworks of value that extend between ourselves, our world, and the others with whom inhabit that world—all in a way that, as Ezra Pound observed, promises to “provide data for ethics.”

* * *

Several commentators have noted that the rhetorical terminology so predominant in Nietzsche’s early works plays a greatly diminished role in his subsequent writings, where the term “metaphor” is superseded by a cluster of more precise (i.e., less metaphorical) terms, including “interpretation,” “perspective,” and “value.” This is true, yet Nietzsche’s constructivist thesis remains notably intact in these later writings; it informs both his genealogical approach to the study of moral phenomena as well as his

---

67 Altieri, *Painterly abstraction in modernist American poetry: the contemporaneity of modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 56-57. Although he identifies this reflexivity as a species of “abstraction,” Altieri notes that it can occur “either noniconically or in conjunction with representational content.”
conviction, epitomized by the controversial figure of the Übermensch, that exemplary individuals armed with these insights might actively intervene in the ongoing transformations of modernity, providing new directions for culture by revealing—indeed, creating—new values around which more viable forms of individual and social identity can be constructed. This becomes fully explicit in Section 299 of The Gay Science, entitled “What one should learn from artists”:

How can we make things beautiful, attractive, and desirable for us when they are not? And I rather think that in themselves they never are…. We should learn from artists while being wiser than they are in other matters. For with them this subtle power usually comes to an end where art ends and life begins; but we want to be the poets of our life—first of all in the smallest, most everyday matters.70

It would be a mistake to understand Nietzsche here as asserting the superiority of philosophy over art in general; his comments seem to be addressed specifically what Schiller had labeled “naïve” art, the kind of art that, irrespective of its merits, uses conventional modes of expression to achieve some mimetic goal and does so without reflecting on the role played by the artist (and culture more generally) in projecting intelligible form onto nature. In fact, rather than denigrating art, Nietzsche seems to be working here toward an affirmation of the necessary confluence of art and philosophy in post-Enlightenment modernity, in which the appeal to form becomes paramount. This becomes apparent two sections later, when he again takes up the thread of this argument:

As a poet, [the higher type of human being] certainly has vis contemplativa and the ability to look back on his work, but at the same time also and above all vis creativa, which the active human being lacks,

whatever visual appearances and the faith of all the world may say. We who think and feel at the same time are those who really continually fashion something [wirklich und immerfort Etwas machen] that had not been there before: the whole eternally growing world of valuations, colors, accents, perspectives, scales, affirmations, and negations. This poem that we have invented is continually studied by the so-called practical human beings (our actors) who learn their roles and translate everything into flesh and actuality, into the everyday…. Nature is always value-less, but has been given value at some time… and it was we who gave and bestowed it. Only we have created the world that concerns man!"  

We have seen how Nietzsche, in some of the earlier works, seemed to exhibit a desire for authentic, unmediated communication—whether by advocating the dissolution of self-identity through Dionysian ecstasy or by lamenting the fact that we are unable to transmit with any real fidelity the immediate data content of consciousness. And we have also seen how this fundamentally de-creative or deconstructive impulse culminated in the call for a liberated intellect who “smashes this framework, jumbles it up and ironically re-assembles it.” What we find in The Gay Science, however, in a subtle but important shift of emphasis, is a theatrum mundi motif that demonstrates his growing respect for the primary act of constructivist “fashioning” (machen) itself. Nature, to be sure, is still inherently “value-less” for Nietzsche. But what he now seems to recognize with far greater clarity is that there is no way out of the basic region of intelligibility opened up by the normative and value-laden frameworks that inhere in our language: “a living thing,” he writes in the second Untimely Meditation, “can be healthy, strong, and fruitful only when bounded by a horizon.” This is the sense in which Wittgenstein will appeal to the “grammar of an experience,” and in which Heidegger, despite his own ambivalence

---

71 Ibid., 241-42.
72 Untimely meditations: 63.
toward the everyday in early writings such as Being and Time, will come not only to accept but to marvel at the fact that language has “always already” opened up a “world” for us by supplying the meaningful distinctions that orient us, first practically and only later theoretically, toward phenomena—a process that actualizes certain systems of interpretation, and the modes of experience attached to them, while necessarily foreclosing on others.

But Nietzsche, in his primary capacity of cultural critic and “psychologist,” found himself unsatisfied by such post-metaphysical ruminations. What he demanded, what he predicted and willed, was nothing less than the active reshaping of the contours of individual and social reality, the “whole eternally growing world of valuations, colors, accents, perspectives, scales, affirmations, and negations” that would manifest itself even “in the smallest, most everyday matters.” Like both the earlier notion of metaphor-construction from which it stems and the later notion of the will-to-power (Wille zur Macht) into which it soon develops, the activity of fashioning (machen, to do, to make, to produce) collapses any rigid distinction between literal and figurative, fact and fiction. Nature was “given value at some time,” Nietzsche writes, emphasizing not only its social constructedness but also its perpetually antecedent character: the sense of belatedness and cultural stagnation that elsewhere motivates his celebration of “untimely” thinkers such as Schopenhauer and Wagner (at least initially). Thus, in what looks very much like a

---

ootnotesize{Richard Schacht and Tracy B. Strong have both illuminated the suggestive linguistic and thematic connection between Macht and machen as it pertains to Nietzsche’s broader conception of form. For Schacht, see Nietzsche (London ; Boston: Routledge & K. Paul, 1983). 224-29; for Strong, see Friedrich Nietzsche and the politics of transfiguration (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000). Strong also makes explicit how, in this broader notion of the will-to-power as the imposition of form, we also find “the answer to the never asked question, What is the apollonian?” (234, Strong’s emphasis).}
Hegelian gesture stripped of its teleological overtones, the idea of fashioning implies our becoming conscious of an activity that our species is said to have carried out on a largely instinctive basis since time immemorial. Nietzsche’s suggestion, both here and in many of his later works, is that once we discover that it was actual men and women who “gave and bestowed” these frameworks through which reality is disclosed, we might actively intervene in the ongoing transformations of modernity, generating new values by which to structure and live our lives. Indeed, his entire critical philosophy is predicated on this assumption, which is in the end all that saves it from succumbing to the nihilism he so vigilantly roots out in others and attempts to combat on the ideological battlefield of his own writings.

At this point, however, a number of questions arise: Who, or what, is the “we” that Nietzsche charges with the task of value-creation? What kind of (singular, collective, or entirely post-subjective) agency does this pronoun subjunctively embody and seek to produce? And how is such a process to be carried out? It is possible to read the figure of the philosopher-poet as kind of puppet-master: a solitary, creative spirit imposing his or her enabling vision on the unreflective “actors” of everyday life. In “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” Nietzsche quotes approvingly a passage from the historian Barthold Niebuhr affirming “how unaware even the greatest and highest spirits of our human race have been of the chance nature of the form assumed by the eyes through which they see and through which they compel everyone to see,” which leads him to speculate that a hundred men who willfully “form within [themselves] an image to which the future shall correspond” could silence forever “the whole noisy sham-culture
of our age.” And yet, while such a Promethean vision no doubt had tremendous appeal for Nietzsche, it is unclear whether, and to what extent, he believed that any comprehensive ideological refashioning of human behavior was possible to implement on a wide scale at any given time, at least in a way that such “liberated intellects” might disburden themselves, and others, of the “reactive” spirit of the Judeo-Christian tradition without either succumbing to nihilistic despair or erecting new absolutes in place of the old idols. Even his controversial notion of the Übemensch is described in terms that are largely aspirational and hortatory in character—as, for instance, in Zarathustra’s rhapsodic insistence that “man is something which must be overcome.”

Despite his ability to pose such issues in a way that foregrounds (rather than simply explains away) their complex and often contradictory nature, I would be hesitant to claim that Nietzsche was able to resolve them with sufficient clarity. What I have attempt to demonstrate here is how a handful of Nietzsche’s early texts manage to bring to an advanced stage of philosophical expression a set of distinctly post-romantic concerns about the role of mind and language in the construction of reality, concerns that, as we will see in subsequent chapters, soon become central to the enterprise of modernism in philosophy and the arts. Although my focus has been on Nietzsche’s appeal to metaphor as a means of conflating the longstanding philosophical distinction between truth and value, I have also sought to underscore how such arguments, and the attack on metaphysical absolutes for which he is best known, testify to an abiding

---


75 “Thus Spoke Zarathustra,” 149.
concern with the inherently social and ethical contours of human experience. For Nietzsche, as Pippen has noted, “any activity, whether theoretical or practical, already involves… a value commitment.”\(^\text{76}\) And Schacht has argued along similar lines that Nietzsche’s philosophical project, while it is often regarded as wholly deflationary in character, in fact seeks “not the elimination of morals, but rather moral renewal” through a “fundamental reinterpretation of the general character of normativity.”\(^\text{77}\) If this search for “new and higher moralities” remains the most underdeveloped aspect of Nietzsche’s philosophy, it is also, tellingly, the aspect he came to consider most crucial to its success: the ultimately positive outcome that could justify his entire critical-diagnostic project and prevent it from degenerating into nihilism. And it is to this basic concern that aesthetic modernism will address itself in the hope of making a contribution to both the understanding and, ultimately, the reconstruction of everyday life and experience.


\(^{77}\) Schacht, "Nietzschean Normativity," 152, 54.
2. “A painted paradise at the end of it”: Humanism and Other Ideas of Order in the Poetry of Ezra Pound

When I consider his work as a whole I find more style than form; at moments more style, more deliberate nobility and the means to convey it than in any contemporary poet known to me, but it is constantly interrupted, broken, twisted into nothing by its direct opposite, nervous obsession, nightmare, stammering confusion…. Style and its opposite can alternate, but form must be full, sphere-like, single.

—W.B. Yeats, “Ezra Pound,” from the Oxford Book of Modern Verse

That I lost my center
fighting the world.
The dreams clash
and are shattered—
and that I tried to make a paradiso
terrestre.

—Pound, Notes for [Canto] CXVII et seq.

Shortly after embarking on the intellectual odyssey that would span the rest of his life, published serially under headings such as “Drafts” and “Fragments,” Ezra Pound wrote to James Joyce to announce that he had “begun an endless poem, of no known category, Phanopoeia (light- or image-making) or something or other, all about everything.” He told the Paris Review several decades later that “the problem was to get a form—something elastic enough to take the necessary material. It had to be a form that wouldn’t exclude something merely because it didn’t fit.”¹ This text, of course, was The Cantos, and the “necessary material” would come to include in some measure all of the following: original lyric passages speckled with idiomatic turns of phrase; semi-

structured translations from literary works; legal documents, letters, and all kinds of correspondence; slang; metacommentary; political ramblings; anti-Semitic invective; official and unofficial historical data; musical notation; Chinese ideograms and other, non-linguistic, pictures; and a steady stream of allusions to the everyday, the academic, and the decidedly obscure—all of these elements reverberating in an incessant symbolic clash, like movements in some grand semiotic symphony without definite beginning or end.

Not only was the text left unfinished upon Pound’s death in 1972; its radical structural open-endedness was, from its earliest pages, a theme that the poem would reflexively take up at crucial stages in its development. The first official canto begins in medias res (“And then went down to the ship…”) only to conclude, after several unexpected shifts in register, chronology, and geographical location, on a note of contingency generated by the incompleteness of the construction “So that:”2 This initial baring of the device serves two related functions. On the one hand, it allows Pound to emphasize the positive, thematic content of subsequent cantos, material that his readership would have expected to complete this picture by enabling the unifying conceptual-affective synthesis necessary to achieve aesthetic closure. At the same time, however, it implicitly undercuts this expectation by drawing attention to the conspicuous absence of the kinds of explanatory connections that could establish in some authoritative and readily intelligible way the network of associations extending between and across the various segments of the text.

This sense of contingency is even more vividly on display in the three so-called ur-Cantos that Pound published in the June 1917 edition of *Poetry* magazine, parts of which he would rework and integrate into subsequent editions of the text, such as the landmark *Draft of XXX Cantos* of 1930. The first of these ur-Cantos begins with a direct, and characteristically irreverent, address to the Victorian poet Robert Browning, whose fictionalized account of the thirteenth-century troubadour Sordello da Goito represented for Pound the most recent attempt within the Anglophone tradition to resuscitate the epic form:

Hang it all, there can be but one *Sordello*!
But say I want to, say I take your whole bag of tricks,
Let in your quirks and tweeks, and say the thing’s an art-form,
Your Sordello, and that the modern world
Needs such a rag-bag to stuff all its thought in:
Say that I dump my catch, shiny and silvery
As fresh sardines flapping and slipping on the marginal cobbles?
[...]
You had one whole man?
And I have many fragments, less worth? Less worth?
Ah, had you quite my age, quite such a beastly and cantankerous age?
You had some basis, had some set belief.\(^3\)

These lines make clear how attentive Pound was from the very beginning to the difficulties of producing an epic—not just a “poem including history,”\(^4\) as he glibly put it, but one that would embody the kinds of cultural values around which individual and collective identities are constructed—for a modern world that now found itself without recourse even to the Victorian faith in progress through reason and the methodical accumulation of knowledge. What is remarkable, even for a modernist, however, is the

---

extent to which Pound seizes upon this sense of ideological fragmentation as a source of possibility, rather than merely one of limitation, threatening to “dump [his] catch” directly on the cobbles of this imagined public square.

Through the juxtaposition of disparate cultural fragments, Pound believed he could make visible for the reader the entire trajectory of Indo-European culture, or what he called the “tale of the tribe.” He saw these past traditions as capable not only of providing insight into our present predicament but also of supplying tools for the project of cultural recovery that he had been advocating in some form or other since joining the staff of the left-leaning New Age magazine upon his return to London in 1911. And yet, *The Cantos*’ encyclopedic scope and dense, allusive framework have continued to alienate readers by seeming to demand from them a staggering degree of historical knowledge and literary comprehension, which would both be necessary to enable the kind of synthesis that could establish the text as a unified, “coherent” work of art. While there is little that Pound’s many commentators agree on, few are willing to claim this kind of coherence for *The Cantos*. Pound himself came to regard this as a deficiency by the later stages of the poem and considered it to be his great failure as a poet. Yet this does not relieve us of the burden of asking in what principle he believed such textual coherence to consist, or how, specifically, he understood such coherence to extend into the domains of society and politics. Are we, like the New Critics, to take the fragments

---

5 *Guide to kulchur* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1952). 194. By 1940, however, after the publication of Cantos LII-LXXI, it became clear this cultural narrative was no longer limited to the West, as Pound, long interested in Eastern forms such as the Japanese Noh theatre, began to draw heavily on Chinese history, with a particular emphasis on the development of Confucianism. He even suggested that he had found in China “a new Greece” (*Literary essays*: 215).
that modernists so assiduously shored against their ruins as a sign of victory over external circumstance? Or are we to regard the modernist collage as a vast panorama of cultural transition and ideological contention, an attempt to register in art the series of seismic shifts that ushered in the twentieth century—and to convey a sense, however ambivalent, that the center cannot hold, that what matters is not so much even the completion of the magnum opus as the constructive foregrounding of the concrete intellectual and creative energies brought to bear in its construction? Or is it, as Pound seemed to suggest in his more self-critical moments, somehow all of these things at once?

The tendency in Pound scholarship for at least the last two decades has been to celebrate the progressive and experimental tendencies of his writing while censuring the more offensive social and political positions he adopted at different stages in his career (his anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, his economics of usury, his allegiance with Italian fascism), thereby refashioning him as a proto-postmodernist. On the level of form, this approach is justifiable enough; the radical fragmentation and disjunctive logic that characterize Pound’s work have served as a model for movements from objectivism through L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, movements now regarded as central to the tradition of twentieth century experimental poetry in America, as critics such as Marjorie

---

6 The central text in this body of criticism is undoubtedly Marjorie Perloff, The dance of the intellect : studies in the poetry of the Pound tradition (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1996). Charles Bernstein’s brief but inspired polemic, “Pounding Fascism” is another case in point. Although Bernstein warns against the dangers of vindicating Pound by extricating his poetry from his politics, he also contends that “The Cantos is in many ways radically… at odds with the tenets of his fascist ideals (Charles Bernstein, “Pounding Fascism (Appropriating Ideologies--Mystification, Aestheticization, and Authority in Pound's Poetic Practice),” in A poetics [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992], 122.)
Perloff and Christopher Beach have demonstrated. But the attempt to reclaim Pound as a proto-postmodernist has also obscured the fact that his own rationale for *The Cantos* was never, strictly speaking, deconstructive. He fancied himself an architect, an eclectic one perhaps, but never what Derrida would call a *bricoleur*. Despite his inability to complete the text, and indeed, despite his eventual misgivings about the entire project, Pound’s aim in *The Cantos* is unquestionably to provide a cultural metanarrative: a term that would have carried no negative connotations for him because he believed that such an overarching framework was necessary to unite the various strata of the work. *Why* he believed this is the central question I want to explore in this chapter. I will therefore be less concerned with Pound’s overall achievement and legacy, both of which are considerable, than with his specific motivations for undertaking such a project in the first place, including his conviction that art was capable of producing formal solutions to the deficiencies he perceived so acutely in modern life and culture.

To understand where Pound ended up, it is necessary to delve more deeply into the intellectual currents that influenced his output around the time of the First World War. I begin, then, by giving particular attention to Pound’s literary and social criticism of this period, examining it through the lens of his association with T.E. Hulme, whose antihumanist, anti-individualist rhetoric Pound briefly adopted—a fact that continues to baffle many of his interpreters, given the pronounced humanist tendencies of his own project. Drawing on the work of Michael Levenson and others who have addressed this

---

phase of Pound’s development, I attempt to show why Pound felt that the humanistic ideal of self-fashioning and value-creation was necessary to keep his constructivist aesthetic from succumbing to the kind of radical relativism that would deprive it of its socially transformative potential. For Pound, as for Nietzsche, the worth of a culture is to be judged on the basis of its ability to produce forms that are conducive to human flourishing. Yet unlike Nietzsche, Pound vastly overestimated the “disinterestedness” of the creative acts of will responsible for generating those forms. His belief that the direct presentation of ideas in art would yield an objective, “natural,” and therefore universally legible mode of perceiving and communicating led him to claim an authority for his art that it simply did not have: an ideal that, as we will see, eluded him until the very end.

* * *

Pound was by no means a systematic thinker, a fact that makes it impossible to attribute to him a definitive set of aesthetic, political, and economic positions. Unfortunately, many critics have chosen either to dismiss his social criticism on the basis of its inconsistencies (in which case it remains a mere curiosity, the record of a brilliant but troubled mind) or to emphasize only the more sensational aspects of his life and career, including his support of Mussolini’s regime in Italy, his arrest for treason, and his subsequent incarceration for twelve years in St. Elizabeth’s Hospital for the criminally insane near Washington, D.C. Yet both approaches overlook an essential, because
conflicted, shift in modernist thought, one that becomes perceptible in Pound around the time of imagism and continues to occupy him in various ways for the rest of his career. For Pound, this ambivalence was to a great extent the result of his attempt to synthesize two opposed currents in modernism around the outbreak of the First World War, which can be characterized with relatively few qualifications as “humanist” and “antihumanist.” (In the present context, humanism might be defined as a belief in the individual’s capacity for self-realization within a cultural framework whose advancement one contributes to by operating within, while still remaining free to question the scope and legitimacy of its basic values.) If, as Michael Levenson has argued, the brief but intense philosophical maturation of T.E. Hulme encapsulates this larger movement from a humanist notion of self-expression to an antihumanist one that emphasizes instead the impersonal expressivity of form, it is in Pound’s aesthetic and critical writings that this dichotomy is most fully embodied, with implications that extend far beyond the aesthetic, back to the social, political, and economic turmoil out of which modernism emerged.

While Pound’s theory of the poetic image underwent a number of minor transformations, passing briefly through Vorticism and culminating, finally, in the living,

---

8 Michael H. Levenson, A genealogy of modernism: a study of English literary doctrine, 1908-1922 (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984). 37-47, 80-102. I find this claim useful but also problematic. As my discussion of idealism in the previous chapter demonstrated, form, however abstract, comes to be seen by both the romantics and the modernists as something deeply, even essentially, human.

9 The literary collaboration of Pound and Hulme has been widely documented, mainly because of its relevance to Pound’s development and promotion of his theory of the image. See, for instance, Nicholls, Modernisms: a literary guide; Patricia Rae, The practical muse: pragmatist poetics in Hulme, Pound, and Stevens (Lewisburg Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1997); Edward P. Comentale, Modernism, cultural production, and the British avant-garde (Cambridge, UK; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Rebecca Beasley, Theorists of modernist poetry: T. S. Eliot, T. E. Hulme, Ezra Pound (London; New York: Routledge, 2007).
pictorial quality of the Chinese written character, he had already begun to lay the
groundwork for this theory of the poetic image in 1913. In the March edition of *Poetry*,
he set forth the following dicta:

1. Direct treatment of the “thing” whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of a metronome.  

Pound advises aspiring writers to “Go in fear of abstractions,” affirming, contra Yeats,
that “the natural object is always the *adequate* symbol.”  
And it is also in this context
that he first endeavors to define the image:

An ‘Image’ is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. [...] It is the presentation of such a complex instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest words of art.

This definition is noteworthy in its attempt to move beyond the merely privative character of the aforementioned stylistic restrictions, *qua* restrictions, by indicating their origin in the realm of aesthetic response. “I use the term ‘complex,’” Pound explains, “in the technical sense employed by the psychologists.” The abandonment of traditional meter, the avoidance of ornament, the “direct treatment of the thing”—these things are desirable not for their own sake but rather for their ability to produce a poetry “with

---

11 Ibid., 5.
12 Ibid., 4.
13 Ibid. Thus, while Hugh Kenner is correct to observe that imagism “was named for a component of the poem, not a state of the poet,” his insistence that “its three principles establish technical, not psychic, criteria” is not entirely accurate (*The Pound era* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971]. 179.)
fewer painted adjectives impeding the shock and the stroke of it,” one whose impact on the reader will be “austere, direct, free from emotional slither.”

Although the demand for precision in writing and thought, which he often described as a form of mental “hygiene,” would fuel his later fascist sympathies, Pound’s emphasis in these earlier essays is not political in the narrow sense of the word. It is aimed, rather, at establishing genuine, phenomenological contact with a social and material reality still encumbered by the scientism and sentimentality of the Victorian era. And it seems only natural that his disapproval would be leveled against the primary offenders, the older generation of poets whose wistful, symbolic “mood-paintings” he found too affected to reflect the dynamism of modern life:

The symbolists dealt in ‘association,’ that is, in a sort of allusion, almost of allegory. […] One can be grossly ‘symbolic’ for example, by using the term ‘cross’ to mean ‘trial.’ The symbolist’s symbols have a fixed value, like numbers in arithmetic, like 1, 2, and 7. The imagist’s images have a variable significance like the signs a, b, and x in algebra […]. The author must use his image because he sees it or feels it, not because he thinks he can use it to back up some creed or some system of ethics or economics.

This plea for restraint in expression, which demanded that one present without authorial commentary the concrete details that “objectify” one’s inner, subjective states, is exemplified stunningly by Pound’s two-line distillation of imagist sentiment, the 1913 poem, “In a Station of the Metro”:

---

15 Although Pound seems to have been ignorant of the contemporaneous movement in Continental philosophy, his attempt to render “the thing itself” is in many ways the poetic equivalent of Edmund Husserl’s phenomenological imperative to “go back to the ‘things themselves’” (*Edmund Husserl, Logical investigations*, trans. J. N. Findlay, vol. 1 [London ; New York: Routledge, 2001]. 168.
The apparition of these faces in the crowd:  
Petals on a wet, black bough.\textsuperscript{17}

Here, the opening phrase provides a general heading (“the apparition”) under which the other elements of the sequence fall, designating each unit (faces, crowd, petals, bough) as a semi-autonomous appearance in the larger phenomenological context of the image. The overarching image is not so much a distinct conceptual entity as “an intellectual and emotional complex,” a poetic arrangement that initiates the exchange of conceptual energies among image-units so that each of these linguistic phenomena can emerge before the mind’s eye, as “realities perceptible to the sense, interacting.”\textsuperscript{18} The crucial point for Pound is that the items juxtaposed, the constitutive elements in this “equation for an emotion,” retain their status as such, continuing to signify themselves while standing in meaningful relation to one another. While the spectral “faces” in the first line never become the petals through a straightforward process of metaphorical substitution, they are reframed and enhanced by this association with natural phenomena, emerging from the shadows of the subway station, restored in the complex play of their relatedness by the light of the reader’s hermeneutic gaze.

Imagism, then, seeks to present a way for the reader to enter directly into the field of “intellectual and emotional” forces generated by, and constitutive of, the poem. By supplying only the basic semantic ingredients necessary for such an experience and demanding that the reader re-assemble them himself or herself, it attempts to bypass the vicarious identifications typical of lyrical subjectivity. Yet despite its claims to

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Personae: the shorter poems of Ezra Pound}: 111.  
\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Literary essays}: 155.
impersonality, imagism is still reliant on some notion of the author as the unseen arranger and conjurer of these effects—evident, for instance, in Pound’s residually romantic insistence that “[t]he author must use his image because he sees it or feels it.” Indeed, as Levenson notes in *A Genealogy of Modernism*, “the image was first elaborated from a point of view opposed to the developed modernist perspective”: it “was not justified in terms of tradition, objectivity, reason, or authority—not even at first in terms of precision or clarity. It was rather defended as anti-traditional, individualist, intuitive, expressive.”

We have seen in Chapter One how Hulme’s prioritizing of intuition over conventional forms of rationality was spurred in part by his engagement with the writings of Bergson, Nietzsche, and others. In particular, it reflects the influence of Bergson’s concepts of *durée* (lived as opposed to chronometric time) and the *élan vital*, or “life principle,” which Bergson posits in fundamental opposition to both the mechanistic character of matter and the corresponding brand of “spatialized” categorical thinking that the intellect imposes upon phenomena. However, the idea of the intuitive, expressive individual—an essentially romantic notion that finds its highest realization in the figure of the artist—was by no means specific to Pound and Hulme’s literary proselytizing. It was in fact one of the most salient features of early modernism, and the one against which figures like Eliot would soon react.

In the case of Pound, the individualist emphasis is especially prominent in his pre-imagist criticism, where social and political issues are already intimately linked to aesthetic ones. Citing *Patria Mia*, Pound’s first substantial piece of social criticism,

---

Frank Lentricchia emphasizes the deeply American character of Pound’s deployment of concepts such as “freedom” and “individuality” by locating them within the tradition of Emersonian self-reliance and Jamesian pragmatism. For Lentricchia, Pound is “a celebrant of the intensely peculiar, the apparently primordial, autonomous force which he believed stood under and propelled everything that is expressed”:

Pound’s word for this substance was *virtu*. In his populist American logic, *individuality*, therefore *virtue*, and therefore (the aesthetic turn on his politics) *virtuosity*, were threatened at their virile heart by the culture of capitalism and its commodity-based economy.  

In this way, we find Pound’s aesthetics already beginning to determine the character of his politics as part of what would become a lifelong attempt to stave off the encroachment of consumer capitalism on the individual in general and the artist in particular. To the extent that it encourages writers to seek out and repeat only the most lucrative formulas, the commodity form of art is for Lentricchia “the death of what Pound thought literature to be, the essence of real literature a nonessence, historical contingency itself.”  

Against this dehumanizing aesthetic, Pound opposes the concept of *virtu* and its implications of self-development and assertion, which he would later wed to the Confucian understanding of social order as radiating outward from the exemplary actions of clear-eyed, honorable individuals.

The problem, then, becomes one of how to reconcile such acts of virtuosity with the principle of impersonal presentation central to the imagist aesthetic. For Levenson, Pound’s framing of imagism in terms of individuality remains fundamentally

---


21 Ibid., 65.
problematic, if only because it associates him with a larger trend toward reactionary individualism in prewar modernism, which occurred in response to a variety of social pressures—scientific materialism, mass culture, and the crisis of liberal ideals—and found in subjectivity “a refuge for threatened values.” Citing figures like Hulme, Ford, and Alan Upward, all of whom exerted a considerable influence on the development of Pound’s aesthetic theory, he affirms that

Among this group liberalism decomposed into egoism. And where liberal ideology had made the individual the basis on which to construct religion, politics, ethics and aesthetics, egoism abjured the constructive impulse and was content to remain where it began: in the skeptical self.

Levenson notes how, pushed to its extreme, the “logic of immediacy” epitomized by Ford’s impressionism “has not halted at the boundaries of the coherent individual subject; the forces driving to the self lead past the self, to the momentary perceptions emotions and sensations which exist prior to any sense of integral subjectivity.” Whether or not it is fair to attribute this annihilation of the self to Ford’s novels, rather than simply to his critical writings in which such ideas are articulated, this way of framing the impressionist position is instructive for any art that aims not just to challenge but to override expressive norms altogether. Because “Ford is so intent on limiting art to immediacy that the attitudes and sentiments of the artist refined away,” his method essentially self-destructs, becoming “a subjectivity in which the subject has disappeared.” And the question, then,

---

23 Ibid., 68.
24 Ibid., 118.
25 Ibid., 119.
becomes whether imagism and vorticism as Pound conceived them to operate are subject to the same fate.

Although Pound clearly absorbed much of the individualist rhetoric of this group, Levenson’s claim that the “egoistic leaning was as pronounced in Pound as it was in Hulme and Ford” fails, I think, to capture the full complexity of Pound’s position. His otherwise nuanced account of Pound’s development in terms of these broader currents in prewar Anglophone modernism here actually obscures the poet’s conflicted relationship to the humanistic ideals of self-fashioning and self-expression. In 1914, Pound and Hulme joined forces with Wyndham Lewis to deliver a series of lectures to the Quest Society in London. Hulme presented “Modern Art and Its Philosophy,” a piece in which he proclaimed the “break up of the Renaissance humanistic attitude.” He insisted elsewhere that despite what we “have been taught by Rousseau,” the human being is in fact “an extraordinarily fixed and limited animal whose nature is absolutely constant,” claiming further that “it is only by tradition and organisation that anything decent can be got out of him.” While we will see this sentiment emerge more fully in the unapologetic didacticism of The Cantos, Levenson’s suggestion that Pound was an active (rather than merely complicit) participant in this attack on Western culture, or that he emerges from vorticism with a deeply “anti-democratic” and “anti-humanitarian” position, goes too far. However much these labels seem to capture a short-lived shift in Pound’s rhetoric,

26 Ibid., 71.
27 Hulme, Selected writings: 95.
28 Ibid., 69, 70.
29 Levenson, A genealogy of modernism : a study of English literary doctrine, 1908-1922: 76. More specifically, Levenson sees Pound’s humanism as continuing through the publication of “The Serious
they also overstate the extent of his transformation. What seems like a sudden reversal is in fact only the manifestation of an existing tension in Pound’s thought between individual expression, on the one hand, and the transpersonal nature of the various social forms, including language, through which it is forced to operate, on the other. It may well have taken Hulme’s influence to bring this tension to the point of crisis. But there is ample evidence even in his vorticist writings that Pound was unwilling to abandon his humanist inclinations in favor of the abstract, geometric art that Hulme had embraced before his death on the front lines in Belgium in 1917.

In sharp contrast to the withdrawal from existing social pressures that characterizes the impressionist’s collapse into the authorial ego, Pound’s experimental aesthetic was motivated by a desire to restore potency to a language, and thus to a society, that appeared to be showing advanced signs of atrophy. For Lentricchia, it is exactly this attentiveness to the social possibilities of linguistic experimentation that makes Pound’s imagism the quintessential modernist attempt to “bend the generic character of language to the unique perceptual possibility (the radical individuality that

---

Artist” (1913), in which Pound still clearly “conceives of art as fundamental and consequential, and he willingly acknowledges the social obligation [of the artist’s] endeavor.” But “over the next several months,” he claims, “Pound’s attitudes suffered a dramatic change, and his was only a part of a more general transformation” (75).

30 For another account that locates this rhetorical shift in Pound’s association with Hulme and Lewis during his vorticist period, see John Tytell, Ezra Pound : the solitary volcano (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2004). 102-11.

31 In his pre-vorticist criticism, Pound would proclaim in one breath that “the truth is the individual,” that “technique is the means of conveying an exact impression of exactly what one means to say” (Ezra Pound, Selected prose, 1909-1965 [New York: New Directions, 1973]. 33.), only to affirm in the next that “what matters in art is a sort of energy, something more or less like electricity or radioactivity, a force transfusing, welding, and unifying” (Literary essays: 49.).
defines human difference).”32 The paradox, here, is that all such notions of linguistic innovation and virtuosity presuppose the normative uses of language based on expressive conventions and criteria that the members of a society share—just as the appreciation of human difference presupposes some basic notion of integral subjective agency, of self or personhood, in relation to which such distinctions and identifications can become manifest. Here, we come face to face with a crucial element of Pound’s aesthetics; namely, that it was framed from the very beginning in terms of an underlying ethics, one that Pound imagined his poetry to be capable of promoting and sustaining in the modern world. “The arts provide data for ethics,” he writes in 1913’s “The Serious Artist.”33 And indeed, it is only when deprived of this emphasis that imagism becomes susceptible to charges of egoism: a condition that Pound will memorably lampoon via the persona of Hugh Selwyn Mauberley in his 1920 “farewell” to the London scene.

Charles Altieri has argued even more pointedly that Pound’s attempt to recast this cluster of related social and aesthetic concerns in the idiom of vorticism should be seen a renewal of humanism, not a repudiation of it. After all, what Pound had been calling for around this time was a risorgimento: a modern renaissance that would seek to revive many of the classically-derived humanist ideals which he believed to be have been suppressed, with no small degree of irony, by the rise of liberalism and a modern consumer economy. While Altieri is in agreement with Levenson that the transition from imagism to vorticism marks a shift of emphasis from the object of representation to the

32 Lentricchia, Modernist quartet: 192.
33 Pound, Literary essays: 46.
primacy of artistic form—a shift, in short, from the “thing itself” to its treatment—he finds this socially engaged formalism to be fully in keeping with Pound’s humanist inclinations. For Altieri, this foregrounding of the activity within the work allows Pound to “attribute social significance to art while evading the standard categorical claims to universality on which such attributions are usually based.”

Noting how the idea of mimesis normally “depends on achieving representativeness for a particular by getting it somehow to embody a universal,” Altieri observes that Pound’s semantic theory, on the other hand, emphasizes the activity within a work over its claims to truth, a man standing by his world rather than a mirror dawdling down a lane. Expressionist humanism addresses a general society through a dynamic of examples, forces, and fields, thus rooting the general effects of particulars in the actual power of the specific example to organize a world around itself.

It is this world, or rather, this world-making activity, that Pound’s juxtapositional method seeks to communicate to the reader. “The particular,” says Altieri, “asserts an identity and, if it is effective, it forces its readers to take account of it as they attempt to assert their own claims to identity…. What has general appeal does so not because of some objectivity of description, but because of the effects individuals have on one another.”

Such a process no doubt presupposes the existence of a cultural framework (such as, but not necessarily limited to, the emphasis that the tradition of liberal democracy places on the inherent dignity and natural rights of all citizens) that fosters and attunes us to the importance of such acts of exemplary individuality. Yet we can see how Altieri’s emphasis on humanistic value-creation serves to clarify how Pound might have imagined

35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
art to “provide data” for ethics. It also indicates the theoretical perspective from which we can understand with minimal distortion another of Pound’s proclamations of this period, which establishes the full extent of his divergence from Hulme on this issue; namely, that “The Vorticist movement is a movement of individuals, for individuals, for the protection of individuality.”

Of course, it was becoming clear even by 1916, when Pound published his memoir of his friend, the sculptor and fellow vorticist Henri Gaudier-Brzeska (yet another casualty of World War I), that his poetic ambitions were beginning to exceed the limited scope of the lyric. The appearance of “Three Cantos” in 1917 signaled a turn to the epic as a form expansive enough to draw into its scope the kinds of values he thought could restore order and vibrancy to a modern world that now seemed increasingly bent on its own destruction. However, in his attempt to salvage still-viable forms of thought and action from these diverse historical traditions, Pound will end up attributing to his work precisely the kinds of categorical claims to universality that his imagist and vorticist art was intended to resist, thus departing drastically from his earlier instance that the artist must “use his image because he sees it or feels it, not because he thinks he can use it to back up some creed or some system of ethics or economics.” This tension, I now want to suggest, becomes most evident in his newfound insistence on the parallels between aesthetic interpretation and the objectivity of the scientific perspective: a tension that Pound is ultimately unable to resolve, despite his repeated attempts to imbue the

---

juxtapositions of cultural artifacts in the text, and the political conclusions to which they lead him, with an authority derived from their supposed proximity to natural processes.

* * *

To acknowledge what I have called the metanarrative thrust of *The Cantos* is crucial not only for understanding Pound but also for understanding most of so-called high modernism as well, since Pound’s work in many ways typifies the grand cultural aspirations that emerged in modernist art during the twenties and thirties and peaked around the onset of the Second World War. This shift in artistic sensibility finds its political compliment in the broad range of social and economic reforms—from communism in Russia to fascism in Italy and Germany to New Deal politics in the US—implemented in response to the breakdown of classical liberalism, which the Great Depression, when it arrived, was taken both to confirm and symbolize. Of course, the tendency toward monumentality in modernist art (and architecture, where “monumentality” should be understood literally, as structures like the Empire State Building or the hyperbolically Art Deco skyline in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* attest) was equally a reaction to the vitalistic wave of 20th-century modernism epitomized, as I suggested in Chapter One, not only by imagism but also by the vogue of Henri Bergson

---

38 For a recent comparison of these seemingly disparate movements that focuses specifically on their architecture and public works programs, see Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Three new deals : reflections on Roosevelt's America, Mussolini's Italy, and Hitler's Germany, 1933-1939*, 1st ed. (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006).
and phenomenology on the European continent. By the end of the 1920’s, Pound, Eliot, Lewis, and others became increasingly impatient with the inability of this aesthetic to address the range of political problems their generation was facing—including the legacy of European imperialism, the rise of the modern nation-state, worldwide economic recession, and, perhaps most pressingly, the technological depredations of modern warfare—problems that, despite their various origins, had now become thoroughly enmeshed in one another. And it was into this morass that Pound’s revamped modernist aesthetic sought to assume its new and higher function as cultural arbiter and supplier of value-structures that could assist with the pressing task of social, political, and economic reform.

As imagist experiments such as “In a Station of the Metro” attest, Pound’s juxtapositional method had the ability to produce poems of haiku-like lucidity and concision that still retained their complex emotional undertones. Once extended to the serial format of *The Cantos*, this technique resulted in increasingly heterogeneous collages, their objects drawn from a range of historical periods and cultural contexts. This open-ended format provided a context in which Pound could showcase the results of his self-described literary-archeological “digging,” a reference to the German archeologist and ethnologist Leo Frobenius, who, according to the anecdote Pound recounts in *Guide to Kulchur*,

looked at two African pots and observing their shapes and proportions, said: if you will go to a certain place and there digge [sic], you will find traces of a civilization with such characteristics.
As was the case. In event proved.³⁹

Pound adopted from Frobenius the notion of Paideuma, which describes the process by which the observer is able to detect in virtually any given cultural artifact “the tangle or complex of the inrooted ideas of any period.”⁴⁰ Yet the sheer outrageousness of this anecdote—reinforced on a certain level by Pound’s glib assertion, “As was the case. In event proved”—immediately raises the question as to whether even the most astute reader will be able to discern the relations that Pound imagined the contents of his own “rag-bag” to reveal.

Like many of his fellow modernists, Pound was skeptical of science’s attempt to establish a universal body of empirically derived laws and axioms. Yet he repeatedly asserted his belief in the objectivity of aesthetic experience, which is to say, in our capacity for apprehending certain essential truths resulting from the play of affective and conceptual forces that issue from a given cultural object, be it a Quattrocento painting, a piece of classical sculpture, or a passage from Ulysses. As early as 1911, he had written of the need for a “new” method of scholarship based on “a method which has been intermittently used by all good scholars since the beginning of scholarship, the method of the Luminous Detail.” He adds that this is “a method most vigorously hostile to the prevailing mode of today—that is, the method of multitudinous detail, and to the method of yesterday, the method of sentiment and generalization.”⁴¹ In addition expressing a basic dissatisfaction with the comprehensiveness of scientific description in the Victorian

⁴⁰ Ibid., 57.  
era through the first decade of the twentieth century, this passage is also significant in that it serves to underscore Pound’s understanding of the relationship between aesthetics and pedagogy. As he acknowledges his preamble to *I gather the Limbs of Osiris* (1911-12), these guidelines for effective work in the humanities, these “heresies,” “pertain not only to education… but to an art not always the reverse.”\(^{42}\) This unapologetically pedantic, canon-building impulse extends beyond Pound’s critical writings into his own eclectic translations and compositions, suggesting that the activities of criticism and aesthetic creation were largely inseparable for him. In *ABC of Reading* (1934), whose title speaks for itself, he will affirm that “The critic who doesn’t make a personal statement… is merely an unreliable critic…. KRINO, to pick out for oneself, to choose. That’s what the word means.”\(^{43}\) And it is precisely this emphasis on creative selection, combined with the impersonal mode of presentation throughout so much of *The Cantos*, that frequently gives the text the feel of a museum exhibit full of diverse cultural artifacts, with Pound acting as both curator and guide. Although technically the theoretical precursor of the image, then, the “luminous detail” thus provides the vital link between the predominantly stylistic emphasis of imagism and vorticism, on the one hand, and the explicitly social, historical, and economic preoccupations of *The Cantos* and later critical works such as *ABC of Reading* and *Guide to Kulchur* (1938), on the other.

Throughout the late 1920’s and 1930’s, Pound’s interest in cultural revitalization took him well beyond the purview of traditional aesthetic theory, finding an outlet in the

\(^{42}\) Ibid.
\(^{43}\) *A B C of reading*: 30.
development of his economic model based on the Social Credit theory of the Scottish engineer C.H. Douglas, many of whose writings were originally published in The New Age. Douglas advocated the nationalization of credit and the equal distribution of the dividend among all citizens as part of an attempt to correct the perceived threat of capitalist overproduction—the flooding of the market with goods that would exceed the purchasing power of the workers who produce them. Although widely disputed by economists even in its day, Pound endorsed the principles of Social Credit theory and began to reproduce them throughout his writings. In Canto XXVIII, for instance, he exclaims:

…there is and must be therefore a clog
and the power to purchase can never
(under the present system) catch up with
Prices at large.45

Indeed, Pound’s insistence on the hostility of market forces to both the freedom of the creative artist and the integrity of the individual in general emerges as early as his vorticist period, as the third stanza of the “The Rest” attests:

Lovers of Beauty, starved,
Thwarted with systems,
Helpless against the control…46


46 *Personae : the shorter poems of Ezra Pound*: 93. It should be noted that in “The Rest,” Pound levels this charge as a self-proclaimed “exile” in London against the industry and commerce of his American homeland. Soon enough, however, he would also find England inhospitable to the ideas of aesthetic and cultural revolution he had been advocating, which prompted his departure for Paris in 1921.
In confronting this issue, we also run up against a characteristic irony embedded in Pound’s political and economic thought, particularly as it began to take shape after the First World War. Like Douglas, he believed that capitalist economic systems were incapable of regulating themselves by striking an effective balance between production and consumption. (Indeed, Douglas’ affirmation in *Economic Democracy* that “systems were made for men and not men for systems, and the interest of man, which is self-development, is above all systems, whether theological, political, or economic,”\(^{47}\) might easily be mistaken for one of Pound’s prewar proclamations.) Yet unlike Douglas, who warned against the consolidation of political and economic power, Pound came to believe that it was only through the efforts of a benevolent dictator that social and economic order could be restored and individual liberty preserved.

This notion of the dynamic leader who “puts his ideas in order” was undoubtedly what attracted him to Mussolini. And yet, as both Tim Redman and Bill Freind have noted, Pound’s understanding of the movement was in many ways idiosyncratic (evident, for instance, in his cosmopolitanism and suspicion of strong forms of national identity). Freind observes that “with the exception of his anti-Semitism and a few celebrations of Mussolini’s corporatism, there is little in Pound’s thought that is quintessentially fascist,” suggesting that Pound’s politics might be better described as “a particularly totalitarian form of the cult of personality” marked by “a Confucian-influenced belief in the power of

a strong leader.” This fusion first becomes palpable in the Canto XIII, composed in 1924, the same year that Pound left Paris for Italy, where he would reside until his forcible detention and extradition by U.S. forces in 1945. Here, we find Pound piecing together a number of Confucian proclamations regarding the relationship between individual and social order, many of them lifted directly from works such as *The Great Digest, The Unwobbling Pivot,* and *The Analects,* which Pound would later translate in their entirety:

If a man have not order within him
He can not put order in his dominions.
And Kung gave the words “order”
and “brotherly deference”
And said nothing of the “life after death.”

As the final line makes clear, what appealed to Pound about this Confucian idea of the virtuous individual whose attempts to impose order on his own thought and character radiate outward to the benefit of those around him, was not only the premium it placed on the individual personality but also its “antitranscendental” orientation. This Confucian model can therefore be seen both as extending but also as departing from Pound’s earlier model of humanistic self-fashioning. While the figure of the expanding circle or center, as Freind observes, “might seem to recall his earlier discussions of the vortex,” its serene

---

48 Freind, "'Why Do You Want to Put Your Ideas in Order?': Re-thinking the Politics of Ezra Pound," 545-46.  
“fixity and stillness” becomes more and more difficult to reconcile with Pound’s framing of the vortex as a “point of maximum energy.”

While Pound’s political and economic positions demand the attention they have been given by critics in recent years, especially considering their prominence throughout the middle and later cantos, there has emerged little consensus as to whether, or to what extent, such positions were able to transcend the merely thematic and emerge as actual structural devices for the poem—as would be the case, for instance, if they could be shown to have led Pound to deviate significantly from the paratactic framework of his poem. But here, all of the evidence points to the contrary. Pound remained remarkably consistent throughout his career to the juxtapositional model he developed during his imagist phase, one that he considered to be the most effective way of laying bare the dynamism of natural processes through “words that hover and cling close to the things they mean.” Thus, comparing the work of Cavalcanti and Petrarch in 1934, he laments that in the latter,

We appear to have lost the radiant world where one thought cuts through another with clean edge, a world of moving energies ‘mezzo oscurro rade’, ‘risplende in se perpetuale effecto’, magnetisms that take form, that are seen, or that border the visible, the matter of Dante’s paradise, the glass under water, the form that seems a form seen in a mirror, these realities perceptible to the sense, interacting…

We can weigh these comments against the following, which appeared two decades earlier in the pages of the Egoist:

---

51 Freind, "'Why Do You Want to Put Your Ideas in Order?': Re-thinking the Politics of Ezra Pound," 554.
52 Pound, Literary essays: 155.
We might come to believe that the thing that matters in art is a sort of energy, something more or less like electricity or radioactivity, a force transfusing, welding and unifying.\(^53\)

The striking consistencies in these two passages are hardly accidental. Both serve as expressions of Pound’s ongoing attempt to regain purity of vision through concise aesthetic presentations, an activity that he considered crucial to maintaining the health of a culture and the quality of life which that culture makes possible for its inhabitants. Indeed, the problem arises not so much from this conviction itself as from his confidence that through such representational perspicuity one can lay claim to “natural,” universally legible order in things which can then serve as an unassailable criterion for understanding other systems, such as economics, that also mediate human interaction. Rather than granting legitimacy to his project, this appeal to natural order ends up vitiating the significance of his aesthetic achievement by providing an outlet through which his various prejudices (including his anti-Semitism, directed especially at financiers like the Rothschild family, whom he accused of usury, and his reduction of women to “biologically” impulsive agents of creation and destruction\(^54\)) seek to assume the semblance of authority, to naturalize themselves.

I do not wish to deny that we often find Pound attempting to impose retroactive control on earlier cantos through the repetition of certain themes or styles that he believed might align them with his current theoretical preoccupations—political, economic, or otherwise. One such attempt occurs with the formal alignment of Cantos XXX and XLV.

---

\(^53\) Ibid., 48.

The former, published in 1930, begins with the “compleynt” of Artemis, who, in a manner reminiscent of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, “against Pity lifted her wail”:

Pity causeth the forests to fail,
Pity slayeth my nymphs,
Pity spareth so many an evil thing.
[...]
All things are made foul in this season,
This is the reason, none may seek purity
Having for foulnesse pity
And things growne awry;
No more do my shaftes fly
To slay. Nothing is now clean slayne
But rotteth away.55

The faux-medieval, vaguely Chaucerian, diction of this passage works to convey the grandeur of the goddess’s annunciation, yet in a way that also makes it strangely inaccessible to the modern reader, contorting her words into fragments of antique elocution. It is unclear on the basis of this passage alone whether her language is meant to convey, via defamiliarization, a sense of suppressed radiance—a resistance to the literal that opens out into the allegorical and timeless dimension of myth—or whether it reflects the internal decay of culture contaminated by Judeo-Christian values such as humility and pity. Canto XLV, written seven years later, positions itself in a way that suggests the latter, establishing through its striking similarity of diction an implicit connection between linguistic atrophy and the socioeconomic predicament that Pound attributed to usury:

With Usura hath no man a house of good stone
each block cut smooth and well fitting
that design might cover their face,

with usura
hath no man a painted paradise on his church wall
harpes et luz
or where virgin receiveth message
and halo projects from incision
[...]
no picture is made to endure nor to live with
but it is made to sell and sell quickly,
with usura, sin against nature,
[... the line grows thick
with usura there is no clear demarcation
and no man can find site for his dwelling.]56

However strongly this passage resonates with the opening lines of Canto XXX, its concerns reach at least as far back as Hugh Selwyn Mauberly’s harangue of beauty as it is “decreed in the marketplace,” as well as the poem’s account of soldiers returning from the First World War, “home to old lies and new infamy; / usury age-old and age-thick.”57 For those who choose to see Pound’s economic theories and anti-Semitism as symptoms of an intrinsic depravity or tragic flaw in his character, such similarities represent so many manifestations of a consistent political agenda whose noxious influence extends into the furthest reaches his poetry. However, this strain of analysis fails to explain why, even now, he remained faithful to the juxtapositional method he developed during his imagist period, a method that, as many have remarked, seems particularly ill-suited for accommodating his Confucianism, his fascism, or any other unifying theoretical paradigm that one might wish to impose on the poem.

Ethan Lewis has observed that juxtaposition itself lends the The Cantos at best a “semblance of unity,” arguing that anything more “would contradict its unifying principle

56 Ibid., 229.

92
to claim.” Although he marvels at what Pound is able to achieve aesthetically in the longer poem on the basis of this imagistic technique, Lewis ultimately feels compelled to admit that “[Pound’s] motive for using the technique betrays a naïve faith that such a simple device might endow history with form.” This, however, is misleading. Pound cared far less about endowing history with form than about plundering its archives in the hope of revealing through the juxtaposition of cultural artifacts certain enduring modes of thought and action, forms that might have viable application to present circumstances. The problem does not lie in this attempt to retrieve and revive historical models as “equipment for living” in the contemporary world but rather, as I have suggested, in his insistence that these forms convey a natural, and thus easily intuitable, sense of legitimacy and authority.

Pound’s flawed assumption that the connections between textual “specimens” possess an objective existence leads naturally to his expectation that the attentive reader will apprehend these connections in a way that is consistent with Pound’s own, highly specialized, mode of reading and arranging them. Yet this is akin to an astrologer telling a non-initiate to scan the evening sky, believing that the latter will simply be able to “see” Sagittarius and Capricorn as signs of the zodiac. What Pound fails repeatedly to realize is that in seeking out the objective correlative of a particular kind of mental state, the author forgoes the right to impose any definitive interpretation upon that object, or, for that

---

59 Ibid., 131.
60 In ABC of Reading, he insists that “[t]he proper METHOD for studying poetry and good letters is the method of contemporary biologists, that is careful first-hand examination of the matter, and continual COMPARISON of one ‘slide’ or specimen with another.”
matter, upon its relation to other objects within and beyond the text. This technique of expressing one’s thoughts and feelings indirectly, through unconventional poetic images or through the analogous juxtaposition of cultural artifacts, strips Pound of his authority and radically democratizes the process of reading. He may take credit for his curatorial efforts, but these arrangements—and even his own words when served up in this paratactic fashion—gesture back invariably to the various cultural traditions, past and present, in whose forms of life they are rooted.

To put it somewhat more bluntly: Pound’s blind faith in the reader’s ability to apprehend these supposedly intrinsic connections is not only epistemologically naïve; it is fundamentally at odds with centrifugal thrust of *The Cantos*, which opens itself up seemingly at every turn to the possibility of multiple, and frequently competing interpretations. The driving, episodic current of the text (And then…, And then… And then…), evident from the opening sequence, repeatedly thwarts the application of Pound’s evolving theoretical convictions throughout the middle and later cantos, resulting in a “schizophrenic” split between Pound the author of *The Cantos* and Pound their interpreter. This in turn reduces his attempts at textual realignment on the basis of his later social and economic theories to so many “re-readings” of earlier cantos.61 With

---

61 This phenomenon accords with Roland Barthes’ comments in his landmark essay, “From Work to Text.” In seeking to define the epistemic shift in postmodern art and criticism, Barthes demonstrates his preference for what he calls the “Text,” which is what remains of the ontology of a literary “work” in light of poststructuralist theories of linguistic difference and the application interdisciplinary perspectives and approaches. The Text for Barthes thus becomes a “methodological field,” existing only in the activity of the discourse it occasions between writer, reader, and the public at large (Roland Barthes, ”From Work to Text,” in *Image, music; text* [New York: Hill and Wang, 1977], 157.). While the traditional work is caught up in a process of “filiation,” with the author as its “father and owner,” the Text is read without this approval or guarantee: “It is not that the author cannot ‘come back’ into the Text,” Barthes notes, but rather that “he can only do so as a ‘guest’” (161).
Pound thus at war with himself, the reader is left largely to his or her own devices, forced to establish provisional connections in the attempt to navigate his or her way through the text and its encyclopedic range of cultural references, the appreciation of which will always depend on one’s knowledge, aptitude, interests, and willingness to persevere.

Pound insisted in his 1933 polemic Jefferson and/or Mussolini that “[a]ny thorough judgment of MUSSOLINI will be in a measure an act of faith, it will depend on what you believe the man means…. Treat him as an artifex and all the details fall into place. Take him as anything save the artist and you will get muddled in contradictions.”

Yet as Bob Perlman suggests in The Trouble with Genius, this advice applies equally to the peculiar kind of authority that Pound attempted to assume as author and arranger of The Cantos. Despite his efforts to present himself as a mere conduit for the expression of this historical narrative, Pound was always its creator; it was, and remains, his vision, his version of the “tale of the tribe.” This is not to deny the possibility that the values projected by works such as The Cantos—whether originating in Pound’s original contributions, his arrangements, his translations, or in the source material itself—can enhance or otherwise alter our perception of the various historical and contemporary figures that populate The Cantos, or attune us to the ways in which our cultural past continues to determine our present values and perspectives. It is simply to call into question the confidence with which Pound claims for these values the status of revealed truth.

---

63 Ibid., 28.
In fact, it is only in the final cantos that Pound begins in any sustained fashion to question the legitimacy of his lifelong attempt to “build light” out of the kaleidoscopic diversity of human history and experience. In the last complete canto (CXVI), published in 1969 in *Drafts and Fragments of Cantos CX-CXVII*, his appeal to the reader is unusually direct. Having expressed a wish that his poetic “palimpsest” may come to represent “a little light / in great darkness,” he declares almost defiantly:

I have brought the great ball of crystal;  
who can lift it?  
Can you enter the acorn of light?  
But the beauty is not the madness  
Tho’ my errors and wrecks lie about me.  
And I am not a demigod,  
I cannot make it cohere.  

Although now willing to admit to his “errors and wrecks,” and even the “madness” strewn throughout *The Cantos*, Pound notably maintains his belief in an ideal of organic textual unity that can serve as a cultural beacon for those who—if only perhaps within the utopian space opened up by the artwork—are willing to “lift” and “enter” into its sphere of radiance. The peculiar image of the “acorn of light” is not accidental; it aligns this final group of cantos with Pound’s insistence in his imagist-era criticism that the “ideas, or fragments of ideas” expressed by a poet’s words “must be in harmony, they must form an organism, they must be an oak sprung from an acorn.”

Despite the organicism of this metaphor, and its insinuation that some intimate connection with natural processes still sustains what is of highest value in Pound’s poetry, there is something otherworldly about

---

64 Pound, *The cantos of Ezra Pound*: 816.  
65 *Literary essays*: 51.
Canto CXVI. It is as if Pound’s voice, direct yet disembodied, anchored in no particular physical location at all, were coming down to us from on high—a far cry from The Pisan Cantos in which he had last expressed such anxieties. There, amid the imagery of shipwreck and darkness, we find Pound, a “man on whom the sun has gone down,” still defiant yet forced by the collapse of Mussolini’s regime to face the prospect, opened up by the constructivist logic of his aesthetic, “that the drama is wholly subjective,”⁶⁶ that even our highest ideals may be reducible in the end to human need and vanity. “I don’t know how humanity stands it,” he writes,

    with a painted paradise at the end of it
    without a painted paradise at the end of it.⁶⁷

---

⁶⁶ *The cantos of Ezra Pound*: 444.
⁶⁷ *The cantos of Ezra Pound*: 450.
3. “Beyond us, yet ourselves”: Wallace Stevens’ Cultural Poetics

A poet’s words are of things that do not exist without the words…. We have been a little insane about the truth. We have had an obsession. In its ultimate extension, the truth about which we have been insane will lead us to look beyond the truth to something in which the imagination will be the dominant compliment. It is not only that the imagination adheres to reality, but, also, that reality adheres to the imagination and that the interdependence is essential.

—Stevens, “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words”

Life is not free from its forms.

—“Adagia”

To imagine a language is to imagine a form of life.

—Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations

“Is it not a bit ironical,” Kenneth Burke quipped in a 1944 letter to the poet Allen Tate, “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?”1 However tempting it may be to take Burke’s remark and its string of wryly redundant qualifications (“a bit,” “somewhat,” “supposedly fairly relatively”) as a kind of indictment—a glib accusation that Stevens, either in his poetry or in his critical writings of the late 1930s and 1940s, had failed to realize the decisive break with the romantic tradition that had defined the theory and practice of Anglo-American modernism since at least the First World War—it also suggests a certain sympathy with

---

this predicament, which Harold Bloom would later characterize as Stevens’ persistent sense of, and anxiety over, his own “belatedness.” The extent of Burke’s ambivalence on this issue becomes clear the following year with the publication of A Grammar of Motives. There, he honors the poet by locating him at the end of a long line of modern philosophers, including Berkeley, Hume, Kant, Hegel, and Marx. While he is quick to praise Stevens as a thinker of particular “deftness and subtlety,” Burke also takes the opportunity to express his reservations, this time on the record, about the “idealist cluster of terms” that Stevens had adopted in the attempt to describe the nature and function of poetry in the modern world. These included vaguely Coleridgean anachronisms such as “imagination” and “personality,” categories that seemed to stand in stark theoretical opposition to an ill-defined, and often oppressive, conception of the external world, which Stevens had taken to calling simply “reality.”

Beyond Burke’s obvious frustration with the philosophical imprecision of these terms, his larger objection in the Grammar is that Stevens’ central dichotomy of imagination and reality was insufficiently dialectical, that it tended to be cast “in terms of knowledge, rather than in terms of action,” thus reproducing the very model of disengaged subjective agency that had been central to the modern epistemological tradition since Descartes. With this objection, Burke anticipates what would become a familiar critical position by the end of the twentieth century, which attributes to Stevens an overriding desire to escape from, rather than engage meaningfully with, what he

---

3 Ibid., 226.
famously called the “pressure” of reality. Whether such an escape is understood to be productive (as in Adorno, where the retreat into aesthetic form provides a final refuge for subjectivity against the dehumanizing effects of late capitalism) or merely reactionary in nature, the Stevensian imagination, cast in this light, comes to appear entirely confined to the domain of private, “inner” experience, sealed-off from the messy contingencies of history, politics, and everyday life.

However sympathetic I am to the spirit of Burke’s objection, I find it almost completely misplaced in the case of Stevens. There is ample evidence in both the poetry and the criticism to suggest that Stevens long before this time had begun arriving at—or, in his own more humble estimation, working “toward”—a far more nuanced conception of the functional interdependence of language, thought, and world than his dichotomy of imagination and reality (like Heidegger’s contemporaneous distinction between Dasein and Welt, or Sartre’s between pour-soi and en-soi) tends to imply when taken at face value. In this regard, the aphorism with which his best-known and most representative piece of criticism, the 1942 essay “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” begins is especially telling: “The imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real.”

Part of what makes this claim so compelling is how it manages to encompass two unreconciled, if not quite antithetical, ideas which had by that time become central to the modernist project. On the one hand, it insists on the need to break with rhetorical

---

5 While Burke’s reservations are primarily about the prose, it should be noted that Stevens often pointedly takes up these terms as objects of meditation in his poetry, as well.
conventions in order to return to something tangible and real, a mode of representation more commensurate with life as it is actually perceived. (This is the common impulse that animates a range of seemingly opposed modernist techniques, from the inward-looking stream of consciousness to the imagist’s emphasis on externalization and “direct treatment of the thing.”) But it also intimates that once we begin to see the imagination as something that extends vitally into reality, matters of truth and fact become inseparable from considerations of perspective and value, rendering our attempts to determine what is objectively real not only theoretically naïve but also largely irrelevant to more pressing human concerns such as “how to live” and “what to do.”

One thing every reader of Stevens can agree on is that he is in some obvious, if often unspecified, sense a “philosophical” poet, a writer concerned with both the life of ideas and the diversity of ways in which we come to experience and understand the world around us. Even the most cursory glance at the titles of his major poems—including “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” “Anecdote of the Jar,” “The Idea of Order at Key West,” “Of Modern Poetry,” “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” and “Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself”—is enough to reveal something of the nature and the extent of these preoccupations. While there has been no shortage of critical accounts that seek to identify Stevens’ theoretical sources, this approach has contributed to a sense that the poems represent merely so many instantiations of this or that doctrine, so many

“philosophical puzzles and apercus in pleasing poetic garb,” rather than a series of demonstrative explorations of the ways in which the world becomes intelligible to us—indeed, takes shape as a world—through the medium of language. The aim of this chapter is to illuminate this latter dynamic and to demonstrate how it becomes central to Stevens’ lifelong attempt to work through the broader social and ethical implications of modernist experimentation in his writing.

Stevens’ significance as a major twentieth-century poet is no longer in dispute, but his status as a modernist, tellingly, remains a matter of some debate. In what follows, I make a case not only for his modernism but for his contemporaneity, for the relevance of his thought to ongoing developments within the cultural sphere. My goal is not to vindicate him in any straightforward sense from the charges of apoliticism that have plagued his reputation since the publication of *Harmonium*, his first volume, in 1922. However, it will soon become apparent why attempts to cast Stevens as a purveyor of a belated “romanticism”—a charge that for many later critics, less sensitive than Burke to the thematic and methodological ties between these movements, becomes synonymous with the aesthete’s desire to dwell in the solipsistic world of his or her own imagination, often with little regard for how this internal monologue might intersect with the conflicted and dialogical territory of politics and economics—inevitably miss the point. Such readings obscure Stevens’ acute awareness of the persistence of idealist motifs in his own writing as well as his particular willingness to expose and come to terms with

---

their basic limitations. This, in fact, becomes the overriding concern of his poetry by the 1930’s and 40’s, when Stevens begins to explore in earnest the possibility that art can generate new values, new culturally defining fictions, around which individual and collective identities can take shape: a phenomenon that Simon Critchley, James Longenbach, and Charles Altieri have explored in productive and largely complimentary ways.  

To read Stevens as engaged in a hermeneutical exploration of the interrelatedness of language, thought, and world while exhibiting a concern with the broader social implications of this attempt to rethink the nature and extent of human agency would no longer be to locate him within the tradition of modern epistemology. It would be to locate him within the ongoing critique of that tradition, and even, I want to suggest, within a particular strain of that critique, which, taking its cues from the later writings of Heidegger and Wittgenstein, has concerned itself less with the solving than the dissolving of the problems generated by modern philosophy and its insurmountable dualisms. We have seen in earlier chapters how the reliance of modern epistemology on a rigid subject-object dualism has rendered it essentially incapable of producing compelling explanations for how qualitatively different domains such as mind and body (or more broadly, mind and world) could interact, giving rise to reductionisms that seek to explain one of these domains fully in terms of the other and, in the process, end up explaining away much of what makes them unique. As Critchley has argued, the philosophical significance of

---

Stevens’ poetry consists to a great extent in its ability to recast the “basic problem of epistemology in a way that perhaps allows this problem to be cast away.”

A first attempt along these lines can be found in Gerald Bruns’ provocatively titled 1985 essay, “Wallace Stevens without Epistemology.” Here, Bruns poses the seemingly innocuous question: “What happens to our reading of Wallace Stevens’ poetry when the problem of how the mind links up with reality is no longer central for us in the way it was for Stevens?” Such a reading, he suggests, would be in accordance with a paradigm shift that has been taking place within the literature and philosophy of the late twentieth century, a shift away from both the “epistemological turn” that has defined modern philosophy from the Enlightenment onward and the “linguistic turn” so pronounced in twentieth century thought. The latter for Bruns is characterized by a general conviction that “our descriptions of the world remain internal to our vocabularies, ideologies, conceptual schemas, paradigms, cultural systems, forms of life, and so on.” Instead of situating Stevens in relation to either of these theoretical perspectives, Bruns proposes that we approach his poetry in a way that would reflect a third and even more recent shift in aesthetic and critical methodology, which he identifies, problematically, as a “hermeneutical turn.” The most obvious difficulty with this expression is that it evokes a range of figures, including Schleiermacher, Heidegger, and Gadamer, whose projects fall within the guidelines already provided for the so-called linguistic turn, thus

---

10 Critchley, *Things merely are: philosophy in the poetry of Wallace Stevens*: 4.
12 Ibid., 165-66.
13 Ibid., 166.
obscuring the distinction between these two supposedly distinct critical approaches. But Bruns has something rather different in mind. The hermeneutical turn he identifies (and implicitly endorses) in this essay might more accurately be described as an *ethical* turn, one that, for him, involves the recasting of certain basic poststructuralist insights regarding the inability of language to establish stable meanings or identities in terms of their social and ethical consequences, the most pressing issue no longer being “how the mind links up with reality” but rather “how we link up with other people in everyday life.”

Bruns does not explain why these concerns—for the subjective and the intersubjective, for the self and the other—must be mutually exclusive. But his conclusion that as soon as we stop conceiving of Steven’s poetry in epistemological terms, we discover that it is, at bottom, “a poetry of the spectator where the main thing is to see something or to construct something and thereby to count it as knowable or intelligible or valuable as a possession of one’s own,” a poetry, in short, of hedonistic appropriation, remains to be reckoned with. Bruns defends this claim by noting both the relative scarcity of other people in Stevens’ poetry as well as the related matter of how these alien voices, whenever and to whatever extent they do emerge, pose a threat to the integrity of the world-making process that stands at the center of Stevens’ project. And yet, despite his insistence that “the characteristic movement of Stevens’ imagination is to

14 Ibid.
15 Ibid. Bruns raises with particular urgency an issue that had been largely ignored by scholars until that time, particularly some of his immediate predecessors in the poststructuralist tradition, such as J. Hillis Miller, who championed the structural irresolution and existential implications of Stevens’ poetry. For an account of the reception of Stevens in the American academy during the 1960’s and 1970’s, see Frank Lentricchia, *After the new criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).
convert otherness into aesthetic identity,” Bruns is quick to point out that it is never quite successful in this endeavor.\(^{16}\) What makes Stevens’ peculiar brand of lyricism so compelling, he concludes, is just this repeated staging of the tension between self and other, which it can never satisfactorily resolve. And from the standpoint of contemporary theory, this “failure” actually becomes Stevens’ saving grace. Like Pound’s self-proclaimed inability to make the \textit{Cantos} cohere, it comes to represent a triumph of the irreducibly complex and particular—a triumph of heterogeneity—over the artist’s hubristic attempt to discover, create, or otherwise impose order on the disparate elements of experience in a way that provides a model for how others might see, think, feel, and act.

My feeling is that Bruns asks the right question here, and even manages to uncover much of potential significance about the constitutive tensions that animate Stevens’ body of work, while still reaching the “wrong” conclusion. His hermeneutic of suspicion ends up attributing to Stevens an ignorance of issues we find him actively pursuing in the poetry, and there to a degree of rhetorical complexity and performative immediacy that eludes direct theoretical restatement.\(^{17}\) Stevens’ fascination with the

\(^{16}\) Bruns, “Wallace Stevens without Epistemology,” 176.
\(^{17}\) I do not wish to deny the potential of criticism to make significant contributions to our understanding of an artist’s temperament and work by identifying certain tendencies of which he or she may not be fully aware, or may even explicitly deny, when there are compelling reasons to believe otherwise. But we need to proceed with extreme caution in the case of a poet as self-reflexive as Stevens. The line of thought that Bruns begins to develop in this essay is pursued to its unfortunate extreme by Mark Halliday, \textit{Stevens and the interpersonal} (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), who sets out to expose what he calls the “omissions and distortions in [Stevens’] account of human life” (3)—as if it were the responsibility of the artist to provide such an “account” and Stevens is therefore committing a fundamental injustice by choosing to withhold information that might finally render his body of work morally unambiguous, an object “safe” for critical approbation or condemnation. Halliday goes further than Bruns in attributing to Stevens not only a persistent anxiety about interpersonal relations but even “a profound aversion” to their
solitary, self-authorizing poetic or philosophical voice, as embodied in the recurring figure of Hoon—who declares while walking along the shore that “I was myself the compass of that sea: / I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw / Or heard or felt came not but from myself”¹⁸—becomes the subject of constant scrutiny in the later poetry: never abandoned, but exposed, complicated, and brought down to earth through incessant waves of irony and qualification.

What Bruns’ analysis effectively reveals is that certain elements of Steven’s lyricism, including some of his basic methodological assumptions as they manifest themselves on a formal and thematic level, are, unlike Pound’s panoramas of ideological contention in *The Cantos*, not readily assimilable into the “ethics of difference” that has been so predominant in the humanities since the heyday of poststructuralism. (Similar considerations prompt Marjorie Perloff to dismiss Stevens’ modernism in her influential essay “Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?”¹⁹) But what Stevens challenges us to see is that there are other ways of being socially and ethically engaged as an artist than by giving priority in one’s work to overt forms of heterogeneity that several generations of critics have learned to interpret, appreciatively, as so many manifestations of “otherness” or “alterity”—a theoretical orientation that despite its sometimes radical trappings remains demands, which he claims continues unabated throughout the poet’s entire career (5). Yet the implication in both cases is that by reading Stevens in this way we are able to unearth something of which he remained either unaware or consciously ashamed, something that, in any case, he had a vested interest in concealing from the very public to whom he made his poetry available.

¹⁸ Stevens, *The collected poems of Wallace Stevens*: 65.
¹⁹ In Perloff, *The dance of the intellect: studies in the poetry of the Pound tradition*. 107
firmly rooted in the tradition of modern liberalism.\(^20\) Where it diverges, at least in emphasis, from this tradition is in its extreme, and ultimately self-defeating, suspicion of the related ideas of personal identity and rational human agency.\(^21\) This suspicion extends even to the modernist effort to achieve a provisionally coherent stance toward oneself and the world, one that, like the narrative persona in Rilke’s *Sonnets to Orpheus* (who proclaims to the still earth, “I flow,” and to the rapid water, “I am”\(^22\)) or the ambiguously autobiographical protagonists of Proust and Joyce, would embrace the constructedness of subjectivity as a defining and inescapable condition of human life and, in doing so, take responsibility for the self that has come into being through the combined influence of forces such as socialization, education, introspection, self-development, and so on.

Stevens, with the possible exception of W.B. Yeats, remains the Anglo-American modernist whose ties to the nineteenth-century lyric of both romanticism and Symbolism are most readily apparent. But his acute awareness of this inheritance is what makes him uniquely attuned to the limitations of modernist ideology. The result is a more balanced, more inherently social, conception of form than the relatively impoverished one we have inherited from poststructuralist philosophy, which tends to regard the imposition of all kinds of order, including aesthetic and linguistic form, as arbitrary, inauthentic, repressive, and ultimately, illegitimate. Stevens’ understanding of the imbrication of

---

\(^20\) To be sure, it has an even longer Judeo-Christian pedigree (this theological connection becoming explicit in Levinas and the later writings of Derrida). For more on this connection, see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the self: the making of the modern identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

\(^21\) Foucault’s later interest in “technologies of the self” represents an obvious exception and corrective to this overall tendency in poststructuralist thought.

imagination and reality makes him attentive to the agency, and thus the social and psychological actuality, of the ideal. Considerable attention has been given to his interest in a poetry that could generate culturally sustaining “fictions” in the wake of traditional religious and moral frameworks, a project that, given its frequent emphasis on the figure of the heroic artist who makes this possible, brings him into especially close theoretical proximity with Nietzsche. Yet to conceive of this dynamic in authoritarian or elitist terms is to neglect both the importance that Stevens ultimately places on the provisional, culturally relative status of such ideals—evident in his paradoxical assertion that even a “supreme” fiction “must change”—and his conviction that, as Longenbach explains, drawing on a cluster of terms that occur with increasing frequency in Stevens’ mature poetry, “whatever sublimity the world contains will be found in the near, the ordinary, the communal, the humdrum.” The reading I pursue in the following pages is one concerned primarily with this “public” dimension of Stevens’ thought. By giving serious consideration to his insistence that “The fundamental difficulty in any art is the problem of the normal,” it becomes possible to see how, and why, his exploration of the ability of poetry to harness the world-making, value-legislating activity of the human intelligence so often coincides with a return to the everyday—a place where epistemology and ontology vitally coincide. More than a critique that seeks to address the problems of the tradition on their own terms, this marks a shift in aesthetic and critical practice, a willingness to abandon the established parameters of literature and

25 Stevens, *Collected poetry and prose*: 908.
philosophy in order to put the resources of both disciplines in the service of a more expansive and nuanced conception of human rationality.

* * *

In “Of Modern Poetry,” Stevens begins in medias res, not so much to describe as to “enact” the ontological status of his subject: “The poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice.” The enjambment here works to stagger these constructions, imposing between them a certain grammatical and conceptual distance, as if to suggest that the latter phrase, “what will suffice,” might be considered alone, detached from “the act of finding” that modifies “poem.” Since there is no direct object onto which all this jumbled psychological energy might discharge itself, it is left to find expression elsewhere, spilling over the edge of the written line, turning the period into a question mark, teasing out of linguistic obscurity the seemingly straightforward question, “What will suffice?”

What makes Stevens’ two-line formulation so remarkable is how it manages to illustrate the procedurally active unfolding of the modernist poem while at the same time constituting an acutely perceptive assessment of the inherent possibilities and limitations of such formal open-endedness. It poses the problem of the ontological status of the modernist text (“the poem of the mind”) and suggests that the object, or objects, of

26 The collected poems of Wallace Stevens: 239.
cognition ("what will suffice") might be other than one would expect, that the meaning of modernist texts can no longer consist in closure on some predetermined moral or conceptual schema but rather in a rigorously dialectical kind of thinking that seeks to negotiate, and ultimately, to redefine, the boundaries of reader, writer, text, and world. 

These preoccupations become even clearer as the poem unfolds:

It has not always had
To find: the scene was set; it repeated what
Was in the script.
Then the theatre was changed
To something else. Its past was a souvenir.
It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.
It has to face the men of the time and to meet
The women of the time. It has to think about war
And it has to find what will suffice. (2-10)

A sense of history, or more precisely, of historical rupture, emerges in the double-indentured "Then" at the beginning of the fifth line. This is reinforced on the grammatical level by a transition from the perfect tense ("has not always had," "was set," "was in the script," "was changed") to a present tense fraught with implications of pragmatic necessity ("has to be living," "has to face," "has to think," "has to find"). Stevens’ suggestion is that the function of poetry has shifted accordingly. The modern poem, while it may have achieved a certain degree of autonomy by breaking with conventional forms and motifs, now finds itself hemmed in by an unshakable, if undefined, sense of social responsibility. It has been forced by the sum of external circumstances—the pressure of reality—to abandon its rarified aestheticism and now must canvass the countryside in a manner more appropriate to a politician than a romantic visionary, learning “the speech of the place,” facing its constituency, shaking hands.
As the poem progresses, the urgency of these imperatives ("has to... has to... has to...") places an increasing strain on the already ambiguous question of what will suffice, pushing that construction to its conceptual breaking point: talk of sufficiency is bound to be empty as long as we know neither what we are looking for nor why we are looking. We are therefore forced to leave these questions aside, at least for the moment, in order to pursue a more fundamental one that has surfaced: Why does poetry now have to find, when before this time all it had to do was "repeat what was in the script"?

I have indicated how the idea that modern poetry represents both a historical rupture and an aesthetic crisis finds its formal correlative in the dramatically indented transition, "Then," at the start of the fifth line. This staggered construction juts out from the right-hand margin like a precipice on the far side of some typographical ravine. Its purpose is to give us pause, to instill a sense of something glossed-over, unaccounted for, perhaps even unrepresentable, and the payoff is considerable: "Then" becomes the primary conceptual pivot of this first section of the poem, a way for Stevens to signal the emergence of some larger, more momentous, shift in aesthetic sensibility without pretending to possess a full theoretical comprehension of that transformation. The task of the modern poem is, after all, not to know, but to find. What Stevens' paradigmatic modernist lyric finds, and what it attempts to communicate in all of its contradiction and

---

27 In its ordinary usage, “then” can be (1) a noun, specifying a specific “time when”; (2) an adverb, indicating consecutiveness in time or position; or (3) an adjective, as in phrases such as “the then-poet laureate,” where it refers to a former state of the thing in question. Stevens harnesses the signifying potential of all of these senses of “then” in order to convey an impression of cultural change so complete that its causes are no longer directly perceptible to the modern mind. Standing on the far side of this divide, we now perceive only its effects, unable to supply the kinds of explanatory connections that would be necessary to sustain a cultural narrative—a vision, however provisional, of our collective past, present, and future.
complexity is that nothing—not even itself—is exempt from this process of historical change.

With the arrival of modernity, “The theatre was changed / to something else,” and this, Stevens suggests, has made it difficult for us to see exactly what made these forms so vital for previous ages. They now appear only in an ironic, caricatured way, as actors whose function is to repeat “what / Was in the script.” I read these lines less as a historical judgment, less as a peremptory dismissal of these earlier forms (whether classical or early modern) as outmoded, primitive, or inherently empty, than as an expression of the inability of Stevens’ generation to grasp that past in its once-living immediacy.28 It becomes history behind glass, museum-like and lifeless: history as it appears to the modern mind. And how could it appear otherwise, Stevens seems to be asking, to a culture so rapidly transformed by forces such as industrialization, urbanization, modern warfare, and the prevalence of new technologies that have drastically altered our ways of conceptualizing time and space?29 How could this past, and the vision of communal wholeness it represents, amount to anything but a

28 To the extent that Stevens’ emphasis on the need to “find” reflects an awareness of something irretrievably lost to modern culture, “Of Modern Poetry” becomes a striking expression of the elegiac sentiment that for Thomas Pfau constitutes “the defining characteristic of aesthetic production in Modernity” (Thomas Pfau, “Mourning Modernity: Classical Antiquity, Romantic Theory, and Elegiac Form,” in The Oxford handbook of the elegy, ed. Karen A. Weisman [Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010], 548, emphasis in original.) Pfau attributes this culturally pervasive sense of loss to the paradigmatic shift during the late Middle Ages from a “closed and timeless cosmology” characterized by cyclicality and recurrence to “a fundamentally altered, linear and secular conception of time” (548).

29 Restricting himself to the period between 1880 and the onset of World War I, Stephen Kern points to world-altering impact of inventions such as “the telephone, wireless telegraph, x-ray, cinema, bicycle, automobile, and airplane” (Stephen Kern, The culture of time and space, 1880-1918 : with a new preface [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003]. 1.). By 1940, when Stevens publishes “Of Modern Poetry,” we can add to this list penicillin, the electronic microscope, tape recorder, television, and the discovery of nuclear fission.
“souvenir”—a kind of manufactured memory lacking clear application to anything we have known or experienced?

We have seen in Chapter I how the idea that modern poetry coincides with an act of cultural retrospection has a clear precedent in the work of Friedrich Schiller. In his 1795 treatise, *Of Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, Schiller expands the Kantian thesis that aesthetic judgments enable us to realize the freedom of the human intellect in the face of an external, or natural, determinism. He does so by rigorously and imaginatively historicizing this claim, giving particular attention to the characteristically “modern” interest we take in the simplicity of nature as it appears to us in its unspoiled forms: plants, animals, landscapes, children, and primitive peoples here provide the paradigmatic examples. While we are moved to melancholy by the noble naiveté of these things, which represent to us our fall from natural grace, our “lost childhood,” the essential point for Schiller is that “their perfection is not something they have deserved, since it is not the result of a decision on their part.” These things lack the potential for self awareness; their mode of existence is completely determined by the laws of nature, a condition of absolute unfreedom. Thus, through a kind of dialectical reversal, the seeming perfection of nature is revealed to be an attribute that the modern mind, in its quest for what will suffice, confers upon it. What we call “nature” is really an image of ourselves transfigured—an ideal of the perfectibility of human nature.

Stevens mobilizes a strikingly similar set of concerns in “The Snow Man,” which stands as one of the greatest achievements of *Harmonium*, his first published volume.

---

Many commentators have noted how the abundance of natural imagery in the opening stanzas situates the poem within the genre of the romantic landscape lyric, and indeed, the identification is so pronounced as to feel deliberate. As the sequence unfolds, we find the narrative consciousness drawing ever nearer, through language, to nature, its ostensible aim being to cultivate a state of mind that would allow it to appreciate the winter landscape as it is in itself, to experience it not as transcendence but as immanence:

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,… (1-9)  

Here, too, we find Stevens utilizing the imperative mood to convey a sense of necessity (“One must…”). Yet the source of this necessity is not explicitly posited, as in “Of Modern Poetry,” where it is the effects of some larger cultural transformation that dictate what the poem “has to” do. This particular kind of necessity, this urgency, hinges instead on an implicitly conditional formulation, one that promises that if one cultivates “a mind of winter,” then something else—presumably something desirable—will happen. And if we take the poem literally, at its word, we find that “a mind of winter” will enable us “to regard the frost and the boughs / […] and not to think / Of any misery in the sound of the

---

31 Stevens, *The collected poems of Wallace Stevens*: 9-10.
wind.” We will be able to experience the world (or at any rate, the world of the poem) without committing the pathetic fallacy.

Several factors combine to suggest that such detachment is possible. The poem’s images, after all, are intensely sensuous, bristling with objective specificity: “pine-trees crusted with snow,” “junipers shagged with ice,” “spruce trees rough in the distant glitter / Of the January sun.” All of these concrete details lend rhetorical support to the claim they are supposed to prove: that a mind of winter could “regard” and “behold” these wintry phenomena from an ideal empirical distance, from an emotionally remote conceptual plane in which the wind that one hears is simply “the wind” and not a plaintive “voice” resonating with our own, all-too-human feelings of isolation and longing amid the desolation of a winter landscape. The closing stanzas, however, undercut the optimistic momentum of this conceit, generating a distinctly self-critical countercurrent that throws into doubt the possibility, as well as the desirability, of a complete internalization of external reality. At this point, the poem abandons its scrutiny of the pathos-projected “misery in the sound of the wind, / In the sound of a few leaves” and takes a turn for the metaphysical:

Which is the sound of the land
Full of same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is. (10-15)

While the emphasis on “sameness” of wind works to collapse the distance between internal and external, subject and object, what makes this gesture truly remarkable is
how, the more the ideal of complete detachment appears to crystallize on the level of metaphor, the more its pragmatic impossibility is revealed. The mind of winter is realized as being unrealizable: in order for the poem’s central absurdist conceit to be fully actualized, or understood, man would have to become snowman.

Here again, Schiller’s notion of the “sentimental” or reflective poet can be of use, Stevens being in many ways the epitome of such a poet. While there is a definite sense for Schiller in which the noble naiveté of nature trumps the artifice of modern art and culture—which is exactly why we feel compelled to seek it out—there is another sense in which it is only what it is, only naïve, in relation to the fallen culture that refines and elevates it through aesthetic creation. For Schiller, we are free only insofar as we are no longer shackled to nature: the basic human desire to return to something determinate, whole, and self-sufficient is what elicits the ideal from sheer necessity, but that ideal represents something higher than nature itself, something that has the potential to uplift and to perfect humanity. This is in fact a profoundly dialectical way of thinking, according to which the two terms, nature and art, rather than canceling each other out, combine to produce a third term and thus a kind of progression, which Schiller conceived as a path leading not only toward greater knowledge about the relationship between form and content but also toward a vision of moral perfection that could promote individual and cultural enlightenment. If this talk of morality itself appears hopelessly naïve to twenty-first-century readers for whom the high romantic belief in “truth, goodness, and beauty” has been flipped on its head—first by nineteenth-century thinkers such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, and later, throughout the twentieth century, by the
emergence of a range of qualitatively different socioeconomic concerns, from world war, fascism, and genocide to mass culture and globalization—the revolutionary aspect of his vision remains as compelling as ever. This is, again, because its primary appeal is not to the actual but to the ideal. Schiller is not principally concerned with revealing the trans-empirical truth of “things as they are”; his concern is with things as they might be, as they ought to be. By encouraging us to compare our actual cultural situation with its ideal counterpart, and by providing a model in which form and content stand in a co-evolving, rather than fixed and transhistorical, relation to one another, modern, “sentimental” art supplies a potential mechanism not only for self-reflection but for the progressive transformation of individual and society alike.

Stevens clearly finds himself unable in “The Snow Man” to conjure that sense of religiosity that characterized the romantics’ encounter with the natural environment. Yet it is striking how closely the following admonition from “Of Naive and Sentimental Poetry” coincides with the thematic progression of the poem:

If you step out of your artificial circle toward the completeness of nature then it stands before you in its magnificent stillness, in its naïve beauty, in its childlike innocence and simplicity. Dwell at that moment on this image, cultivate this feeling; it is worthy of what is most splendid in your human nature. Do not let it occur to you any longer to want to change places with nature. Instead, take nature up into yourself and strive to wed its unlimited advantages to your own endless prerogatives, and from the marriage of both strive to give birth to something divine.32

Schiller reaffirms in this passage that what is of primary importance to him is not nature per se but rather the “divine” ideal of the perfection of human nature, the pursuit of which

32 Schiller, "On Naive and Sentimental Poetry," 193, my emphasis.
he believed could elevate us above the oblivion of a merely instinctual existence and into ever-higher states of individual and social consciousness, an idea that would return with particular intensity in Hegel. This dual emphasis on both the adaptability of human beings—as creatures that throughout the course of their development find themselves constantly renegotiating the boundaries of self and other—and on the utter indispensability of the human perspective in matters of knowledge, thought, judgment, belief, and action, is also what sets Schiller’s conception of the creative artist apart from the insensate snowman at the center of Stevens’ poem. He advises the lyrical poet to reflect, but without letting go of that sense of self-possession that connects him the rest of humanity: “To be sure, the poet is supposed to liberate humanity from all arbitrary limitations, but without overturning the concept of humanity and upsetting its natural limits.”

But what are those limits, and how can we come to know them? Schiller recognizes that the poet “can hardly elevate himself to the true ideal of human ennoblement without taking some steps beyond it”:

In order to get to that point he must take leave of the actual world, for he can fashion it, like any ideal, only from inner and moral sources. He does not encounter it in the world around him and in the bustle of active life, but only in his heart, and he finds his heart solely in the stillness of solitary reflection.

Schiller’s pursuit of the emotion recollected in tranquility, here, leads him onto noticeably shakier ground. If ideals of some kind do not already serve to mediate the

---

33 Ibid., 247.
34 Ibid.
artist’s perception of “the world around him,” including his experience of the “bustle” of everyday life, it suddenly becomes unclear how the values revealed by great works of art could ever acquire the requisite agency, the normative force, that would allow them to carry over into the domain of life and have a transformative impact on a culture. And it is perhaps in the attempt to stave off such an objection that he adds the following caveat:

But this withdrawal from life will not always remove only the contingent limitations of humanity from view. More often it will also remove the necessary and indestructible limitations of humanity […] and what the contemplative mind discovered on the serene path of thought, the person acting will not be able to realize on the beleaguered path of life.35

Whether these remarks are intended to affirm the fundamentally social dimension of thought or simply the untenability of any absolute distinction between theory and practice, the central importance that Schiller places on human sociality—much like Kant’s appeal to the *senus communis* in the Third Critique, from which it derives—distinguishes him from the narrative consciousness presiding over Stevens’ poem, which, as we have seen, finds its objective correlative in the ironically *inhuman* figure of the snowman. For Schiller, the steadfastness and perfection we detect in nature remain a primary source of spiritual inspiration, a beacon to guide both our individual development and our collective efforts to build a better, more fulfilling and inhabitable culture. Nature, although indispensable, is only a means to this end; any endeavor to return to it on the literal level would be not only delusional but socially irresponsible. (As the narrator of “The Idea of Order at Key West” will insist, it was “she”—the woman singing by the sea—“and not the sea we heard,” although the precariousness of this

35 Ibid., 248.
distinction is underscored by the fact that only a single consonant serves to keep these two linguistic entities, “she” and “sea,” from merging into one another.\(^{36}\) It is this basic concern with the role played by transpersonal, cultural forms in the shaping of human experience and identity that comes to define Stevens’ lyricism as he begins to rethink the relation between self and world in ways that reveal the shortcomings of the rigid subject-object dichotomy bequeathed to us by science and philosophy.

* * *

On March 4, 1906, when Stevens was 26 years old and working in New York as a lawyer, he took a moment to reflect on the arrival of spring in his journal, remarking almost impressionistically on the fields “full of puddles” and the “blurred appearance” of treetops in East Orange, New Jersey, where he resided. He then launches into a brief but revealing mediation on relationship between the individual and society. “People are not particularly interested in humanity nowadays, as Schiller was, or Desmoulins or Shelley—or anybody,” he writes.

We study the individual + that individual is one’s self + through one’s self to one’s neighbor. As for humanity at large, we are content to write Johnsonian letters to the Post—but never to read them. We go slumming in a quarter, we help starving Asiatics—true; but we do not pursue the ideal of the Universal Superman—at least not to-day. But we may the day after to-morrow.\(^{37}\)

\(^{36}\) Stevens, The collected poems of Wallace Stevens: 127.

The notion that art can have an ethical function, that it can (to use one of Stevens’ deliberate archaisms) “ennoble” us as individuals while binding us together as a society through shared values that we knowingly construct and assent to, will return with a peculiar intensity in his mature work, most notably in the longer poem “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” and his major critical works of the late 1930s and 1940s. What makes this entry noteworthy is that it demonstrates not only that this central preoccupation of the later writings had begun to assert itself as early as 1906—a time when Stevens had suspended the writing of poetry altogether in order to secure a more gainful and traditionally “masculine” form of employment—but also that he was conversant enough with figures such as Schiller and Nietzsche for their ideas to have contributed to his thinking about such issues.

I do not want to place undue emphasis on this connection. It may be tempting to decipher in Stevens’ writing the direct “influence” of certain Continental philosophers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as Bloom and others have done. Yet it is clear enough from his correspondence with close friends such as Henry Church (an avid reader of Nietzsche who in the early 1940s persuaded Stevens to revisit some of the philosopher’s major works\(^\text{38}\)), that Stevens was at best a recreational, if highly

\(^{38}\) Unlike Bloom, I am prepared to take Stevens largely at his word when he responded to the interest that his close friend Henry Church had taken in Nietzsche around 1942, admitting, “I haven’t read him since I was a young man” (Letters 409). This dismissal may stem in part from international tensions arising from the Second World War. In a subsequent letter to Church, dated March 10, 1944, Stevens indicates with obvious frustration that his recent efforts had convinced him that it was “impossible” to acquire a German edition of Nietzsche’s collected writings in New York; he was forced instead to order an English translation, of which only five of “something like 20 or 25” total volumes ended up reaching him (Letters 461, 486).
discriminating, reader of philosophical texts. We know that he was enrolled at Harvard in a course of study that encompassed the English, French, and German traditions, where he became familiar with some of the major texts and figures of the romantic tradition, including Goethe, Hölderlin, Coleridge, Keats, and Emerson, whose collected writings his mother had given him in 1898.\(^{39}\) Several critics, including Frank Lentricchia, have emphasized the importance of his exposure beyond the classroom to the ideas of William James and George Santayana as they percolated through Cambridge around the turn of the century.\(^{40}\) Although Stevens’ rejected Santayana’s aestheticism, he befriended and exchanged sonnets with the philosopher while at Harvard and later commemorated him with the luminous 1952 lyric “To an Old Philosopher in Rome.” All of this is well-established, and readers of Stevens’ critical essays will find them peppered with casual references to figures like Plato, Kant, James, Bergson, and Whitehead. But the question remains: how are we to reconcile this with his own insistence, in 1949, six years before his death, that he had “never studied systematic philosophy and should be bored to death at the mere thought of doing so”\(^{41}\)

Stevens’ view of philosophy, as intimated in The Necessary Angel and other essays of the period, reflects an awareness of the widening gap between Anglo-American and Continental schools of thought, which had been less pronounced even during his time at Harvard. Yet the “systematic philosophy” with which Stevens found himself at odds

---


\(^{41}\) Stevens, *Letters of Wallace Stevens*: 636.
was not analytic philosophy per se but rather philosophical *dogmatism* in all its various forms, the kind of theoretical outlook that, whether empiricist or rationalist in its basic orientation, masquerades as what he branded in that essay the “official view of being.” Plato’s theory of the forms is certainly the most familiar example of this kind of essentialism. However, as a persistent theoretical tendency—one that, if we are to accept Kant’s account in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, both reflects and codifies the inevitable overreaching of the rational faculty itself—it remains largely synonymous with the attempt to ground one’s claims in some ideal of trans-empirical objectivity that would exist *as such* even beyond the taint of human perspective, a “view from nowhere.” What dogmatism loses sight of, what Nietzsche would say it necessarily represses and “forgets,” is that such a conception of objectivity is itself nothing more than an ideal: but also, crucially, nothing less.42 “To be at the end of fact,” Stevens writes in one of the “Adagia,” “is not to be at the beginning of the imagination but it is to be at the end of both.”43

Already in *Harmonium* Stevens can be seen taking direct aim at philosophical dogmatism, along with its crippling intellectual and pragmatic consequences. Nowhere is this more apparent than in “Six Significant Landscapes,” where the excesses of ratiocination are depicted as a kind of conceptual prison that locks its adherents, however

42 In the context of scientific theory, such a conception of objectivity might be said to serve at any given time as a model, that is to say, a foundational metaphor—or Kuhnian “paradigm”—whose indispensable function is to synthesize a diversity of information and provide a general direction in which thought can travel. As Kuhn has demonstrated, the fact that paradigms, as products of human culture, are never ultimate does make them inherently susceptible to historical supersession by other, more compelling paradigms that eventually take hold and displace them. However, it does not render paradigms themselves dispensable, something we may one day begin to live or to theorize without. See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The structure of scientific revolutions*, Fourth edition. ed. (Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2012).

43 Stevens, *Collected poetry and prose*: 912.
unwittingly, into a frame of mind both too rigid and mechanically repetitive to account for the testimony of first-person subjective experience:

Rationalists, wearing square hats,
Think, in square rooms,
Looking at the floor,
Looking at the ceiling.\footnote{The collected poems of Wallace Stevens: 73.}

These lines, with an absurdist austerity reminiscent of Beckett, work to caricature and throw into question the basic epistemological scaffolding of modern philosophy: the assumption that we, as subjects, formulate concepts that grasp something either true or false about the “external” world of physical objects and the fundamental laws governing their interaction. Stevens does not attempt to refute this so-called “correspondence theory” of truth on its own terms. Instead, he challenges us to imagine a scenario in which this rigid distinction between subject and object would be fully realized—in this case, from the standpoint of the rationalist, who emphasizes the independence of conceptual knowledge from sense experience. By comically exposing the limitations of this model of subject-object interaction, he enables it to feel cartoonish, ontologically impoverished, and (to the extent that it comes to seem manifestly at odds with the qualitative dimension of human experience) even illogical.

This is not to suggest that the naïve realism of empirical philosophy emerges unscathed from Stevens’ critique, however. “Realism,” he insisted elsewhere, “is a corruption of reality.”\footnote{906} Like rationalism, it relies on an epistemology that begins by hypostasizing the categories of subject and object; it simply moves in the opposite
direction, engaging in processes of reduction designed to remove the bias of the observer and give precedence to the observable objects or states of affairs it seeks to explain. Yet as Heidegger remarks in one of his later lectures, “Science always encounters only what its kind of representation has admitted beforehand as an object possible for science.”

What Stevens enables us to see is that any strict theoretical distinction along the lines of rationalism and empiricism inevitably breaks down in practice: both pull fundamentally away from the sensible toward the conceptual with the assumption that only the latter can grasp what is truly essential in phenomena.

What distinguishes the arch-Platonic rationalists that populate the final section of “Six Significant Landscapes” is that they are only capable of experiencing concepts; the concrete, sensuous element of their world has been entirely drained away. One could call it, quite literally, a reduction in their quality of life. Yet this is a limitation of which they remain entirely unaware. They do not experience it as a lack because, for them, sitting in their “square rooms,” there is simply nothing else to see, no unruly or revelatory perception whose content could erupt into consciousness in a way that might challenge, and potentially unsettle, the logico-mathematical perfection of this conceptual edifice.

The perversity of this form of existence, this utter blindness to sensation, is reinforced through a further analogy to Euclidian plane geometry. They “confine themselves / To right-angled triangles,” Stevens insists, before proposing a remedy:

If they tried rhomboids,
Cones, waving lines, ellipses—

As, for example, the ellipse of the half-moon—
Rationalists would wear sombreros.⁴⁷

This is Stevens at his most devastatingly tongue-in-cheek. And as is so often the case, his
delight in pushing a poem’s central conceit to, and even beyond, its conceptual breaking
point becomes a vehicle for profound insight. When weighed against the vividness of
certain details from other episodes in this six-part sequence—the little, imagistic shards
that, although highly “elliptical” in nature, form a constellation of concrete experiential
associations, a lyrical coherence outside the linearity of conventional narrative—the
sombrero is oddly sobering in its effect. In the stifling atmosphere of this final section
(not that of a landscape at all, but rather a self-enclosed, interior space), it emerges as an
unexpected, and even delightfully arbitrary, figure. If not for the exoticism and inherent
musicality of the word itself, Stevens’ sombrero might just as well have been a bowler, a
cowboy hat, or a beret. What is important is not so much that it happens to be a sombrero
as that it comes to our rescue at the last possible moment, asserting the triumph of
perceptual nuance over conceptual abstraction. Never mind that this triumph is only
hypothetical, as the conditional formulation “If they tried rhomboids…” makes
abundantly clear. The sombrero prevails, and does so exactly insofar as it comes to stand
for the redemption of everything that the Western philosophical tradition, in its tendency
to suppress the sensuousness of the particular, has overlooked: how, for instance, “the
larkspur, / Blue and white / At the edge of the shadow, / Move[s] in the wind,” or how “A

⁴⁷ Stevens, The collected poems of Wallace Stevens: 75.
pool shines, / Like a bracelet / Shaken in a dance,” to note only two especially vivid instances from earlier sections in the poem.

This is not a victory for some phenomenological ideal of direct and unmediated perception. The sombrero is still intensely figural, still a thinly-veiled metaphor for human consciousness. However adaptive to the contours of sensation this non-Euclidian form of rationality may be, we are—as long we are wearing “hats”—still emphatically within the purview of the human mind. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that we are still operating in a world to which the intellect has made significant contributions. The crucial difference is that the sombrero-wearer stands in a dynamic and co-creative relationship with the world around him such that these contributions become more agile, more adaptive, more responsive to diversity in the physical and social environment of which he, too, is revealed to be a product. In this way, he comes to occupy a tenable middle ground between the inhuman extremes of Snow Man and Hoon, the one transfixed to the point of oblivion by what Bergson called “pure perception,” the other unable to escape the artificial world of his own conception.

* * *

48 The ideal of direct perception would be inaccessible regardless of whether one imagines that longed-for immediacy to consist in the straightforward apprehension of something exterior to consciousness, such as the trans-empirical “object” (the Kantian ding an sich), or in something more emphatically inward, graspable through a process like phenomenological reduction, Bergsonian durée, or Deleuzean “intensity,” which aim in their various ways to disrupt our habitual modes of experiencing and communicating so as to reveal more accurately the “immediate data of perception.” For Stevens, as for Nietzsche, there simply is no such thing as unmediated perception, no form of human experience that would not be, at bottom, figural.
There are other, less direct, but no less effective, ways in which Stevens exploits the resources of poetry in order to provocatively blur the lines between fact and fiction. One of the most identifiable of these is his use of the anecdotal form. (Harmonium, of course, begins with “Earthy Anecdote” and includes four other poems that bear this description in their titles.) Adalaide Morris has noted how the anecdote can be thought as “a sly twist of the parable”:

Unlike the parable, which is a sophisticated, stylized fabrication in illustration of a moral lesson, the anecdote is traditionally a simple, factual account of an episode inherently entertaining. Whereas the parable is true in its fiction, the anecdote is supposed to be true in its facts; whereas the one is produced by imagination, the other is a product of reality.

Yet she is quick to add that for Stevens “there are no convenient and clear-cut distinctions between fact and fiction or between reality and imagination,” also noting the “perverse joy” he seems to take in blending anecdote and parable. 49

It is with this distinction in mind that I now turn to “Anecdote of the Jar,” a poem that has proven irresistible to many of Stevens’ most astute critics. What makes this deceptively simple, three-stanza sequence so intriguing is how completely it appears to deliver on the promise of its title to delve, at last, into something factual and real. It recounts an act that, on the face of it, would not involve a feat of poetic world-making at all, but rather a detached, quasi-empirical process of placement and observation:

I placed a jar in Tennessee,

And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.\textsuperscript{50}

Despite the air of passivity that enshrouds the first-person narrator as he begins to recede from view after the opening line, there remains something intriguing, something overtly \textit{performative}, about this initial act of placing, reminiscent of a conquistador or—to recall a figure more historically and geographically proximate to the events in the poem—a colonial settler staking his claim to the land. But how, exactly, are we to understand this gesture? As an instance of childish play-acting? Or as something more “grown-up,” more deliberate, perhaps even along the lines of a historical reenactment, in which case the placing of the jar would be understood as commemorative in its basic intent, an act of cultural retrospection analogous to that of the pre-modern poet who, rather than creating something new, merely “repeated what / Was in the script”?\textsuperscript{51} It soon becomes clear that this will be impossible to determine from context alone. A definitive answer along these lines would not, in any case, explain the peculiar centrality of the jar itself, which still remains utterly out of place. Social convention has not conferred on it the function of a flag or sign-post (indeed, has not conferred on it any recognizable communicative

\textsuperscript{50} Stevens, \textit{The collected poems of Wallace Stevens}: 76.

\textsuperscript{51} Of course, the activities of retrospection and commemoration can involve a more conscious relation to one’s cultural tradition than Stevens’ notion of simple “repetition” in “Of Modern Poetry” seems to suggest. In this regard, Harold Bloom is correct in reading Stevens’ characteristically skeptical stance toward history as one inspired by the Emerson of \textit{Nature}, the opening salvo of which not only anticipates but in many respects also inaugurates the premium on novelty that later becomes central to American modernism: “Our age is retrospective,” Emerson writes. “It builds the sepulchers of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?” (Ralph Waldo Emerson, \textit{The essential writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson} [New York: Modern Library, 2000]. 3.)
function at all), leaving us to ponder for the remainder of the poem what might have motivated the narrator to place this jar, without further explanation, in the middle of the Tennessee wilderness.

There can be little doubt that the sense of initial *bewilderment* this gesture instills in us raises with particular urgency the basic epistemological question of what we know and how we come to acquire that knowledge. But I want to suggest, too, that the poem ultimately transcends that question in favor of the even more fundamental one—what Heidegger would call an ontological question—of what it means to be a creature who values such knowledge at all, a creature to whom such knowledge *matters*. I have argued that Stevens’ reputation as a so-called philosophical poet is deserved, if potentially misleading. This is because to read him is less to entertain a series of arguments or philosophical illustrations than it is to find oneself in a certain kind of predicament, one that often requires the combined resources and reflexive capacity of both poetry and philosophy to overcome. However, since this is a predicament that does not admit of any ultimate resolution (unless we were somehow to cease to be capable of asking such questions, of taking an interest in our own existence and the existence of others—to cease, in a certain sense, to be human), “overcoming” it could only mean something like the acceptance of one’s finitude as a knowing agent while attempting to work through its broader social, ethical, and political implications.

In “Anecdote of the Jar,” the existential overtones of this predicament are especially pronounced. The poem places us in a position of seemingly total dependence on an absentee narrator while at the same time withholding the kind of direct textual
evidence that could confirm, or even render probable, any of the motives we find ourselves wanting to attribute to him. Instead, we become witnesses to his miraculous disappearing act—a sudden dispersal into the abstract, atmospheric objectivity of the third person voice—in a manner that calls to mind the *deus absconditus* of eighteenth-century Deism: a God that, however spiritually and ontologically remote, was still considered to be rationally accessible, his infinite perfection legible in the range and the complexity of the natural forms that surround us and in the predictability of physical processes the discovery of whose laws, in time, promised to render all things explicable. Of course, by the beginning of the twentieth century, this sense of God’s absence had begun to give way to a sentiment far more difficult for religious belief of the theistic variety to endure: a sense of his irrelevance. *Deus absconditus* had become *deus mortuus*. Thus, the colonial American overtones of the poem notwithstanding, it is only within this latter cultural climate—the post-Marxian, post-Darwinian, post-Nietzschean, post-Freudian, post-Einsteinian landscape of Stevens adulthood, one that we still tend to recognize in fundamental respects as our own—that the sequence of events depicted within it can best be understood. Severed from the representationalist framework of modern science, from the epistemic ties that bind us as discrete subjective agents to the orderly, providential whole of nature; severed even from the recognizably biographical

---

52 In this regard, Stevens’ bottle bears a strong resemblance to the pocket watch in William Paley’s *Natural Theology* (1802). Paley argues that if one were to come across a watch while “crossing a heath,” it would be most rational to assume that the watch was the product of deliberate human creation rather than the accidental result of natural forces. He then concludes by analogy that the same is true of the order and complexity we find everywhere in nature—only there “in a degree which exceeds all computation”—and offers this as a teleological proof of God’s existence (William Paley, *Natural theology : or, evidence of the existence and attributes of the deity, collected from the appearances of nature*, Oxford world's classics [Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006]. 7, 16.)
and narrative dimensions of the anecdotal form, the central, precipitating action of
“Anecdote of the Jar” assumes an air of whimsicality, like an efficient cause divorced
from the assurance of any final cause. We are left to ourselves in an increasingly chaotic
universe, forced to entertain the possibility that there may never again exist any grand
explanatory schema, theological, scientific, or otherwise, that could compellingly account
for natural phenomena and render the world meaningful for us.

Rather than providing further insight into narratorial (and by extension, authorial)
intention, the ensuing stanzas pull so drastically away from the individual human
perspective that it becomes necessary to ask whether our initial attention to such issues
was entirely misplaced. With the departure of the first-person persona soon after the first
line, the locus of narrative agency shifts to the jar itself, which now—and nothing but a
transitive construction will suffice to underscore the strangeness of this transformation—
imposes its own inert and impersonal brand of order onto a wilderness rendered
“slovenly” by comparison. If the extent of the landscape’s submission to geometrical
regularity of this man-made object (not so much to its physical presence as to what I am
tempted to call its “perspective,” which is to say, the weltanschauung it discloses and
would appear to carry with it, ineluctably, wherever it goes) is not yet fully evident by the
end of the first stanza, where the wilderness can already be seen to partake linguistically
of the jar’s roundness, surrounding the hill upon which it sits, having been compelled,
been “made,” to do so, this becomes undeniable over the course of the next two stanzas,
which bring the poem to its abrupt and highly elliptical conclusion. However resistant at
first to this emblem of human order and efficiency, it turns out that the wilderness is easily tamed:

The wilderness rose up to it
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground.
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush.
Like nothing else in Tennessee. (5-12)

Only now, having reached the end of “Anecdote of the Jar,” are we in a position to appreciate the exaggerated simplicity of its diction, the subtle undulations of iambic tetrameter that, although largely unrhymed, still manage to approximate the nursery-rhyme quality of poems such as “Man with the Blue Guitar” though repetition and assonance, as well as a series of striking internal rhymes (“round,” “around,” “surround,” “ground”). The same is true of its rudimentary plot, which, keeping interpretation to an absolute minimum, might be recounted as follows: a man-made object is inserted into a remote, natural landscape, becoming a catalyst for what would appear to be a literal transformation of that landscape. Although the wilderness does not, strictly speaking, assume any of the formal characteristics of the jar, it is left noticeably de-fanged by this encounter, “no longer wild.” Like a lounging animal, it simply “sprawl[s] around,” subdued by the jar’s transparent and panoptical presence: a picture not so much of contentment as one of containment.

But how is this possible? How can a jar contain what is, strictly speaking, external to it? The obstacle confronting any literal interpretation of this sequence of events is
obvious: it would be absurd on the face of it to suggest that an ordinary jar—an inert and insensate object—could somehow of its own accord manage to effect such a far-reaching transformation of the physical landscape. That would be beyond the scope of anything we have ever experienced, or might expect to, at least in waking life. But does it necessarily follow that Stevens has ventured into the territory of the surrealist dreamscape, or that of the fairy tale? In that case, the jar would no longer be beholden to the laws of physics: it might be a magic jar; it might contain a genie; it might have the power to transport us back in time or to teleport us to a remote corner of the universe. It is said, after all, to be “of a port in air,” a decidedly high-toned phrase that cuts against the laconic simplicity of the narration, allowing the ambiguity of the preposition, “of” (which can denote possession, origin, causation, proximate location, among many other things) to bring into play the multiple meanings of “port.” These include not only the familiar American usage, designating a nautical harbor, but also some of the term’s less common, and now chiefly British senses, which remain closer to the word’s etymological origins: an opening, a place of entry, a portal. Although this function is merely implicit in “Anecdote of the Jar,” it figures prominently in poems such as “Peter Quince at the Clavier,” in which the apprehension of beauty is portrayed as being “momentary in the mind—/ The fitful tracing of a portal,”53 and, even more memorably, in the closing lines of “The Idea of Order at Key West”:

The maker’s rage to order words of sea
Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,
And of ourselves and our origins,

53 Stevens, The collected poems of Wallace Stevens: 91.
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.  

Indeed, the notion of the doorway or threshold becomes a favorite figure for Stevens, especially in the later poetry, where it encompasses both the mind’s general contribution to the constitution of reality (“The starting point of the human and the end, / That in which space itself is contained, the gate / To the enclosure”  

and the role that language plays as a form of mediation through which the elements of this world take on their familiar shape and significance. In “A Postcard from the Volcano,” it also serves as the gate that leads to the metaphorical “mansion house” of literary and cultural history: a monument that, with the passing of this generation, bequeaths “what still is / the look of things” to the unsuspecting “Children picking up our bones.”

However intent “Anecdote of the Jar” may seem on summoning the mood of fantasy or hallucination—in which ordinary objects and events come to seem unpredictable, alterable, and extraordinary—there is nothing in the poem to suggest that Stevens is content to attribute the transformation of the Tennessee wilderness to the vagaries of what Coleridge would have called individual “fancy” in a way that would end up depriving it of its social significance. That would be to deny the ability of the imagination to make a genuine contribution to reality, to our shared or common sense of “things as they are,” regardless of how species-specific or culturally relative that understanding of the world may turn out to be. As Stevens’ project evolved, his interest in thinking through the broader social implications of this process brings him into

---

54 Ibid., 130.
56 Ibid., 159, 58.
especially close theoretical proximity with the linguistic philosophy of Heidegger and the later Wittgenstein—a series of thematic and methodological overlappings that I will explore presently. But first, as a way of bringing into focus both the broader theoretical stakes of his intervention and the unique disciplinary convergence it represents, I want to inquire into the peculiar ontological status of the jar itself. How, exactly, does the jar assume its uniquely metareferential function within the context of Stevens’ poem? Would any other commonplace object “suffice” in achieving the same conceptual end? And if not, why not? What is the nature of this object upon which, like Williams’ red wheelbarrow, so much seems to depend?

* * *

Joseph Riddel, one of the first critics to give sustained consideration to the philosophical dimension of Stevens poetry, noted in 1965 the largely negative reception that “Anecdote of the Jar” had received until that time, referring to it even as “that much-abused little exercise.” Riddel attributes this sentiment in part to the influential interpretation of Yvor Winters, whom he insists has done a disservice to Stevens by reading the poem “in severely moral terms, with the jar representing intellect set over against the wilderness, or nature—with the conflict ending to nature’s disadvantage.”

There are several things worth noting here. The first is that as a characterization of Winters’ position, this statement is misleading at best. It fails to account for the unusually broad function that the term “moral” is made to serve in the context of his critical writings. As opposed to what Winters labels the narrowly “didactic” kind of reading, one that regards literature as offering up readily paraphrasable content in the form of “useful precepts and explicit moral instruction,”⁵⁸ his self-described “moralistic” approach stresses engagement with the formal qualities of a given work as an indispensible part of a larger effort to determine how the values it projects (values that he problematically, but with clear polemical intent, insists on calling “objective”) are tied to certain ways of living.⁵⁹ While I remain uncomfortable with the more reactionary aspects of his project—not just the familiar brand of modernist nostalgia he exhibits for earlier forms of literature and culture but also the unnerving sense of conviction, the inquisitorial coolness, with which he goes about passing judgment on the moral systems he finds encoded within particular poems—it is something like Winters’ understanding of the social and ethical force of modernist writing, and in particular, how the values communicated by such literature always coincide with forms of life, both actual and prospective, that I have been attempting to recover in this study.

For this reason, I find it all the more unfortunate that Winters’ reading of “Anecdote of the Jar” lives up to Riddel’s unfavorable characterization of it, providing a virtual case study in how easily his so-called moralistic approach can succumb to

⁵⁹ Ibid., 11.
didacticism. Winters dismisses the poem out of hand as a “purely romantic performance,” one that, insofar as the jar on which it centers becomes “symbolic of the human intellect…, would appear to be primarily an expression of the corrupting effect of the intellect upon natural beauty.”\textsuperscript{60} Despite his obvious hedging (“would appear to be primarily”), this is as straightforward an allegorical reading of Stevens’ poem as one is likely to find. Winters does not, as might be expected of a contemporary of Pound, Eliot, and Williams, object to the jar on imagistic grounds, which is to say, insofar it assumes this abstract symbolic function at all. He gives it serious consideration as a symbol and objects, instead, to its message: to what he determines the various elements of the poem, taken as a whole, to be communicating. And for him, it amounts to simply one more iteration of the “Rousseauean” conviction that the products of human reason, including modern civilization and technology, serve mainly to corrupt the splendor and providential harmony that reside intrinsically in nature.

Stevens’ affinities with romanticism notwithstanding, I find this conclusion too superficial to be even remotely compelling, which, to be fair, is how Winters seems to have felt about the poem itself. Whether or not one agrees with the specific content of Winters’ reading, however, what is noteworthy is that this has remained the level on which later critics, even those who have found it to be an effective exercise, have overwhelmingly attempted to make sense of “Anecdote of the Jar.” The interpretation of the poem is thus reduced to a matter of deciphering the hidden allegorical meaning and choosing sides: critics will come down on the side of either rationality or irrationality,

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 437.
order or slovenliness, the jar or nature, usually with the assumption that this is what Stevens himself believed and was attempting to communicate through the various formal and thematic elements of the poem.\textsuperscript{61} While instructive readings have been produced along these lines, my feeling is that to remain on this level is still to miss a basic procedural imperative of the poem, which forces us at every turn to become more reflective about our own motives and expectations, not just as readers but as creators and manipulators of symbols more generally; to adopt a more nimble and adaptive set of interpretive strategies; and to arrive in the process at a more nuanced understanding of the sources and conditions of rationality itself.

None of this is to deny that “Anecdote of the Jar” lends itself to an allegorical reading. On the contrary, the agonizingly nondescript nature of Stevens’ jar—of which we learn over the course of three stanzas only that it is “round,” “tall,” “grey,” and “bare”—and its unlikely prominence as the subject of a lyrical poem together seem to cry out for symbolic interpretation. (“Subject,” here, should be understood in the fullest sense of the word, given the jar’s ambivalent status as both the poem’s “subject matter,” which is to say, the main object of its poetic and theoretical attention, \textit{and} as the apparent locus of lyrical agency.) But it is one thing to see that the poem functions on a certain rudimentary level as an epistemological parable concerned with the staging of an allegorical confrontation between humans and nature. It is quite another to presume that merely to have reached this conclusion, the so-called moral of the story, is \textit{ipso facto} to
have arrived at its meaning—as if the textual details, having been gleaned for their allegorical content, might be transcended and dispensed with altogether.

That Stevens entices us into something like a religious mindset by summoning the social and moral force of allegory is no guarantee that the poem will crystallize on this level, in this heavenly key. The case would surely be different if he had chosen for this purpose an object already steeped in religious or cultural significance. If the jar had been a cross, one can imagine how readily the analogy to Calvary would issue from the minds of readers—and along with it, the longstanding Judeo-Christian belief in man’s divinely licensed “dominion” over nature.62 Indeed, we have seen how these biblical associations enter into the ambiguously allusive atmosphere of the poem even in its current state. But the jar is not a cross. It is a jar, and still remains to be reckoned with as such. “A jar is a jar is a jar,” Stein might have intoned. What if the poem is in fact more resolutely superficial, more stubbornly resistant to symbolic interpretation, than we have so far been willing to acknowledge? And what if that resistance is actually essential to what it strives to communicate? This is the kind of reading I now want to pursue, one that becomes plausible the moment we abandon the heights of allegorical abstraction and attempt to grasp the jar in all of its obdurate and unremarkable ordinariness—the aspect of it which is typically the least visible to theory, and thus the most likely to escape the notice of those philosophers who would “one day get it right at the Sorbonne.”

---

62 The King James translation of Genesis 1:26, which this term resoundingly echoes and evokes, remains one of the most familiar passages in the Western cultural tradition: “And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.”

63 “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” in Stevens, The collected poems of Wallace Stevens: 406.
The first thing worth noting along these lines is how, in an ironic inversion of Keats’ central motif in “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” Stevens’ ekphrastic object, his jar, is emphatically not a product of artisanal antiquity, not an artifact of enduring cultural interest and value, the kind one might find in a museum. It is a product of the modern factory, available in abundance at anyone’s local hardware, drug, or grocery store. Roy Harvey Pearce goes so far as to suggest that Stevens had in mind “a specific fruit jar, the ‘Dominion Wide Mouth Special,’” which had been widely available in the United States since 1913 and, as Pearce speculates, might even have captured Stevens’ attention as he was travelling through Tennessee in April and May of 1918, thus cementing the specific regional associations we find on display in the poem. In addition to its biographical interest, this observation would bring to light a note of submerged levity toward the beginning of the final stanza, where the narrative voice, in a manner both matter-of-fact and quietly ominous, affirms that the jar “took dominion everywhere.” But more important to an understanding of the dynamics of Stevens’ poem, I want to suggest, than

64 Many commentators have noted this Keatsian connection. Bloom has famously emphasized the importance of Keats, along with Emerson and Whitman, as one of Stevens’ major romantic influences in The Poems of Our Climate. But it is Helen Vendler who has been the most extreme in her insistence that “Anecdote of the Jar” constitutes a “commentary” on “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” She affirms that the poem is “not comprehensible, in matter or manner, unless it is taken to be centrally about Keats’ poem” (Helen Vendler, Wallace Stevens: words chosen out of desire [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986]. 45.). This is no doubt an overstatement. To postulate a basic familiarity with Keats’s poem as a necessary condition for understanding “Anecdote” denies a range of viable interpretive possibilities (including that of approaching the jar as a readymade, which I will consider presently) in which the issue of Stevens’ relation to his literary inheritance is not understood to be paramount.

65 I am therefore making two assumptions that readers of this poem have typically made, but for which there is in fact little direct evidence in the text. The first is that this is a glass jar, as opposed to one made of ceramic or clay (in which case it would be more likely to possess a decorative function that would exceed its obvious utility). The second, related, assumption is that the jar is the product of the modern factory, rather than the hands of an artisan (which would diminish the degree of antithetical tension the poem seems intent on establishing between the jar and nature).

the attempt to establish what brand of mason jar he might have had in mind at the time of its composition, an attribution for which there is only tenuous textual support, is an appreciation of the dissonance between, on the one hand, the jar’s ontological status (including its origins in the factory and subsequent existence as a commodity to which not only a use value but also an exchange value, a market price, can be readily attached), and on the other hand, the newfound theoretical significance that this commonplace object assumes when transplanted abruptly—“jarringly,” to recall Frank Lentricchia’s apt pun—into the domain of art, where it becomes subject to the particular forms of attentive contemplation that art and its institutions have sought to foster, with an increasing emphasis on formal and aesthetic purity, throughout the modern era.

This manifest incongruity of (mass-produced, practical) object and (aesthetic, theoretical) context has led critics such as Glen MacLeod to emphasize the similarities between Stevens’ poem and the Dadaist readymades of Marcel Duchamp, including the latter’s iconic Fountain, consisting solely of an autographed urinal with the fictitious attribution, “R. Mutt 1917”—a reference to the New York plumbing supplier from whom Duchamp had commissioned it. In both cases, MacLeod notes, a familiar object is “placed in a strange environment and divorced from its practical function” such that “the choice of object is seen as a creative act.” In the process, the readymade becomes “the focus of a meditation on the relation between external things and our perception of

67 Frank Lentricchia, Ariel and the police : Michel Foucault, William James, Wallace Stevens (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988).
them."^68 I find these claims accurate, both as a characterization of the general logic governing the creation and reception of readymades and as a description of the more specific and, as it were, elemental shifts in perspective and conceptual orientation that constitute the core dramatic action of “Anecdote of the Jar.” But by emphasizing only the similarities between the two artists and their works, his approach also overlooks some telling differences. This is most evident in his tendency to minimize the role that the found object plays in determining the overall conceptual character of the composition (or perhaps “anti-composition” would in this case be the more appropriate expression). For not all readymades are created alike. The contextually uprooted objects out of which they are composed all have lives of their own, each existing within a larger network of functional associations that extend in complex and qualitatively different ways into the world of social, political, and economic affairs. However much their appearance in the context of an art exhibition (or literary magazine) might serve to upset our expectation and excite the Kantian freeplay of our cognitive faculties, the familiar character of these objects, their overt purposiveness, always obtrudes in a way that seems to resist complete integration into the formal dimension of the work.

In this respect, the logic of the readymade stands as the ultimate counterpoint to that of abstract expressionism, whose progressive departure from the realism of nineteenth-century figural painting can be seen, as Clement Greenberg has famously argued, as part of a larger effort to explore and to clarify the expressive possibilities of

---
the medium, giving rise, in the work of Kandinsky, Rothko, Newman, and those who followed their example throughout the middle and later twentieth century, to a characteristic emphasis on the flatness of the canvas as well as on simple geometric forms that could more directly convey the primacy of shape and color. For obvious reasons, the found objects out of which readymades are composed are not capable of exploiting this representational tension in quite the same way. They have not themselves been subject to reproduction in any recognized aesthetic medium such that style and technique, along with an appreciation of their particular mode of departure from the conventions governing such reproduction—as, for instance, in the case of cubism’s attempted collapse of three-dimensional space and simultaneous presentation of different aspects of an object or event through a series of juxtaposed planes—can become relevant factors in our consideration of the work.\footnote{It is important to note that my comments here apply only the case of the “pure” readymade, the found object that would not be embellished by the artist at all.}

Owing largely to their familiar and artifactual character, these objects present themselves as specimens of total legibility, as “pure content.” But this formlessness is of course an illusion, arising from our initial reluctance, or inability, to scrutinize them on a theoretical level—an activity that rarely presents itself as a necessity in the course of everyday life.

We can conclude from these reflections that what makes readymades so theoretically compelling, and also of particular relevance both to Stevens’ poetry and to post-romantic art as a whole, is the manner in which their sheer presence manages to evoke, even as it threatens to collapse, the \textit{meta-representational field} that opens up...
between work and audience during the course of aesthetic experience: a dialectic that the vast majority of thinkers in the modern tradition since Kant have also taken to be constitutive of that experience in one way or another. Found objects exploit for theoretical ends the inherent tension between art and artifact. They stage a confrontation, and thus an implicit comparison, between the modes of production specific to the manufactured objects out of which they are composed and the process of artistic creation itself.

On one level, this comparison has an obviously deflationary effect on the value of art. By undercutting the sense of autonomy, spontaneity, and inscrutability that have long surrounded the creative process, it forces us to reflect instead on broader social and economic factors, such as the ongoing transformation of modern life by capital and the proliferation of new technologies and systems of mass production, which not only have a direct impact on the creation and distribution of art but also determine in crucial respects the broader cultural atmosphere in which such art is received. Indeed, to the extent that readymades like Duchamp’s foreground their complicity in these modes of production, they would accord with the broad outlines of a Marxist critical theory that has sought throughout the twentieth century both to identify and to demystify what it regards as the excessive spiritualization in an increasingly secular age—although some, including Adorno, have exhibited a notable appreciation of both the formal experimentalism and the sense of characteristic inwardness, the preoccupation with first-person subjective
experience, that often ambivalently coexist in modernist art.\textsuperscript{70} The functional, mass-produced familiarity of the objects out of which readymades are composed would therefore seem to constitute the most direct assault imaginable on what Benjamin famously called the “aura” of the artwork, prompting us to reassess our participation in the institutions of art and consumer culture alike.\textsuperscript{71}

But this juxtaposition cuts both ways. In addition to reuniting art with its inescapably material dimension, readymades present the unique theoretical opportunity to consider manufactured objects themselves as a species of art. This activity, although more speculative and open-ended in nature, would involve, at minimum, a newfound appreciation of how such objects, as products of human design, intersect meaningfully with our lives by helping to determine how we engage and think about the world around us. Of all the movements associated with modernism, it was arguably Bauhaus that understood the significance of the contribution that functional objects make to the establishment of the content and character—to the construction—of everyday life. Its “total” approach to cultural revitalization extended beyond the visual and performing arts into architecture and interior design, encompassing everything from furniture to kitchen appliances. But Duchamp’s Dadaist justification as to why \textit{Fountain} (still attributed here


\textsuperscript{71} Of course, it could be argued that this specific act of negation—which creates an ironic distance between the cultural conditions that contributed to the creation of these earlier, “higher” forms of art and those of the present—seems to reinforce as much as it threatens to collapse the implicit distinction between high culture and mass culture, evincing a certain nostalgia for a time when such a gesture would have been not only unnecessary but unintelligible.
to the fictitious R. Mutt) constitutes something more than “plagiarism, a plain piece of plumbing” also manages to be instructive in this regard:

Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, and placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view—created a new thought for that object.

As for plumbing, that is absurd. The only works of art America has given are her plumbing and her bridges. 72

Again, I find nothing objectionable in the insistence on artistic choice as the primary factor in the creation and consideration of readymades, an idea that recalls Baudelaire’s characterization of the modern artist as a collector and flâneur, while at the same time looking ahead to Derrida’s celebration of the poststructuralist bricoleur. 73 Yet Duchamp’s suggestion that the mere presentation of an ordinary object in an aesthetic context “creat[es] a new thought for that object” strikes me as excessively vague. When applied to singular, minimally embellished objects like the urinal in Fountain, it is also potentially misleading. For this process does not add anything extra to these objects so much as work to suspend thought from its practical, pre-reflective engagement with them, fostering in us an awareness of their functional character in its world-defining relation to the everyday practices and forms of life to which they belong. Some understanding of this dynamic would even appear to be implicit in Duchamp’s glib contention that “The only works of art America has given are her plumbing and her bridges”: a claim that

72 “The Richard Mutt Case,” The Blind Man, no. 2 (1917): 6. The article, as MacLeod notes, was actually written by Beatrice Wood under the supervision of Duchamp (MacLeod, Wallace Stevens and modern art: from the Armory Show to abstract expressionism: 206.)

underscores how certain categories of functional object are at least latently “aesthetic” by virtue of the cultural, historical, and anthropological significance they embody and (on occasions when they become the focus of critical reflection) convey. This significance is not something superadded by the artist, something “new.” It is already built into these objects themselves.

This is exactly what Heidegger seeks to underscore in his 1951 lecture, “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” where he chooses the example of a bridge to illustrate of how constructed objects redefine our relationship to the world around us:

The bridge… does not just connect banks that are already there. The banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream. The bridge designedly causes them to lie across from each other…. With the banks, the bridge brings to the stream the one and the other expanse of the landscape lying behind them. It brings stream and bank and land into each other’s neighborhood. The bridge gathers the earth as landscape around the stream…. The waters may wander on quiet and gay, the sky’s floods from storm or thaw may shoot past the piers in torrential waves—the bridge is ready for the sky’s weather and its fickle nature. Even where the bridge covers the stream, it holds its flow up to the sky by taking it for a moment under the vaulted gateway and then setting it free once more.  

Note the how the series of strong transitive verbs in this passage lend the bridge a peculiar kind of agency directly analogous to that of Stevens’ jar. It actively “connects,” “brings,” “gathers,” “covers,” “holds up” and “sets free.” By stressing the etymological connection between the German Ding (thing, object, matter) and the concepts of gathering and assembling that it once explicitly denoted in Old High German, Heidegger draws attention to the manner in which objects like bridges make possible certain ways of

---

engaging with the world by creating contexts for human action and revealing aspects of the natural environment that would otherwise not have been visible to us. The more familiar we are with a particular bridge, the more likely we will be in the course of daily life to regard it in terms of simple utility, as the most expedient way of getting from one side of the river to the other. Heidegger acknowledges that on rare occasions it can also assume a symbolic function, coming to represent notions such as human progress or mastery over nature in the abstract, but he insists that the bridge “is never first of all a mere bridge and then afterward a symbol. And just as little is the bridge exclusively a symbol, in the sense that it expresses something that strictly speaking does not belong to it.”75 Instead, it constitutes what Heidegger calls a “location,” whose essential function is to bring a determinate “space,” a concrete set of conceptual and pragmatic relations, “into the dwelling of man.”76

These ideas are in many respects a direct outgrowth of Heidegger’s earlier and more fundamental notion of “equipmentality,” which emerges in his analysis of everyday human existence in Being and Time to provide the basis, the conceptual pivot, of his larger effort to rethink our ontological relation to the world in terms other than those of subject and object. There, Heidegger distinguishes between readiness-to-hand and presence-at-hand, categories that refer at once to certain kinds of worldly things and our cognitive-interpretive-behavioral orientation toward them. Readiness-to-hand is the more experientially immediate of the two, an “everyday” mode of existence in which we are

75 Ibid., 151.
76 Ibid., 154-55.
absorbed to varying degrees in the flux of innerworldly things. In this state, the
phenomena that surround and engage us not yet “objects” because they have not yet been
subjected to the process of abstract, theoretical consideration that constitutes them as
such; they are merely things that possess a certain utility and value for us, things upon
which, or through which, we act in ways that are of immediate relevance to our lives.

Heidegger’s most memorable example of readiness-to-hand in *Being and Time*
involves an extended description of our absorption in the surrounding environment
through the use of tools. When we use a hammer, for instance, it becomes an extension of
our body, a kind of temporary prosthetic; through the hammer, we better able to
manipulate other innerworldly things in accordance with the plan or intention that guides
our actions. We do not become conscious of it as a mere “object” at all unless it happens
to pose a problem for us—by breaking, growing heavy, becoming the source of irritation
(as, for instance, when we cannot find a convenient place to set it down), and so on. It is
only during such relatively infrequent moments of reflective awareness, Heidegger
suggests, that the hammer and the various other things in our vicinity which stand in a
relation of actual or potential relevance to us emerge as part of what he calls the
“equipmental totality” of relations that constitute our world.77 This assumes, of course,
that we do not take the path of traditional philosophy, which begins, he argues, by
reifying these complex phenomena, disentangling them from their contexts of use and
reducing them, “disinterestedly,” to the status of mere objects, to presence-at-hand.

Let us look once again at the jar, this time with its equipmental character in mind. Whether one understands the particular jar at the center of Stevens’ poem to be made of glass, ceramic, or some other common material, the sense of utter plainness bestowed on it by nondescript adjectives such as “grey” and “bare” reinforces that its function is not primarily decorative (like that of a Grecian urn or a modern vase) but merely the supplementary one of containing and delimiting other substances. It is a function so rudimentary that in the course of everyday life, jars, much like boxes, drawers, shelves, picture-frames and windows, tend to escape our notice altogether, giving way instead to the specific aspect and utility of that which they serve to contain: to contain, but at the same time, to frame and reveal. In the case of a glass jar, the already barely visible form that a such a container imposes on its contents, while it remains physically and structurally intact, tends in the course of everyday life to disappear from the scope of one’s pragmatic considerations, almost to the point that the contents (whether fruit preserves, cookies, loose change, or someone’s pet goldfish) appear to have assumed this spatial organization themselves. This is especially the case when the contents are rarely disturbed and the jar becomes less likely to attract attention to itself as an object by, for instance, refusing to open, toppling over, taking up too much space on the countertop, becoming the explicit subject of conversation (“I need to get another jar just like that one”), and so on. In the absence of such opportunities for reflection, content seems to exist without form. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the particular form it has assumed—the form imposed on it by the jar—simply appears natural.
Stevens is intent on making such transparency, such hidden form, obtrude. He lays “bare” both the context-defining capacity of the jar and the concrete relational forces it exerts on the “surrounding” objects within that larger sphere of influence, and does so in way that that allows these conceptually elusive processes to become the focus of contemplation. All of this, in fact, is already evident in his choice of object. As both a literal product and emblem of advanced industrial society, the jar works to complicate the basic dichotomies of mind/matter and man/nature operating by underscoring a further connection between poetic creation and the techniques of mass production responsible for the jar’s existence (which themselves reflect a fundamental shift in humankind’s relationship to nature over the past two centuries). By choosing the jar as the centerpiece of his meditation, Stevens therefore approaches the same distinction between poesis and techne that Heidegger identifies in “The Question Concerning Technology,” where it is depicted as corresponding to two divergent ways of regarding and engaging with the natural world, one in which we understand ourselves as being responsible for the values and forms of engagement with the world that our culture has made available to us, and another that dichotomizes this relationship, casting nature as a kind of “standing reserve,” a quantity of expendable resources for us to exploit through the instrumental logic of “enframing” [Gestell] and rational calculation.78

---

78 “The Question Concerning Technology,” in Basic Writings (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1993). The distinction between poesis and techne should therefore not be understood as a straightforward distinction between theory and praxis; it is a distinction, rather, between different modes of living from which issue two discrete configurations of the theory-praxis relation, two fundamentally opposed ways of understanding our role in the world.
These world-historical implications become most apparent when we consider “Anecdote” in productive juxtaposition with a striking passage from “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in which Heidegger chooses yet another architectural example to illustrate his larger claim in the essay on behalf of the world-disclosing possibilities of art. On a certain level, this is hardly surprising, architecture being in many respects the art form least removed from the practical concerns of living. Like music, it is inherently non-representational; yet unlike music, it is also primarily functional, with a range of clearly defined real-world applications. It is also telling that he does not choose simply any common architectural structure here, but one with an especially deep cultural and historical resonance—a Greek temple—in the attempt to underscore the tremendous cultural traction that certain forms of life, once they have come into being, are capable of maintaining. Through a feat of poetic reimagining, Heidegger casts the temple not so much as an abstract symbol for classical Greek culture as the literal product and concrete, metonymic extension of that culture, a structure that embodies its basic principles while remaining a vital part of “this open relation context… the world of this historical people.”79 The significance of the temple, like that of Steven’s jar, is inseparable from the specific forms of order and intelligibility we find it imposing on the natural environment, and it, too, makes slovenly nature surround the hill upon which it stands:

Standing there, the building holds its ground against the storm raging above it and so first makes the storm manifest in its violence. The luster and gleam of the stone, though itself apparently glowing only by the grace of the sun, first brings to radiance the light of the day, the breadth of the

---

sky, the darkness of the night. The temple’s firm towering makes visible the invisible space of air…. Tree and grass, eagle and bull, snake and cricket first enter into their distinctive shapes and thus come to appear as what they are.\textsuperscript{80}

The striking similarities that exist between this passage and Stevens’ poem once again throw into relief the artifactual qualities of the jar, including the social, historical, and economic conditions that contributed to its production, its distinctly impersonal brand of “authorship.” In doing so, they challenge us to consider the relationship between aesthetic form and what might be called the social and ideological basis of what Heidegger calls “the worldhood of the world,”\textsuperscript{81} which gathers itself up through an act of necessary appropriation out of the inhuman forces of nature, epitomized here by the figure of the storm. The temple not only “holds its ground against the storm” but indeed “first makes the storm manifest in its violence.” And it is only in relation to the temple that the various aspects of nature, from general atmospheric conditions (“the light of the day, the breadth of sky, the darkness of the night”) to the familiar forms of animal and vegetative life (“tree and grass, eagle and bull, snake and cricket”) are seen to crystallize and take on intelligible shape, “to enter into their distinctive shapes and thus come to appear as what they are.”

It now becomes apparent just how far this understanding of the object diverges from Duchamp’s analysis of the readymade. In his dismissive attitude toward the “useful significance” of ordinary objects and single-minded emphasis on the radically new, Duchamp, like many of the postmodern artists he later inspired, fails to come to grips

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 167-68.
\textsuperscript{81} Being and time: 91.
with the implications of the inherent sociality of form. He regards the normative contexts and practices in which such objects take on meaning primarily as a source of limitation: a necessary point of departure, perhaps, for the process of artistic decreation, but not the domain to which art ultimately addresses itself. However, if readymades work by exploiting the tension between art and artifact, this is only possible because there is already an intimate relation between these two forms of human making. We have seen Nietzsche attempt to bridge this divide, first with the idea of metaphor, and later with an equally broad notion of power that manages to encompass both *macht* and *machen*. Yet it is Heidegger who, in his account of the phenomenology of everyday life, makes this notion central to his writing, something that Nietzsche himself was never quite able to achieve.

***

The core insight that animates Heidegger’s philosophy is that long before we begin to regard things theoretically, language has already opened up a *world* for us, a sum of meaningful relations binding us to determinate contexts in an engaged and prereflective way: a notion that he often expresses with the idiomatic German phrase *immer schon*, or “always already.” There is thus something deeply problematic for him about the structuralist-linguistic tendency to view language primarily as a system of signs, which is, in effect, to mistake a mere *description* of language for its essence. We
see Stevens directly approaching this idea in some of the later poems, including “Large Red Man Reading,” a meditation on how the linguistically oriented activities of reading and listening relate to cognition more generally by supplying us with the conceptual distinctions through which the various elements of our world become meaningful and accessible to us.

“Large Red Man Reading” is one of Stevens’ later poems, and one that he counted among his favorites. This is perhaps because it revives a number of motifs found in his earlier poetry while pushing them to an even higher degree of realization. Its emphasis is still on the aesthetic as a site of revelation. But in a gesture that is typical of his last two volumes, Stevens now seems intent on portraying the interaction between imagination and reality in a way that is no longer even remotely “in opposition to ordinary experience but in the service of its recovery.”

There are direct parallels here with the later Wittgenstein, who in the *Philosophical Investigations* stressed that the goal of philosophy should be to free us from the endless entanglements of metaphysics by leading us back to the ordinary meanings of words and to the contexts of use, or “forms of life,” in which they originate and with which their meanings are thereafter bound up both pragmatically and theoretically. Wittgenstein famously described this return to the ordinary, together with the heightened awareness of the reciprocity of language, thought, and world that it has the potential to awaken in the attentive reader, as a form of

---

“therapy.”

And I would argue that it is a similar appreciation of the embeddedness of thought in concrete experiential contexts, rather than a desire to escape from pressing social and political realities through aesthetic recreation, that lies behind Stevens’ claim that the function of the modern poet is to help us “live our lives.” Here is the poem in its entirety:

There were ghosts that returned to earth to hear his phrases,  
As he sat there reading, aloud, the great blue tabulae.  
They were those from the wilderness of stars that had expected more.

There were those that returned to hear him read from the poem of life,  
Of the pans above the stove, the pots on the table, the tulips among them.  
They were those that would have wept to step barefoot into reality,  
That would have wept and been happy, have shivered in the frost  
And cried out to feel it again, have run fingers over leaves  
And against the most coiled thorn, have seized on what was ugly

And laughed, as he sat there reading, from out of the purple tabulae,  
The outlines of being and its expressings, the syllables of its law:  
Poesis, poesis, the literal characters, the vatic lines,  
Which in those ears and in those thin, those spended hearts,  
Took on color, took on shape and the size of things as they are  
And spoke the feeling for them, which was what they had lacked.

The figure of the “ghost”—a word Stevens uses only once, in the opening line, to introduce us to these disembodied spirits—remains deeply ambiguous throughout the poem. It has a tendency to shade (pun intended) into that of the angel: another quasi-corporeal figure whose ontology has long been a topic of theological debate, and which,

---

84 Although never stated explicitly, this idea emerges throughout the *Philosophical Investigations* in provocations such as “There is not a philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies” and “What is your aim in philosophy?—To shew the fly out of the fly the way out of the fly-bottle” (ibid., 44, 87).

85 Stevens, *The collected poems of Wallace Stevens*: 423.).
in the work of poets such as Dante, Donne, and that of Stevens’ own contemporary, H.D., has also become the subject of extended literary scrutiny and reflection. But if they are angels, Stevens’ ghosts are clearly modern, secular angels: detached from any notion of cosmic order, with no heaven to ascend to and nowhere, really, to go. This sense of metaphysical disorientation is reinforced by the phrase “wilderness of stars,” a figure that, as in “Anecdote of the Jar,” suggests a narrative perspective that lacks recourse to the harmonious Aristotelian cosmology of classical and medieval society, or even the law-governed, Newtonian universe of the Enlightenment.

The force of the first three stanzas hinges on the sense of bemusement we feel when, somewhere around the third line, we begin to recognize that these ghost-angels exhibit an undeniable preference for reality—a preference not for this fallen world itself but for the condition of embodiment, including the existential limitations imposed on us by the prospect of death and the threat of physical suffering, that shapes our entire experience and understanding of it. Although technically deceased, they exist in a state of permanent unrest, possessed, as it were, of a desire to reestablish contact with something tangible and real, even if that means willingly exposing themselves to pain (by running their fingers against “the most coiled thorn”), to ugliness, or to other extremes of sensation that they would likely have avoided while alive. The only explanation provided as to what might have prompted their return is the offhand acknowledgment that that they “had expected more.” At once understated and vaguely uncomprehending, this remark

86 “A Tribute to the Angels,” the second volume in H.D.’s Trilogy, was published in 1945, just three years prior to “Large Red Man Reading.” See H. D., Trilogy: The walls do not fall, Tribute to the angels, The flowering of the rod (New York: New Directions, 1973).
amplifies the already disquieting implication that eternal salvation, at least of the sort that Christianity promises, may be something other than paradisial.

The precedent for this motif in Stevens’ poetry can be traced all the way to *Harmonium*, where one finds poems such as the suggestively titled “Of Heaven Considered as a Tomb.” Its most memorable occurrence in that volume, however—and arguable in Stevens’ poetry as a whole—comes in the sixth stanza of “Sunday Morning,” where, once again we find him evoking the Keats of “Ode on a Grecian Urn” through a series of images that depict a pastoral but also eerily atemporal kind of immortality:

Is there no change of death in paradise?
Does ripe fruit never fall? Or do the boughs
Hang always in that perfect sky,
Unchanging, yet so like our perishing earth,
With rivers like our own that seek for seas
They never find, the same receding shores
That never touch with inarticulate pang?
[...]
Death is the mother of beauty, mystical,
Within whose burning bosom we devise
Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly. 88

Stevens, like Keats, could never bring himself to accept the Christian conception of the afterlife as a trans-earthly paradise, 89 which promised a return to Edenic innocence without the loss either of consciousness or of that basic sense of selfhood, sometimes called personal identity, that each of us possesses at a given time and which continues to evolve throughout the course of our lives. I have attempted to show that for Stevens the restrictions imposed on us by human finitude are, somewhat paradoxically, what render

87 Stevens, *The collected poems of Wallace Stevens*: 56.
88 Ibid., 69.
89 On this point, see Morris, *Wallace Stevens: imagination and faith*. 160
things meaningful for us in the first place. And it follows from such a conviction that any vision of earthly perfection that can be confected through the combined efforts of the imagination and the intellect—let alone one like that of Christianity, which explicitly seeks to transcend and escape the basic condition of embodiment—is bound to be empty, at least when taken literally, as a “place” to which “we” will one day ascend for all eternity, where human experiences and emotions will remain possible even in the absence of a determining context, and pleasure will exist without the prospect of pain, loss, or regret. What Stevens enables us to see is that we have created a heaven for ourselves that is, strictly speaking, uninhabitable: a utopia in both the literal and actual senses of the word. It is an ideal place, but also one that by its very nature cannot exist, a no-place. Stevens’ heaven, accordingly, becomes a never-ending freeze-frame of ripe fruit and hanging boughs, “unchanging,” where, in a final act of erasure, we realize that even these descriptions—as products of the human intelligence as it attempts, in real time, to comprehend how such phenomena could be immortalized—would themselves be denied a place.

Stevens will return once more to this idea at the beginning of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” where we, like the character of the ephebe to whom the remarks of the poem’s vaguely Socratic narrator are addressed, are tasked with seeing the sun after it has been “Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven / That has expelled us and our ideas.” In “Large Red Man Reading,” the sensuality and spatiotemporal boundedness of human thought is reinforced by the color scheme around which Stevens structures the

---

90 Stevens, *The collected poems of Wallace Stevens*: 381.
entire poem. On one level, the central dichotomy of red and blue, in its cartoonish simplicity, recalls the absurdity of the final section of “Six Significant Landscapes.” And this calculated two-dimensionality takes on greater significance in relation to some of the developments in modernist painting already noted, including emphasis that abstract expressionism places on the flatness and rectangularity of the canvas through large, and often conspicuously geometrical, swatches of primary color. For Greenberg, this “use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence” becomes the hallmark of modernism both within and beyond the arts.91

In addition to helping the poem’s status as an “allegory of reading” become manifest in this way, the color scheme also serves a more specific and intertextual function. It moves thematically from a state of initial impoverishment to one of renewed fullness and vitality, a state in which some of the more ethereal and abstract elements of the opening are, at least imaginatively, brought down to earth and “fleshed out.” Red and blue are two of the three primary colors, colors out of which all of the others can be composed, and in the context of this poem, they do in fact emerge as something primary, like the rudiments of vision or meaning. Critics have long noted that the colors red and blue both have a symbolic value for Stevens.92 Red is a color he tends to associate with the earth and instinct. This tendency is epitomized by his Florida poems, including

---

92 After examining Pound’s rejection of conventional “symbolism” in the previous chapter, I use this term with some hesitation. Stevens, it should be noted, is well aware that the meanings he assigns to these colors do not depend on any straightforward process of substitution that would link them to conventionally associated concepts or ideas (as is the case when one uses a lion to represent the idea of courage).
“Infanta Marina,” “Fabliau of Florida,” “O Florida, Venereal Soil,” and “The Idea of Order at Key West,” in which images of lush, tropical abundance evoke a sensuality by turns decadent and spiritually restorative. Etymologically, Florida derives from the Latin and Spanish terms meaning “flowery” and “blooming,” and it is intimately connected to the concept of “flourishing”: a word that occurs in several key places throughout Stevens’ collected works, including twice in “The Comedian as the Letter C” and once, strikingly, in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” where the narrator, after insisting that the sun “bear no name,” immediately attaches to it the epithet “gold flourisher.” In English, of course, “florid” and its cognates also denote redness, especially the kind of ruddiness intimately linked to human vitality and the blood that serves as both its literal and symbolic source.

Blue, on the other hand, is a color Stevens associates overwhelmingly with the creative imagination and, to a lesser extent, the synthetic operations of the intellect. Examples of this abound in his poetry, but the most notable is “Man with the Blue Guitar” (1937). Although more sprawling and improvisational than “Large Red Man Reading,” the poem hinges on the same conceit of a central artist figure actively engaging his audience in (what is revealed through the dynamics of this performance to be) the world-constituting dialectic of imagination and reality. It, too, is concerned with how our sense of reality—or “things as they are”—is constituted by the various conceptual and narrative frameworks that structure our experience of the world in a way that renders it

93 Stevens, *The collected poems of Wallace Stevens*: 381.
94 Ibid., 135.
coherent and communicable. Yet its primary focus remains on what the individual artist can provide for his or her culture, including roles like that of the hero, which, like its precursors in the epic traditions of premodern cultures, constitute exemplary models for individual development and action.

“Large Red Man Reading,” published over a decade later, is noticeably reticent on these issues, and the interaction between audience and artist is no longer fraught with contention; there is no suggestion that the audience is in any way at odds with the Red Man, or with itself—one of the features of “Blue Guitar” that seemed to encapsulate not only the wide-ranging social and political upheaval of the 1930s but also the more specific debates then raging in American intellectual circles about the artist’s responsibility to address these developments in his or her work. In the hushed, postwar atmosphere of the poem, with its faintly apocalyptic overtones, the Red Man—who receives this colorful description from the poem’s title, otherwise appearing only in pronominal form—emerges as a solitary and sage-like presence: a kind of spiritual guru who, in the plentitude of his own being, draws the discontented spirits to himself as if by some earthy magnetism. Yet upon closer examination we find that this relationship to his audience is not so clearly defined. The Red Man reads “aloud,” but for whom it is not entirely clear. Is he even aware of the ghost-angels who gather around him to savor the restorative effects of his speech, or is their presence merely incidental?

95 See Longenbach, Wallace Stevens: the plain sense of things and Filreis, Wallace Stevens and the actual world.
96 For a discussion of the pervasiveness of this theme in Stevens’ later poetry, see Malcolm Woodland, Wallace Stevens and the apocalyptic mode (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005).
To be sure, there is something vaguely parasitic, even vampirical, about these spirits. They seem to gravitate naturally toward the Red Man, but why they require his guidance is not clear until the closing stanzas. One could therefore argue that the real charge of the poem does not occur in the third line (where we are first introduced to the idea that the ghost-angels are discontented with the terms of their eternal salvation), but rather in the course of lines four through nine, when we realize that what they long for is in fact the *anti-sublime*, the poem of everyday life and its minutiae, its familiar objects, rituals, and routines, which we are apt to dismiss as the least memorable, and therefore most expendable, part of our existence. Yet the poem suggests that our identities are constituted on the basis of a tissue of associations and memories that link us to precisely these settings, however unglamorous that relationship may strike us in certain states of mind. In “Preludes,” T.S. Eliot refers disparagingly to the “thousand sordid images / Of which your soul was constituted.” Stevens’ reference to “the pans above the stove, the pots on the table, the tulips among them” reads like a more optimistic restatement of this Bergsonian idea that we are on some level the sum of our prior experiences which we are always bringing to bear on subsequent experience. Or, as Heidegger puts it in a later essay, “Even when mortals turn ‘inward,’ taking stock of themselves… [w]hen, as we say, we come to our senses and reflect on ourselves, we come back to ourselves from things without ever abandoning our stay among things. Indeed the loss of rapport with

---

things that occurs in states of depression would be wholly impossible if even such a state were not still what it is as a human state.”

Then comes what is perhaps the most stunning line in the entire poem: “They were those that would have wept to step barefoot into reality.” I want to leave that line hanging for a moment to consider how the poem’s rhythmic structure has been working all the while to echo and abet the thematic progression of “Large Red Man Reading.” Although the poem does not conform to any regular meter, the first six lines hinge on a series of anapests (“There were ghosts…”; “As he sat…”; They were those…”) interspersed with varied, mostly iambic, units. Crucially, however, the endings of lines two and six counter this rhythmic tendency by dropping off in conspicuously dactylic fashion (“TA-bu-la-e,” “re-AL-i-ty”) as if to signal the descent of the ghost-angels and their simultaneous return to a state of—at least vicarious—corporeality. This return coincides with a heightened awareness of and newfound pleasure in sensation. But what they desire is, again, nothing grand: to shiver in the frost, to run fingers over leaves, to revisit the humble domesticity of things like pots and pans, kitchen tables, stoves, and tulips.

So far I have taken the poem largely at its word. I have proceeded as if these disembodied spirits are indeed the ghosts or angels they appear to be. But this does not do full justice to the marked allegorical dimension of “Large Red Man Reading.” Such an interpretation—which I believe can coexist amicably with the one I have been outlining here, given Stevens’ penchant for blurring the lines between anecdote and parable, fact

---

98 Heidegger, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," 155.
and fiction—would understand these spirits to be emblematic of our ordinary, everyday selves, who are often driven to extremes in the search for meaning, for certain fundamental truths that we feel might provide ballast for our lives, might make us whole and complete. It also allows us to read the phrase “returned to earth” of the first line in a somewhat different light, almost as a plea for humility. Like these celestial voyagers, we are prone to metaphysical overreaching. By yearning for “something more,” we often overlook or even deny outright the complexity of the everyday and the force of the diverse and often competing demands it places on us, taking refuge in specious abstractions from which it then becomes difficult to escape. “A picture held us captive,” Wittgenstein writes in the *Investigations*, “And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.”

What we find in this later poem is no longer an emphasis on the discrete act of poetic transfiguration. Instead, we see Stevens appealing directly to the inherently social dimension of language, thought, and action in order to underscore how our lives and identities are vitally interwoven with the practices and objects of everyday experience: “the pans above the stove, the post on the table, the tulips among them.” This gesture further recasts the poet as a cultural figure whose primary function is to help us accommodate ourselves to life by demonstrating how the language we share has always already oriented us in a particular way toward the world, making it accessible, intelligible, and meaningful through a process of linguistic mediation. What makes this

---

99 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical investigations: the German text, with a revised English translation*: 41, section 115.
poem exceptional even for Stevens is the extent to which the act of creative making or “finding” seems to be overshadowed by one of recitation, signaling a complete reversal of the dynamic in “Of Modern Poetry.” The Red Man sits, “reading aloud,” what is in the script, but the contents of that script are no longer a source of empty repetition. They are the basic coordinates of our comprehension: “The outlines of being and its expressings / the syllables of its law.” The movement from the original opposition of blue and red to purple reinforces the synthesis of conception and perception that unfolds throughout the course of the poem as the ghost-angels are imaginatively “fleshed-out” and enabled to resume something like their human form, allowing us, as witnesses to their reincarnation, to see how poetry, in the most general sense as poesis or making, lets things “[take] on shape and the size of things as they are.”

***

Harold Bloom announced in the heyday of American poststructuralism that Stevens “gave us a canon of poems themselves more advanced as interpretation than our criticism as yet has gotten to be,”100 a charge that I would argue is as applicable today as it was in 1980, if for somewhat different reasons. Stevens’ poems not only anticipate in fundamental respects the kinds of deconstructive approaches that would be routinely

---

applied to them throughout the 1970s and 1980s\footnote{For more on Stevens’ reception in the American academy, see Chapter 2, “Versions of Existentialism,” in Lentricchia, \textit{After the new criticism}: 28-61.} but also—to the extent that they seek to harness this centrifugal symbolic energy for hermeneutical and productive ends—manage to surpass those approaches in their level of critical sophistication. There can be no denying that they expose, often in an overtly “playful” manner, the cognitive dissonance generated by the breakdown of strict conceptual distinctions, including those of subject/object, internal/external, human/nature, and individual/social. Yet rarely are Stevens’ poems content merely to revel in that dissonance. Critics who would understand them as so many illustrations of some broadly poststructuralist vision of language—one that emphasizes only the arbitrariness and the inadequacy of symbolic meaning, the ways in which our words, while appearing to grant us full cognitive access to the unchanging essences of the things they denote, are in fact always becoming unstable, breaking down, and leading us hopelessly astray in a universe forever intent on concealing from us its inherently contradictory character (until we become willing to take the plunge down the rabbit hole of theory, where we suddenly find ourselves in an position to affirm these and other, paradoxically essential, truths)—may be said to demonstrate at best a limited understanding of the means of Stevens’ poetics while remaining blind to the possibility that this kind of formal experimentation might be made to serve other, more positive, ends. I have argued that to overlook this basic aspiration is to ignore something fundamental to the project of aesthetic and philosophical modernism, which seeks, however ambivalently, to embrace form not only as a source of limitation but also as one
of possibility, one that has the potential to make a direct contribution to the quality of everyday life and experience.

Stevens’ poetry, I want to insist, does not exemplify a single, identifiable “theory of language”; it serves, much like the later philosophy of Wittgenstein, as a vast rhetorical laboratory in which social and linguistic phenomena are performatively broken down, analyzed, and forced to interact in potentially revealing ways. As such, what it requires is not a criticism that looks to unlock its essential (or essentially “arbitrary”) meaning but one that is capable of attending to the dynamic and mutually determining interplay between the material specificity of sensation and the abstract conceptual frameworks that we bring to bear in the attempt to, quite literally, make sense of things; a criticism that would be mindful of how poetry can make a contribution to theory by leading us toward a fuller—less caricatured, less sensually impoverished—understanding of rationality itself; a criticism, in short, that wears a sombrero.

While I share Bloom’s enthusiasm for what he identifies as Stevens’ “major phase, from 1942 to his death in 1955,” a time when Stevens turns with both increasing frequency and explicitness to the problem of the ordinary, I find this final efflorescence in his development as a poet and thinker largely continuous with the basic themes and tensions found in the early poems of *Harmonium*, in which these issues, as we have seen, are already articulated with a remarkable degree of self-awareness. Central among them is the problem of human rationality and the understanding that the specific forms of agency available to us will to a great extent be shaped and determined by cultural ideals.

---

One feature of Stevens’ thought that many have found troubling, particularly in light of the authoritarian leanings of fellow modernists like Pound and Eliot, is his fascination in the poems of the 1930’s and 1940’s with the figure of the hero. In a 1945 letter to Henry Church, he expresses a longing for “a few really well developed individuals,”\textsuperscript{103} insisting that “What is terribly lacking from life today is the well developed individual, the master of life, or the man who by his mere appearance convinces you that a mastery of life is possible.”\textsuperscript{104} But we find him satirizing exactly this impulse in poems such as “Life on a Battleship” (1939), where he associates it, in its most extreme form, with the cult of personality surrounding dictators like Mussolini and Stalin.\textsuperscript{105} There is also his flippant admission to Church when the latter inquired about a possible connection between the “major man” of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” and Nietzsche’s conception of an Übermensch as someone who would embrace the metaphoricity of truth to provide a new cultural narrative, and new, post-Christian values, with which to identify:

> About Nietzsche: I haven’t read him since I have a young man. My interest in the hero, major man, the giant, has nothing to do with the Biermensch; in fact, I throw knives at the hero, etc. But we shall get round to that some other time.\textsuperscript{106}

It is understandable enough, given Stevens’ limited exposure to Nietzsche, as well as the philosopher’s widespread association with the politics of authoritarianism both during and immediately after the Second World War, that he would be quick to dismiss such a connection, failing to realize how paradoxically the figure of the Übermensch emerges in

\textsuperscript{103} Stevens, \textit{Letters of Wallace Stevens}: 518.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{105} Longenbach, \textit{Wallace Stevens : the plain sense of things}: 173, 84.
\textsuperscript{106} Stevens, \textit{Letters of Wallace Stevens}: 409.
Nietzsche—and how closely its deliberate idealization as a self-reflexive, self-actualizing fiction aligns with the conception of human agency that Stevens had been articulating in his poems of this period. The principal difference is that Stevens elaborates this idea as part of an attempt to salvage, rather than undermine, the core principles of liberal democracy. Longenbach has noted how Stevens’ understanding of politics was shaped, as it was for many Americans of his generation, by the opposition between the isolationist populism of William Jennings Bryon and the imperialist industrialism of William McKinley, whose clash in the presidential race of 1900 Stevens covered as a young reporter for the New York Tribune. Stevens ultimately cast his ballot for Bryon, the liberal champion whose increasingly reactionary views throughout the 1910’s and 1920’s, however, come to epitomize what Longenbach calls “the peculiar combination of reaction and reform that can be found throughout American modernism,” one that, in Stevens, manifests itself as a desire “to leave room for every individual... while thinking that some individuals should lead the majority of others.” Although he recognized the tension that existed between these impulses, Stevens did not consider them to be mutually exclusive. The affinities between Stevens and the pragmatism of William James notwithstanding, I believe Longenbach is correct to observe that what Stevens found lacking in such a view is its inability to provide “rationale for a community.”

108 Ibid., 31, 33.
109 Ibid., 33. Longenbach attributes this objection to Peirce, but appears in many ways to sympathize with it himself. For other accounts of Stevens’ relationship to Jamesian pragmatism, see Lentricchia, Ariel and the police: Michel Foucault, William James, Wallace Stevens, Rae, The practical muse: pragmatist poetics in Hulme, Pound, and Stevens, and Jonathan Levin, The poetics of transition: Emerson, pragmatism & American literary modernism (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999).
None of this is to suggest that Stevens’ poems of the 1930’s and 1940’s seek to offer concrete solutions to political problems. However, by addressing themselves to a conception of the human “beyond us, yet ourselves”—an ideal toward which we transcend ourselves, and which he also seems to suggest would provide a basis both for individual development and for social cohesion in secular democratic societies—they help to identify the kinds of cultural values that can serve as a necessary condition of a humane politics. For Stevens, as for Schiller, the poet’s reflexive relationship with language is what makes him or her particularly well-suited to this task of discovery through articulation. As he muses in “Chocorua to its-Neighbor,”

To say more than human things with human voice,  
That cannot be; to say human things with more  
Than human voice, that, also, cannot be;  
To speak humanly from the height or from the depth  
Of human things; that is acutest speech.110

Stevens gives these concerns center stage in his major long poem, “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” still widely regarded as his highest achievement. In its place, I want to consider another, roughly contemporaneous, work, “Asides on the Oboe” (1940), which mobilizes a similar set of issues, yet more concisely and in a way that also works to foreground the fragility of this humanistic ideal.111

Here again we find Stevens taking up the formal reflexivity of modernist art as his explicit theme, only now in a manner that seems to acknowledge the full extent of his indebtedness to tradition of romantic idealism. In the first line of the poem’s prologue, we

---

110 Stevens, The collected poems of Wallace Stevens: 300.
111 Although “Asides on the Oboe” and “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” were eventually collected in Parts of a World (1942) and Transport to Summer (1947), respectively, they were originally published within two years of each other, in 1940 and 1942.
are confronted with the ironic statement that “the prologues are over.” Immediately after comes the central paradox that Stevens pursues throughout the late 1930’s and 1940’s, one that would not begin to wane in intensity for him until the publication of *The Auroras of Autumn* in 1950; namely, the demand for some “final belief” that “must be in a fiction.” Stevens’ prompts us to “choose” but instead ends up conjuring the figure of the “impossible possible philosophers’ man,”

The man who has had the time to think enough,  
The central man, the human globe, responsive 
As a mirror with a voice, the man of glass,  
Who in a million diamonds sums us up.112

While phrases such as “man of glass” suggest the fragility (and perhaps, when carried to its extreme, the literal impossibility) of this idea of the philosopher-poet, the depiction of his poems as “diamonds” conveys a countervailing sense of rarity, purity, and enduring value. This trope suggests a certain weariness with the modernist destruction of “romantic tenements / Of rose and ice / … / In the land of war,” along with a newfound desire to salvage—or create anew—the shared values that could bestow order and meaning on an war-torn civilization whose collective cultural project now seemed irrecoverably lost.

At the same time, there seems to be an understanding in Stevens that the social and political upheaval throughout the early twentieth century, and in particular, the horrific nature modern warfare, had exposed a side of nature that precludes any complete return to the high romantic idealism of figures like Schiller and the early Emerson. His

112 Stevens, *The collected poems of Wallace Stevens*: 250.
skepticism regarding the possibility of actualizing this ideal is written into the very trope of the “impossible possible philosophers’ man,” whose mutterings and “milky lines / Concerning an immaculate imagery” are themselves still metaphors, still fictions. What Stevens is asking us to believe in is the fiction of a maker of fictions, a request that seems much less perverse when we realize that we are all implicated in this process. For him, the collapse of traditional frameworks of value and belief forces us to acknowledge there is no longer—and indeed, never was—any higher authority than ourselves to whom we can appeal for culturally sustaining fictions. The trope of the philosopher-poet epitomizes tendency, manifesting itself as the cultural ideal toward which we transcend ourselves and which perfects us by binding us together as “the human globe.” His diamonds are a metaphor for our desire for total transparence and intellectual clarity:

He is the transparence of the place in which
He is and in his poems we find peace.

These lines recall the closing lines of “The Snow Man,” yet the emphasis here is no longer on the annihilation of the individual subject but rather on the positive existence of the philosopher-poet’s fictions and their ability to provide shared values that bring us into attunement with one another: “He is the transparence of the place in which / He is,” Stevens declares affirmatively, as if repetition alone were enough to make it so. This sense of affirmation continues throughout the final stanza, which culminates in the proleptic realization of a human community, like so many scattered diamonds after the war, finally becoming “one” with the glass man, and with one another, finally cohering as
his “diamond globe.” Our fictions have been exposed as such, Stevens suggests, yet this central aspiration has not ceased to be meaningful. Indeed, only now we are able to know the glass man intimately, as part of ourselves, “without external reference.”

\footnotesize
\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 251.
\end{flushright}
4. Living with Others: Modernist Form and the Problem of Interpersonal Communication in Bergman

Earlier physicists are said to have found suddenly that they had too little mathematical understanding to cope with physics; and in almost the same way young people today can be said to be in a situation where ordinary common sense no longer suffices to meet the strange demands life makes. Everything has become so intricate that mastering it would require an exceptional intellect. Because skill at playing the game is no longer enough; the question that keeps coming up is: can this game be played at all now and what would be the right game to play?

—Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*

Man’s inner concerns do not have their issueless private character by nature. They do so only when he is increasingly unable to assimilate the data of the world around him by way of experience.

—Walter Benjamin, “On some Motifs in Baudelaire”

“Let the play begin. I wouldn’t call this a great or harrowing tale. It really is just an everyday drama. Almost a comedy. Let’s raise the curtain.”¹ Thus concludes the prologue to *Crisis*, the first of over forty films that Ingmar Bergman would direct between 1946 and 2003. As the voiceover comes to an end, a young maid in the provincial townhouse on which the camera has settled stoops to open a window shade and let the viewer peer in—“raising the curtain” both on the dramatic action of the film and also, in hindsight, on the career of one of the most significant cinematic artists of the twentieth century. *Crisis* is often dismissed as a throwaway work in Bergman’s catalog, a competent but unremarkable melodrama of the sort that Svensk Filmindustris was

---

producing in large numbers during the 1940s, when Hollywood films had yet to fully penetrate the Swedish market. Yet it is telling that this is exactly the kind of metafilmic gesture that will come to typify Bergman’s style by the early 1950’s, a gesture torn between an apparent need to emphasize its own critical involvement (its “role”) in the unfolding drama and a countervailing desire to disappear altogether, achieving through techniques such as the extended close-up a sense of total transparency, relative to the film’s diegesis, that would give the action over entirely to the characters themselves—and expose us in the process to the full spectrum of significant actions, expressions, and behaviors that enable third-person observers within and beyond the theater to formulate assumptions about the complex motivations of other human beings. This constitutive tension has led some to conclude that there are in a sense “two” Bergmans: the one drawn to the avant-garde filmmaking of German expressionism and the Swedish silent cinema, the other to the so-called narrative realism of the Hollywood tradition; the one committed to an existentialist vision of isolated, authentic individuality (a vision that coincides for many of his central characters with a withdrawal from the demands of social interaction and a lingering uncertainty about the possibility of living a meaningful life after the departure of the Judeo-Christian God), the other to affirming our basic ties to those around us, and to the entire spectrum of cultural practices, traditions, and values that render meaningful even our explicit attempts, in times of personal and cultural crisis, to break free of their inevitable limitations. What Bergman demonstrates with an increasing degree of self-awareness in his films throughout the 1950’s and 1960’s, however, is that this tension can in fact be a productive one, that these opposing tendencies, far from
being mutually exclusive, can combine to produce a modernist cinema of extraordinary depth and power.

One of the ironies surrounding Bergman’s career is that he remains best known to international audiences for his overtly allegorical meditations on the nature of religious belief in the modern world, epitomized by such films as *The Seventh Seal* (1957) and *The Virgin Spring* (1960). Not only does the opening sequence from *The Seventh Seal*, in which the medieval crusader Antonius Block challenges Death to a game of chess, still serve for a majority of critics as the iconic example of Bergman’s high-existentialist melancholia; judging from the many parodies it has inspired over the years, it also seems to have established itself in the popular imagination as the pinnacle of art-film portentousness more generally. The reason for this is obvious: the success of these films coincided with the rise of an international art cinema in the late 1950’s of which Bergman soon came to be regarded as a pioneer and leading exponent. Although largely deserving of the praise that has been lavished on them, it is also important to recognize that such films represent only a small, if easily caricatured, cross-section of his overall output. Bergman tried his hand at several genres and produced a string of successful comedies during the 1950’s, including *A Lesson in Love* and *Smiles of a Summer Night*. In fact, it

---

2 Although the lofty religious preoccupations of Bergman’s films during this period had little appeal for someone like Godard, whose cinematic pastiches arguably have more in common with the emerging Pop Art aesthetic than the ennui of his art-film contemporaries, Bergman’s impact on the French New Wave and international film scene was nonetheless considerable. Thus, we find Truffaut paying explicit homage to Bergman as early as *The 400 Blows* (1959), in which the young Antoine Doinel, Truffaut’s alter ego, absconds at one point with a poster of Harriet Anderson in *Summer with Monika* before himself becoming the subject of an iconic close-up in the final moments of the film.

3 A case-in-point would be “Swedish Movie,” a skit from the inaugural season of Saturday Night Live, in which Chevy Chase and guest host Louise Lasser caress each other’s faces as Death, standing just beyond, enumerates in Swedish the most trivial details of the fictional couple’s lives (“Swedish Movie,” in *Saturday Night Live. Season 1. Episode 23* (1976).).
was the latter that received the Special Jury Prize for “best poetic humor” at Cannes in 1956, earning him at once a wider international audience and the flexibility he would require to pursue projects of a more personal, and commercially precarious, nature under the auspices of Svensk Filmindustri. As one of his co-workers told James Baldwin in 1960, “he wins the prizes and brings us the prestige,” while other directors could “be counted on to bring in the money.”

Even more important to understanding Bergman’s cinematic achievement and distinctive brand of modernism, however, is his directorial pivot from 1960 onwards toward what he called the “chamber film,” a term that evokes the chamber orchestra of the classical music tradition as well as the similarly pared-down “chamber plays” of his countryman August Strindberg, who remained Bergman’s most significant literary influence from his adolescence onward. This format, characterized by minimal scenery and an intense focus on the actions and expressions of only a handful of actors, is prefigured in many of the earlier works, particularly Summer with Monika (1953), Wild Strawberries (1957), and Brink of Life (1958). But beginning with Through a Glass Darkly (1961) and the two thematically interconnected works that followed, Winter Light (1963) and The Silence (1963), with which it composes an informal trilogy, the chamber film finally emerges as Bergman’s representative mode. “At once austere and improvisatory,” it becomes the means of an extreme distillation of his aesthetic, a metafilmic workshop in which signature devices such as the sustained physiognomic

---

close-up, the conspicuous play of light and darkness within the frame, and the minimal use of non-diegetic sound are pursued to a level of at times excruciating psychological intimacy.

In the following pages, I consider how Bergman’s interest in the material dimension of film—its ability to reproduce, through a mechanism structurally analogous to the human eye, the surfaces and living contours of things drawn in from the “external” world—comes to full fruition in the Trilogy, where it provides the basis of an extended meditation on the inherent limitations and possibilities of human embodiment. While it is true that these films tend to fixate on the impediment that our physical and psychological separateness poses for our ability to make ourselves known to others, their self-reflexive inquiry into the nature of representation itself also yields what one might call a provisional “solution” to this dilemma by finding in language (and other media) a repository of shared criteria for understanding the world. Drawing on the work of Stanley Cavell, I attempt to show how Bergman’s filmmaking on this level becomes an exercise in what Wittgenstein called “seeing as,” a revelation of the constructedness of human experience that gives way not to some extreme species of relativism but rather to an ethically significant reflection on how thought is vitally bounded by the contexts and practices, the shared forms of life, in which we participate. My contention, as in previous chapters, will be that this activity has important implications for our understanding both of modernism itself and of the larger inquiry into normativity and value that its experimental strategies make available to artist and audience alike. Although Bergman was no doubt committed to an aesthetic of innovation, his films demonstrate an
understanding that formal experimentation is never an end in itself—or, as Cavell aptly
observes in *The World Viewed*, that “nothing is a possibility of a medium unless its use
gives it significance.” A few remarks on the evolution of cinematic modernism will
make clear the significance of this contribution and furnish the necessary historical
context for my discussion of the Trilogy.

* * *

If the issue of modernism in film remains even more contentious than it does in
any of the other arts, this is because, historically speaking, film would seem to be a
modernist enterprise almost by default. The emergence toward the end of the nineteenth
century of basic technical apparatus that made cinema possible, along with the rapid
development throughout the early twentieth century of the modes of production, generic
conventions, and studio system that came to define what André Bazin would famously
label its “classical” Hollywood mode, all parallel the widely accepted chronology of the
rise of a modernist sensibility in arts such as painting, music, and especially literature. Yet the formal predicament confronting these cinematic pioneers was in at least one
respect the exact opposite of the one faced by modernists like Picasso, Schoenberg, or

---

7 As Michael Valdez Moses has observed, the “worldwide success first of the silent movie and then after 1927 of the sound film significantly coincided with what has been traditionally regarded as the heyday of literary (and more generally artistic) modernism” (Michael Valdez Moses, "Introduction," *Modernist Cultures* 5, no. 1 (2010): 1.)
Pound, who recognized themselves to be working within (and indeed, largely against) the long-established generic and representational conventions that governed the creation and reception of art within their respective media. The impetus for formal innovation in the work of a director like D.W. Griffith, or even Sergei Eisenstein, did not stem from any comparable dissatisfaction with existing filmic conventions or a general sense of their outmodedness. It stemmed, rather, from an effort to establish such conventions in the first place, to discover how the medium might be manipulated in order to convey distinctive emotions, ideas, and situations that would resonate with audiences (who, in turn, would need to acquire a new narrative and visual vocabulary in order for techniques such as cross-cutting and continuity editing to become fully legible). By constructing a coherent fictional world out of a succession of discrete photographic images and their alternating points of view, these conventions introduced the public to new ways of conceptualizing time and space. But just as importantly, with the emergence of genres and their distinctive character types, they also provided new models for emotional identification and new ways of envisioning individual agency.

A more comprehensive account of the emergence of cinematic modernism would surely need to take into consideration what Noel Burch identified in 1969 as an ongoing oppositional tendency to the “institutional mode of representation” that had been perpetuated with remarkable success and efficiency by the Hollywood studio system from the early twenties until about 1960.\(^8\) In order to highlight Bergman’s achievement

---

and the specific kind of modernism his films embody, however, I hew more closely in
what follows to the more historically decisive account popularized by David Bordwell in
works such as *On the History of Film Style* as well as his landmark study, *The Classical
Hollywood Cinema*, which acknowledges the presence of earlier avant-garde movements
but ultimately chooses to locate the emergence of full-blown filmic modernism in the rise
of the international art cinema around 1960. To insist on this timeframe is by no means to
deny the telling stylistic affinities between, for instance, the soviet montage of Vertov
and Eisenstein and the juxtapositional aesthetic on display in cubist painting or, for that
matter, in the contemporaneous writings of Pound, Lewis, Marinetti, Loy, and H.D.
(Indeed, it is well-established that the cinematic avant-garde of the 1920’s drew
considerable inspiration from developments within the other arts, as the prominence of
Expressionist motifs in Robert Wiene’s *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* or the overt
collaboration of Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel on the surrealist *Un Chien Andalou* serve
to illustrate, to name only two familiar examples of such cross-pollination.) Nor is it my
intention to minimize the early contributions of Fritz Lang, Carl Theodor Dreyer, and
other luminaries of the silent era to the development of either mainstream or avant-garde
filmmaking in the decades that followed. It is simply to insist that modernism is not
reducible to formal innovation alone, that it cannot occur within a medium until the
conventions governing the creation and reception of works produced within it have
assumed a normative status, becoming for all intents and purposes *universally
recognizable* to the members of a given culture.⁹ (If this were not the case, there would be

---

⁹ It would be impossible to specify exactly when filmic conventions gained this level of cultural currency.
no basis on which to deny someone like George Méliès unqualified modernist status before the turn of the century, when the medium was still in its infancy.) Modernism, whatever else it may be, is the name we have given to mark the broader cultural crisis that arises when these conventions, having become part of the way we understand ourselves and the world around us, cease to be compelling for at least a significant minority of artists and their audiences. This in turn necessitates the search for “new” expressive forms that will be more adept at registering and—to the extent that this gesture is conceived in revolutionary terms—positively transforming the character of everyday life and experience.

In previous chapters, I argued that this aspect of the modernist project has been obscured by the comparatively enfeebled conception of form that the humanities have inherited from several decades of exposure to poststructuralist theory, which has been inclined to regard formal coherence of any kind (up to and including that of organic bodies) as arbitrary, inauthentic, and tending in the final analysis either toward conservatism or outright authoritarianism. One of the practical advantages to reconsidering filmic modernism in a manner that seeks to understand its contributions as more than merely oppositional and deconstructive in nature is that it allows us to steer...
clear of some of the rigid dichotomies that have plagued film theory since the 1970s. As Miriam Hansen has argued, these binarisms tend to produce a facile opposition between “classical-idealist” and “modernist-materialist” modes of filmmaking, in which the former is cast as the product of a repressive capitalist social order whose ideology it reflects and serves to reinforce, while the latter, in its gleeful violation of cinematic conventions and stubborn resistance to the values of mass culture, emerges as a necessarily “self-reflexive and progressive” force. Although justifiably skeptical of Bordwell’s offhand suggestion that the representational strategies of the classical Hollywood cinema may correspond to some biologically hard-wired, or “natural,” mode of human perception, Hansen agrees that the formal conventions introduced by this tradition provided a powerful mechanism for self and social awareness, noting how, for a nation of immigrants in the early twentieth century, the urban movie theater became a “specifically modern type of public sphere,… a discursive form in which individual experience could be articulated and find recognition by both subjects and others, including strangers.” After considering the widespread admiration among Soviet filmmakers for the technical innovations introduced by the Hollywood system during the late 1910’s and early 1920’s, she concludes that filmic reflexivity can take different forms and different affective directions, both in individual films and directorial oeuvres and in the aesthetic division of labor among Hollywood genres, and that reflexivity does not always have to be critical or unequivocal. On the contrary, the reflexive dimension of

---

10 One might recall in this connection Nelson Goodman’s characterization of “realism” not as some natural and transhistorical mode of perception but rather as a matter of the relative ease with which information issues from a given set of representations for the people of a given society at a given time” (Nelson Goodman, *Languages of art; an approach to a theory of symbols* [Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968]. 36-37.).
these films may consist precisely in the ways in which they allow their
viewers to confront the constitutive ambivalence of modernity.

The reflexive dimension of Hollywood films in relation to
modernity may take cognitive, discursive, and narrativized forms, but it is
crucially anchored in sensory experience and sensational affect, in
processes of mimetic identification that are more often than not partial and
excessive in relation to narrative comprehension.11

The crucial point for Hansen is that it was not just avant-garde filmmaking, or what
Burch defines more broadly as an oppositional tendency that developed alongside the
institutional model from the 1920’s onward, that had the power to challenge the status
quo by projecting new forms of individual and cultural identity. The so-called narrative
realism of the Hollywood tradition was equally capable of this feat, perhaps even more
so, given its enormous mass cultural appeal in and beyond the United States.12 As
Bordwell has argued, it was more an attempt to interrogate, scrutinize, explore, and come
to terms with this cultural dynamic than a desire to pose truly radical alternatives to it that
provided the driving force behind the modernism of Bergman, Antonioni, Fellini, and the
directors of the French New Wave, despite even their occasional claims to the contrary. A
film like Godard’s Breathless would be especially illustrative in this regard because it
presents itself not only as an ambivalent love letter to the Hollywood tradition—and a
young American woman who typifies its allure—but also as a virtual case study of the
impact of identification on character formation. This becomes evident when, halfway

11 Miriam Bratu Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular
12 It should be noted that the classical Hollywood cinema, too, demonstrated a capacity for pronounced self-
reflection in films ranging from Buster Keaton’s Sherlock Jr. (1924) to Billy Wilder’s Sunset Boulevard
(1950) and Gene Kelly and Stanly Donen’s Singing in the Rain (1952). Such films evince a fundamental
concern with the impact of technological developments on our experience and understanding of the
medium, allowing us to see how even the narrative conventions they currently embody are highly stylized
and subject to alteration.
through the film, we see Michel Poiccard (Jean-Paul Belmondo) standing in front of a poster of Humphrey Bogart and are given to understand that he has all the while been adopting the look and mannerisms of his celluloid hero. By assuming the Bogartian persona, Poiccard is able to literally “act out” and “realize” in his dealings with others a number of the conventions associated with the gangster and film noir genres—all in a way that, like Godard at his most compelling, manages to straddle the divide between the playfully ironic and the deeply earnest.

What these reflections allow us to conclude is that for full-blown cinematic modernism, realism comes to be seen less as a category to be rejected outright than as a complex system of normative representations that mediate our everyday experience of the world, determining to a great extent how (and what) we are able see, think, feel, and communicate. One might even say that it is exactly what is at stake. As Bordwell observes, the art film often presents itself as a more sophisticated species of realism: “It will show us actual locations, ‘realistic’ eroticism, and genuine problems (e.g., contemporary ‘alienation,’ ‘lack of communication’), he writes. “Violations of classical conceptions of time and space are justified as the intrusion of an unpredictable daily reality or as the subjective reality of complex characters.”

The cognitive dissonance created by this departure from established narrative and representational conventions therefore retains a broadly mimetic function by registering on a formal level what Hansen

---

calls the “constitutive ambivalence of modernity,” aspects of which will then be taken up on a thematic level and subjected to careful scrutiny by the modernist film.

It is in terms of this productive tension between the representational and meta-representational that I want to approach Bergman’s Trilogy. Doing so will allows us to confront an apparent paradox in his work, one whose unraveling also has implications for our understanding of modernism more generally; namely, that Bergman at his most formally reflexive is also the most intensely focused on the individual human subject and the particular difficulties that modern life poses for both our self-understanding and our ability to live with others. From his explorations into the “dark night of the soul” emerges a distinctly humanistic vision according to which all transcendent or otherworldly explanations for the nature of embodied human existence, without ever being rejected outright, are presented as having significance only in terms of our participation in the cultural traditions that construct, perpetuate, and modify them in accordance with the changing demands that history imposes on us: a vision according to which human beings emerge with varying degrees of self-awareness in the modern world as one another’s own tormenters and saviors.

***

_Through a Glass Darkly_, however much it represents an intensification of certain visual and thematic motifs found in Bergman’s earlier films, still manages to feel like
nothing else that came before it. Strains of the hauntingly beautiful saraband from Bach’s D Minor Cello Suite accompany credits set in white typeface against an ominous black background. And in a similar fashion, the opening dedication to Käbi Laretei, the Hungarian-born concert pianist who became Bergman’s fourth wife in 1959, has a function that extends beyond its obvious personal and romantic significance, affirming both the lifelong importance that music held for Bergman as well as the crucial role that it will play in establishing the overall emotional tonality of the film. As the only source of non-diegetic sound in *Through a Glass Darkly*, the Bach saraband becomes a leitmotif, recurring unexpectedly after long intervals to provide an additional source of narrative cohesion in key moments when the film, like the lives of the characters it follows over the course of twenty-four hours, begins to pull apart at the seams.

The opening shot presents a stationary view of the shallow, semi-transparent waters off Faro Island, streaked with glare from the late-afternoon sun. This image of reflective surfaces and hidden depths brings immediately into play the epistemic connotations of the film’s title, excerpted from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then I shall know even as I am known.” In their biblical context, these lines constitute an expression of humankind’s desire—and devout expectation—to experience God directly, in a way...
that would yield a full comprehension of his divine intentions. Although the passage moves rhetorically toward the proleptic realization of this desire, the stark, “night-and-day” contrast it establishes between a shadowy “now” and a radiant “then” also makes clear that this kind of unmediated communion with God remains forever out of reach, at least in our current mortal and embodied state. It thus becomes something indefinitely postponed, projected into a nebulous hereafter. At the same time, phrases such as “face to face” and “know as I am known” evoke the concrete interactions between human beings from which they plainly derive, including the literal, evaluative, and ethical “stances” we adopt toward others in everyday life: a relation that would apply only metaphorically to a God believed to exist outside the spatial and temporal parameters of the created universe.

It is clear enough why this biblical passage would have appealed to Bergman, who sets out in the Trilogy to examine the inherent pitfalls in idealizing human agency, including the skeptical rift between individuals and the severance of knowledge from its everyday contexts that such idealization tends to promote. All three films demonstrate in one way or another how the longing for something “higher” that can make life worth living can also bring it to ruin. And it is this realization that causes Bergman to move progressively away from the Lutheranism of his upbringing toward a vastly different conception of the interrelatedness of art, value, and everyday life. In *Through a Glass Darkly*, as I now want to show, it is his provocative alignment of the illusions generated by art and mental illness and their potentially antisocial consequences that allows him to reflect on how this basic tension between the actual and ideal plays out in the context of our lives, sometimes to disastrous effect.
It is a testament to Bergman’s efficiency as a storyteller that these considerations, and the narrative conflicts out of which they naturally arise, all become apparent within the first ten minutes of the film. The plot revolves around four principal characters who have gathered at their family’s remote island home to spend the summer holiday. In the opening sequence, we see them walking side-by-side, splashing and laughing, out of the sea. By the time they sit down to dinner at the beginning of the second scene, however, this picture of familial unity has been immeasurably complicated. We discover that David, the patriarch played by Gunnar Björnstrand, is a famous writer\textsuperscript{16} who has just returned from an extended stay in Switzerland. While helping him gather the fishing nets, his son-in-law, Martin (Max von Sydow), confides in him that Karin (Harriet Andersson), just released from the hospital where she has been undergoing electroshock therapy for a condition we infer to be schizophrenia, is not expected make a full recovery. Meanwhile, David’s adolescent son, Minus (Lars Passgård), discloses to Karin that he finds it impossible to have a meaningful conversation with their father, who he insists is too “wrapped up in himself” to acknowledge concerns of those around him. This inattention, verging at times on solipsism, is reflected in the gifts David brings home from his trip, including ill-fitting gloves for Karin and an electric razor for Martin that turns out to be identical to the one he already owns.

\textsuperscript{16} Many, including Gervais in his recent Marc Gervais, \textit{Ingmar Bergman: magician and prophet} (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999), have emphasized the autobiographical connections between David and Bergman himself. Although Bergman had dealt explicitly with the personal sacrifices required of the artist or performer in earlier films such as \textit{Summer Interlude}, \textit{Sawdust and Tinsel}, and \textit{The Magician}, there is indeed something about David’s preoccupation with his own shortcomings as an artist and absentee father that resonates strongly with Bergman’s own situation, a set of concerns that reemerges with particular force toward the end of his life in both \textit{Faithless} (2000) and \textit{Saraband} (2003).
After dinner, they blindfold David and lead him into the backyard where Minus has prepared a “surprise”: a play composed for the occasion of his father’s return, in which he and Karin will both be performing. As they assume their positions, Martin whispers with a smile to his father-in-law, “This is almost like Shakespeare.” However facetious, this comment highlights the implicit structural parallel between Minus’ “play within a play” and the interpolated material found in several of Shakespeare’s works, including Peter Quince’s production of the Pyramus and Thisbe legend in “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” and Hamlet’s staging of a forensic murder-mystery whose plot, although fictional, parallels the actual poisoning of his father and seduction of his mother by Claudius, providing an opportunity for him to gauge the latter’s reaction. It also bears a striking resemblance to the metatheatrical first act of Chekov’s *The Seagull*, a play that Bergman had directed earlier that year in his debut for the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm, around the same time he was composing the screenplay for *Through a Glass Darkly*. In each of these cases, the nesting of narratives, together with the distinct but thematically intersecting diegetic worlds to which they give rise, leads to a philosophically significant reflection on the proximity of what is presented within the aesthetic medium to “life itself.” And the questions it raises regarding the precise nature of our relationship as audience members to the characters on stage are not only epistemic and ontological but also, as I have been insisting, fundamentally ethical in nature. As

---

Stanley Cavell suggests in his extended meditation on this topic in “The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of King Lear,” to call these characters merely “fictional” is in fact “incoherent (if understandable) when used as an explanation of their existence, or as a denial of their existence. It is, rather, the name of a problem: What is the existence of a character on the stage, what kind of (grammatical) entity is this?” He proceeds to outline several of its distinctive features:

1. A character is not, and cannot become aware of us.… We are not in their presence.
2. They are in our presence. This means, again, not simply that we are seeing and hearing them, but that we are acknowledging them (or specifically failing to). Whether or not we acknowledge others is not a matter of choice any more than accepting the presence of the world is a matter of choosing to see or not to see it. …[A]voidance of the presence of others is not blindness of deafness to their claim upon us; it is as conclusive an acknowledgement that they are present as murdering them would be.…
3. How is acknowledgement expressed; that is, how do we put ourselves in another’s presence?... By revealing ourselves, by allowing ourselves to be seen. When we do not, when we keep ourselves in the dark the consequence is that we convert the other into a character and make the world a stage for him. 18 … The conditions of the theater literalize the conditions we exact for existence outside—hiddenness, silence, isolation—hence make that existence plain. Theater does not expect us simply to stop theatricalizing; it knows that we theatricalize its conditions as we can theatricalize any others. But in giving us a place within which our hiddenness and silence and separation are accounted for, it gives us a chance to stop.

The whole of the Trilogy can be seen as an attempt to come to terms with this peculiar proximity of art and life. Drawing on the terms of Cavell’s analysis, we might say that Bergman attempts to achieve this feat by focusing our attention on how the various forms of acknowledgement (or refusal) that art is capable of eliciting from us not only parallel

our “actual” encounters with others outside the theater but also, and perhaps more
importantly, stand to inform those interactions by involving us emotionally in situations
that continually expand and redefine our understanding of what it is to be human.

This dynamic takes center stage, as it were, in Minus’ one-act play, suggestively
titled *The Artistic Haunting, or The Tomb of Illusions*. It features a prince, played by
Minus, who proclaims himself “an artist of the purest kind,” so idealistic in temperament
that his search for “ultimate perfection” in life and art has left him utterly dissatisfied
with both. Outside the chapel of St. Teresa, named for the sixteenth-century Spanish
mystic, he encounters the ghost of a princess, played by Karin, whom he resolves in
rhetorically overblown and mock-heroic fashion to follow back into the realm of death so
that his name might live forever (fig. 1). “Oblivion shall own me,” he declares
triumphantly, “and death alone shall love me.” Yet at the last moment, he hesitates,
turning toward the audience to articulate his newfound reservations about the act of self-
sacrifice he is about to commit:

Ye devils, what am I about to do? Sacrifice my life? For what? For
eternity? For the perfect work of art? For love? Have I gone mad? Who
shall see my sacrifice? Death. Who shall gauge the depth of my love? A
ghost. And who shall thank me? Eternity.

In a moment of Hamletian anxiety induced by these existential deliberations, the
artist-hero now explains that his knees have turned “to clay.” Clutching his lower
abdomen, he asks with an anguished expression whether it would even be proper to enter
eternity with an upset stomach. At this point, however, the door to the tomb swings shut,
and seeing that his window of opportunity has passed, the prince announces resignedly, “Such is life.”

Figure 1: Minus as Romantic Artist

Karin notes to Martin shortly afterward that her father had taken the play as a “personal affront”; in addition to providing insight into the fraught relationship between David and Minus, this observation reaffirms the ability of fictional narratives, even at their most hyperbolically theatrical, to reflect back on life ways that stand to heighten or

19 Ingmar Bergman, "Through a glass darkly," (United States: The Criterion Collection, 2003. 1961). All subsequent quotations from Through a Glass Darkly, Winter Light, and The Silence, unless otherwise noted, are excerpted from the subtitles provided in the 2003 Criterion Collection editions. Many commentators have relied on Bergman’s published screenplays for this purpose, but I find this problematic in view of the fact that the screenplays contain more extensive and thematically explicit dialogue than the films themselves.

20 This and all subsequent images ©2003 The Criterion Collection, captured with ScreenHunter 6.0.
otherwise alter our perception of actual situations by re-framing them in new and compelling ways. The play, a fledgling effort on Minus’ part that Frank Gado calls a piece of “gothic nonsense,” is at once a parody of David’s misplaced energies and a compelling indictment of the toll that his physical and emotional absence has taken on his relationship with his son. By demonstrating that he is mature enough even to have formed a judgment about these matters, Minus implicitly demands recognition from his father as an adult, as an individual with his own, sometimes radically divergent, attitudes and opinions. By drawing on the resources of art in order to do so, however, he approaches David where the latter is most vulnerable, exposing his father’s moral perfectionism as quixotic and hypocritical. Thematically, Minus’ play works toward the suggestion that the “illusions” produced by his father’s literary fiction are empty—ontologically “haunted,” one might even say—their relationship to reality an essentially parasitical one. Yet it also manages to underscore a positive function of narrative art forms by drawing attention to their ability to elicit from us forms of empathy and acknowledgement that, for any number of reasons, we are often incapable of providing in life. As Cavell suggests, “We may find that the point of tragedy in a theater is exactly relief from this necessity, a respite within which to prepare for this necessity, to clean out the pity and terror which stand in the way of acknowledgement outside.”

Gado has noted how Bergman’s films of the 1950’s had been animated “by a tension between the destructive, nihilistic dream vision and the artistic contrivance that

---

22 Cavell, "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of King Lear," 333.
offers rescue from despair.” In a manner reminiscent of the early Nietzsche, whose writings Bergman read with great admiration as a young man, the fiction-making process in these films is portrayed as

a kind of magic, generating consoling illusions even though the magician remains all too aware that they are only tricks. But by the end of the ‘fifties, the magic no longer works, and the filmmaker, for the first time in his films, begins to use art as a means not of escaping from the horrorscape of the dream but of expressing it.

I find Gado’s psychoanalytic emphasis on the “horrorscape of the dream” vastly overstated here, more applicable to films like Persona and Hour of the Wolf than those of the Trilogy, let alone later works such as Scenes from a Marriage and Fanny and Alexander, which focus even more squarely on the overlooked complexities of the everyday. Yet he is correct to identify an important transformation in Bergman’s outlook on life and art that first comes to the fore in Through a Glass Darkly. Rather than stressing the redemptive transfiguration of human experience, the film explores how both art and religion, precisely because they are so deeply enmeshed in the cultural value systems through which we encounter and come to understand the world, can also pose a serious threat to our individual and collective well-being when they tempt us with ideals of otherworldly perfection that correspond only negatively to the actual circumstances of our lives. Much like the later Nietzsche, Bergman becomes utterly fixated during this

23 Gado notes how Bergman, having discovered Nietzsche in his teenage years when he felt ostracized from many of his peers, was soon pursuing the philosopher’s work “with the zeal of a convert. A good friend recalls Ingmar quoting his vatic writing at every turn, apparently need ‘to comfort himself with the thought of being an Übermensch’” (17).

24 Magic, of course, figures quite explicitly in films such as Sawdust and Tinsel and The Magician. For a recent study of the evolution and epistemological implications of illusion/reality dichotomy in Bergman’s films, see Laura Hubner, The films of Ingmar Bergman : illusions of light and darkness (Basingstoke England ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
phase of his career on how both forms of cultural practice can in such cases become “pathological,” leading to either a resolute stoicism that seeks to buffer itself against the inevitable pains (but also, regrettably, the pleasures) of embodied existence or a hedonistic solipsism that causes us to regard our obligations to others as insignificant, even somehow unreal. In these cases, the longing for something higher, something utterly transcendent, in which the meaning of human life is believed to reside paradoxically threatens to devalue that life and bring us to ruin.

By fostering in the audience an awareness of how the artist’s pursuit of the transcendent can result in a parasitic, and therefore sociopathic, relationship to those around him or her, Minus’ play points to an implicit connection between the illusions generated by this kind of art and those produced by Karin’s illness. Both are forms of psychological affliction. And it soon becomes clear that Karin’s hallucinations also exhibit a yearning for the otherworldly that aligns them with religious utopianism. In the opening scenes of the film, she is in fact remarkably lucid, looking to Martin and David for clues as to the nature and extent of her condition, which they withhold in order to protect her. Both speak to her in affectionate but overly paternalistic terms, calling her “little one,” “my girl,” and by the diminutive “little Kajsa,” which she notes to Martin had been her childhood nickname. (The aural proximity of Kajsa to both Kaja and Kai—two other diminutives of Karin whose literal meanings in Swedish and German, respectively, are “jackdaw”25 and “quay/waterfront”—establishes an intimate connection with the physical landscape in which the film is set and lend Karin, with her raven hair

25 A common species of European blackbird.
and increasingly distant manner, a further sense of mystery and isolation.) Her trust in both men is shaken, however, when she happens upon her father’s journal and discovers that her illness is incurable. Although David admits in the pages of his journal to finding this news “unbearable,” he also confesses, in a further turn of the screw, to being “horrified by [his] own curiosity,” possessed with a perverse desire to record her disintegration for the purposes of his art: or, in his own blunt estimation, “to use her.” So appalling is this admission that it seems to matter little whether he intends to use her for his own selfish reasons, which might include the advancement of his reputation and socio-economic standing, or for relatively selfless ones, in which case David might even understand himself to be operating in the service of the “greater good” by contributing, for instance, to the edification or spiritual “ennoblement” of the literate public to whom his work is addressed. The fact remains that he has been willing to turn his own daughter into a sacrificial figure, not only without her consent but even without her knowledge.

When David and Martin set off to the mainland for supplies, Karin confesses to Minus that she feels fundamentally misunderstood by both men, who insist on relating to her only in terms of her illness. She then leads him into a ramshackle room on the upper floor of the house and begins to describe in detail a series of visions she has been having, visions in which she is summoned by a voice behind the wall, a place where it is “bright and peaceful,” and where there is a “shining light” in the faces of the nameless masses who are gathered in devout expectation of some holy spectacle. “Everyone is waiting for him to come,” Karin explains in a kind of quiet ecstasy. When Minus asks who this mysterious figure is, she responds: “No one has said for certain. But I think it’s God who
will reveal himself to us.” Although Minus is gratified by his older sister’s willingness to confide in him, the content of her confession also forces him to confront the reality of her illness directly; he looks on throughout the entire sequence with concern and sadness, like a passive spectator helplessly watching these events unfold. When he finally does assert himself, insisting that these visions and the world they describe are not real for him, she becomes immediately distant, refusing to acknowledge his presence and repeating several times to herself, in a kind of reassuring mantra, “They must be real.”

In the famous climax of the film, Karin’s longing for spiritual communion will be thwarted in devastating fashion, when she returns to the room in a state of rapture, anticipating the arrival of the divine being, only to begin shrieking in abject horror, her body convulsing, as it finally reveals itself to her in the form of a giant spider intent on sexually assaulting her: a hallucination triggered by the image of a medical helicopter as it descends outside the window to carry her back to the asylum, in what Birgitta Steene identifies as a “veritable deus ex machina.” Indeed, one of the most painful ironies in Through a Glass Darkly is that Karin’s descent into the nightmare of schizophrenia coincides with the others’ awakening into a common, or shared, sense of reality, for which her illness often appears to serve as a catalyst. This is most apparent in two revelatory encounters that occur toward the end of the film, the first with Minus, the second with David, to which I now want to turn. In both scenes, Bergman’s voluptuous play of light and shadow within the frame produces a series of iconic images that aspire on a certain level to the condition of extra-narrative autonomy while nonetheless


201
managing to convey a sense of inner transformation that bears directly on the lives of these characters and on the developmental trajectory of the plot itself.

Karin’s behavior becomes increasingly erratic from the moment she discloses to Minus the nature and the location of her visions. At one point, while the two of them are waiting near the shore for the others to return, she jumps up, scanning the horizon with inexplicable anxiety, and begins to flee, insisting that they seek shelter from the coming storm (of which there is as yet no atmospheric evidence). Minus finds her a short while later sprawled and seemingly unconscious in the hull of a shipwrecked fishing boat. He is in the process of attempting to revive her when, with sudden intensity, she pulls him down on top of her supine body; when he resists, she pulls him down again with even greater force. An abrupt cut implies that an incestuous encounter has taken place between them and creates an unexpected rift in the temporality of the narrative itself. In the ensuing shot, they are still in the boat, with rainwater streaming in all around their inert bodies. The disintegrating vessel, listing to one side, its inner planks splayed like broken ribs, parallels the dilapidation of the room in which Karin has been experiencing her visions and in this way comes to serve as another visual and spatial metaphor for her psychic unraveling. Indeed, the scene constitutes a narrative “singularity” in every sense of the word, including its specialized use in the context of astrophysics to refer to a point in the space-time continuum in which the quantities used to measure gravity become infinite and the laws of physics effectively break down, as in the case of a black hole. The film generates a similar sense that it is coming apart at the seams, a sense that anything might happen, a sense of infinite possibility that is tempered almost immediately by the
tragic realization that we are often unable to control, let alone fully understand, our own actions and desires. As Karin will later remark to David in a moment of clarity, “It’s so horrible to see your own confusion and not understand it.”

Bergman’s screenplay is almost as evocative as his camera in its depiction of Minus’ fall, and simultaneous re-birth, into the full consciousness of adulthood. “Minus is sitting somewhere in eternity with his sick sister in his arms,” Bergman writes.

He is empty, exhausted, frozen. Reality, as he has known it until now, has been shattered, ceased to exist. Neither in his dreams not in his fantasies has he known anything to correspond to this moment of weightlessness and grief. His mind has forced its way through the membrane of merciful ignorance. From this moment on his senses will change and harden, his receptivity will become sharpened, as he goes from the make-believe world of innocence to the torment of insight.27

In the final moments of the film, Minus will confide to his father that “When I sat holding Karin down in the wreck, reality burst open. Do you understand what I mean? Reality burst open and I tumbled out. It’s like in a dream. Anything can happen. Anything.” At this point, however, we see the guilt-ridden Minus return to the house to bring Karin the glass of water she has requested. He falls to his knees and rocks slowly on the wooden floor, his face illuminated by the otherworldly glow from the window, murmuring, “God.” Bergman then transitions from this medium close-up to a true close-up of Karin’s face as she lies waiting on the floor of the ship, her eyes downcast. The camera follows her head as she turns slowly to the right, revealing the presence of Minus, who has now returned; he is holding Karin close to his chest, his chin resting gently against her

forehead, the expression in his eyes one of devastation and quiet resolve (fig. 2). In one of the most memorable close-ups in Bergman’s oeuvre, his stationary camera lingers on the two of them for several moments before jump-cutting to a long shot in which their basic position has not altered, generating a tableau in which the stillness of their bodies is exaggerated by the streaming rain from above, the sheer, almost spectral, whiteness of their faces more angelic than demonic—and more nakedly human, perhaps, than anything else (fig. 3).

Figure 2: Minus and Karin
When David and Martin return, Karin resolves in a period of relative lucidity to return to the hospital, where she will forego any further electroshock therapy. “I can’t live in two worlds,” she insists to David. “I have to choose.” This decision gives way to a mutual confession between father and daughter. Karin admits to having read David’s diary, and he, sensing that this may be his last opportunity to confront his daughter, confesses to having had a guilty conscience about her condition for some time, an attitude that led him to turn away from his parental obligations. “It makes me sick to think of the life I sacrificed for my so-called art,” he tells her.

You see Karin, one draws a magic circle around oneself to keep everything out that doesn’t fit into one’s secret games. Each time life
breaks through the circle, the games become puny and ridiculous. So one draws a new circle and builds new defenses.”

When Karin and David climb together out of the wreckage of the ship, the sun, although never intruding directly into the frame, becomes almost blindingly bright, reflecting harshly off the water and carving stark shadows all along the rocky shore. This is underscored when Karin remarks drowsily, “The light is so strong,” as if to confirm the basic anxiety that T.S. Eliot gives voice to at the beginning of *The Waste Land* that mankind cannot bear very much reality, that our knowledge, both on the individual and collective level, amounts to a mere “heap of broken images, where the sun beats”—itself a suggestively cinematographic image that owes a great deal to Henri Bergson’s analogy between consciousness and the processes of film.

The fluctuation between darkness and illumination remains a prominent motif throughout this sequence, operating on both a literal and figurative level, in a way that harkens back once again to the moral and epistemic dimension of the film’s title. All of the characters are shot from below, which creates a discernible corona effect as the sun streams in around the outlines of their bodies. This device reinforces the stark contrast between their mutual awakening into reality and what now appears to be Karin’s inexorable descent into interior darkness, which culminates shortly afterward in the horrific revelation of the spider-god. The last time we see Karin, she is putting on a pair of dark sunglasses before heading outside to board the helicopter—not so much in willful denial of this communicable, public reality,

---

as Peter Cowie has insisted,\(^29\) as in sober _acceptance_ of the fact that she can no longer function effectively within it.

But this is not the end of the film. In a final, long-awaited conversation between father and son, David points to the fact of human love as the redemptive force that makes life worth living and comes as close as we can get to knowledge of the divine. When Minus, crushed by the course of recent events and still dubious of David’s tendency to yearn after the transcendent, responds sarcastically, “A special kind of love, I suppose?” David’s reply is telling: “All kinds, Minus. The highest and the lowest, the most absurd and the most sublime. All kinds of love…. Longing and denial. Trust and distrust.” While most commentators regard _Through a Glass Darkly_ as a masterpiece, few have found this final summation entirely convincing. It seems at once structurally and thematically forced, a hastily appended resolution that, as John Coleman notes, “hardly winds up a wet afternoon of incest and horror.”\(^30\) Some have taken issue with the fact that it undermines Karin’s position as the ostensible protagonist of the film,\(^31\) which is no doubt the case, but not in itself necessarily a flaw. Others have argued that the sentiment voiced by David

\(^{29}\) Cowie, _Ingmar Bergman: a critical biography_: 201.
\(^{30}\) Qtd. in Hubner, _The films of Ingmar Bergman: illusions of light and darkness_: 54.
\(^{31}\) See, for instance, Robin Wood, _Ingmar Bergman_, Movie paperbacks (London: Studio Vista, 1969). 107. and Charles B. Ketcham, _The influence of existentialism on Ingmar Bergman: an analysis of the theological ideas shaping a filmmaker’s art_, Studies in art and religious interpretation (Lewiston, N.Y.: E. Mellen Press, 1986). 137-45. Ketcham, whose approach to Bergman is theological in its basic orientation, rejects the implicit humanism in David’s statement: “While David, Martin, and Minus have all been brought by their respective existential crises to the sentimental conclusion that only communication—that is, love—can save them, only Karin has had the courage to look into the heart of things, the creative center of life (that we have logically and arbitrarily defined as God), to search for the source of love itself. What she finds, looking through the conventional, metaphysical dark glasses is not God, but Nothingness…. [142] The difficulty with such a reading is that its existentialist emphasis on resolute authenticity in the face of the realization of both the utter contingency of the world and the inevitability of one’s own death, however applicable to Bergman’s previous films, neglects the overriding importance that the Trilogy tends to place on the centrality of the social—and in particular, on the difficulties involved in communication—to human life as a whole.
remains fundamentally religious in nature; Marc Gervais even goes so far as to call it Bergman’s “clearest statement ever of Christian existentialism’s affirmation of God.”

Yet all of these interpretations place such weight on the content of David’s revelation that the primary importance of the exchange itself, as reinforced by Minus’ final exclamation, “Papa spoke to me!” tends to be largely overlooked. In this regard, Laura Hubner is right to emphasize how Minus “does not agree with David’s words per se but rejoices in human contact, suggesting a move towards humanism, but not necessarily a resolution.”

For it is upon this possibility of a post-religious humanism, one that might render meaningful the complexities, contradictions, and essential limitations of life without falling prey to the transcendent yearning and escapism of orthodox Christianity, that Bergman would begin to build in the ensuing films.

* * *

Although many have accepted at face value Bergman’s own characterization of Through a Glass Darkly, Winter Light, and The Silence as a self-contained “trilogy,” there are several reasons that one may wish to question the applicability of this description, beyond the obvious fact that these films have no characters or plot lines in

---

32 Gervais, Ingmar Bergman: magician and prophet: 76. The issue of Christianity aside, I find Gervais’ tendency to reduce David to this straightforward autobiographical function, in which he becomes a mere mouthpiece for Bergman’s own evolving views on the subject, deeply problematic.

33 Hubner, The films of Ingmar Bergman: illusions of light and darkness: 55.
common.\textsuperscript{34} For one thing, Bergman is on record as having insisted to the Swedish director Vilgot Sjöman as late as May 1961 that the upcoming picture would constitute the final installment in a trilogy that began with \textit{The Virgin Spring}, rather than \textit{Through a Glass Darkly}. As Sjöman remarks in his journal, “He likes working with the idea of a trilogy; it is just that by degrees he moves the trilogy forward a step: the first part drops out when a new one appears.”\textsuperscript{35} Indeed, Bergman’s interest in producing a trilogy appears to have been motivated in part by the excitement surrounding Antonioni’s trilogy of modern alienation, which was soon to comprise \textit{L’Avventura} (1960), \textit{La Notte} (1961), and \textit{Eclipse} (1962)—even if, as many have since argued, this series should be expanded to include 1964’s \textit{Red Desert}, thus forming a “tetralogy” of films featuring Antonioni’s muse, Monica Vitti, whose characters all exhibit a similar range of anxieties and dissatisfactions in their attempts to negotiate the complexities of modern life, wandering in and out of their tenuous social attachments in an abstract and technologically driven world. Like Antonioni, Bergman’s interest in pursuing a related set of cultural problems through the conflicting interests and ideological perspectives of his protagonists in film after film, together with his reliance on a select group of actors (Gunnar Björnstrand, Max Von Sydow, Erland Josephson) and actresses (Harriet Anderson, Bibi Anderson, Ingrid Tulin, Liv Ullman) in his productions for both the stage and screen, lends his entire body of work an inherently intertextual character. What sets the films of the Trilogy apart from those of the 1950’s, however, is the degree to which they seize upon


this intertextual dynamic and begin to exploit its conceptual and affective possibilities. If not a trilogy in the conventional sense, these films certainly invite consideration as what Irving Singer calls a thematically interrelated “triad” insofar as “each film contains circumstances—not always apparent throughout or evident at the beginning—that reflect back upon problems about faith, or the absence of it, which occur in the other two.”

Winter Light both resumes and builds upon the prior film’s suspicion of transcendent explanations for the meaning of human life, this time in direct relation to the religious ideals instilled in Bergman during his strict Lutheran upbringing. The film opens with the same iconic white-on-black credit sequence found in Through a Glass Darkly, with the slow, somber clanging of a church bell now in place of the Bach saraband. Despite Bergman’s insistence that the idea for Winter Light was sparked by a radio broadcast of Stravinsky’s Symphony of Psalms, it is, somewhat ironically, the first of his films to do entirely without a score. As such, it relies entirely on its actors and mise en scène to establish an atmosphere of oppressive ordinariness, a kind of hibernal purgatory in which all the processes of organic life seem to have ground to a halt, leaving only the muted, inert surfaces of things—the somber facades of farmhouses, a row of passing train cars, the interior of a country schoolhouse—that gradually reveal themselves to in the fullness of their everyday significance.

The plot begins in medias res with a quick fade-in on the face of Thomas (Gunnar Björnstrand), a minister in a remote Swedish town north of Stockholm, as he recites

---

somberly from the communion scriptures. He is framed slightly from below, which lends an imposing and somewhat impersonal air, the blackness of his robe dominating the lower third of the frame. His eyes are unrevealing, hidden behind horn-rimmed reading glasses (fig. 6). Bergman sustains this medium close-up for three quarters of a minute before jump-cutting to a long shot still centered on Björnstrand but now encompassing the complete interior of the small country church. We see that the pews are largely empty, with only a handful of parishioners in attendance. A series of quick dissolves establish the salient features of the bleak winter landscape outside, revealing the inhospitable exterior of the building itself, the snow-covered ground, a river glazed with sheets of broken ice, and an overcast sky above, which diffuses what little remains of the afternoon light. As Sven Nykvist, Bergman’s cinematographer of choice from the late 1950’s onward, observed, “There was no light coming in except from the cloudy sky, so [when designing the interior sets] we couldn’t have any shadows at all.” This atmospheric diffusion and the lack of visual depth to which it gives rise work throughout the film to collapse the distinction between earth and sky, cutting against Thomas’ yearning for a transcendent purpose in God in a way that also lends visceral immediacy to his crisis of faith, which plays out over the course of a single afternoon.38

38 Singer is also instructive on this point, noting how the background lighting “more or less erases our normal perception of the horizon” and suggests on Bergman’s part the deliberate “avoidance of any suggestion of a metaphysical dualism” (125).
Much like Karin’s descent into schizophrenia in *Through a Glass Darkly*,
Thomas’ moral and existential crisis turns out to be less significant in itself than for its
tendency to catalyze preexisting tensions between the central characters, as well as the
various forms and degrees of self-realization to which these confrontations eventually
lead. In this way, it becomes the basis of a larger meditation on the nature and extent of
our obligations to the others with whom we share a life, on the inherent difficulties in
knowing and making ourselves known through the expressive resources made available
to us through a combination of evolutionary, cultural, and historical circumstances.
Although well-intentioned, Thomas comes across as curt and largely ineffective in his
dealings with others. His excessive formality, in part a function of his office, tends to alienate those who attempt to engage with him on a personal level. When he tries to connect with Jonas Person (Max Von Sydow), a suicidal parishioner obsessed with the threat of nuclear war, it is first by resorting to platitudes (“We must trust in God”) and then, when this strategy proves unsuccessful, by turning Jonas into a sounding board for his own doubts and insecurities in a manner that reverses the entire dynamic of the confession.

During their first encounter, Thomas speaks candidly about his own religious doubts in a way that establishes a striking visual and thematic parallel with the conversation that takes place between Minus and David (the latter part also played by Björnstrand) in the final moments of Through a Glass Darkly, yet this time without recourse to even the limited consolations provided by David’s immanentist doctrine that equates God with human love. Finding that he is unable to meet Jonas’ gaze directly, Thomas stands and begins to speak at the other’s side while gazing down at the desk. “We live our simple daily lives, and atrocities shatter the security of our world,” he observes frankly. “It’s overwhelming and God seems so very remote. I feel so helpless, I don’t know what to say. I understand your anguish, but life must go on.” When Jonas asks for a reason why we must go on living, David finds himself entirely at a loss. But sensing urgency of the situation, he elicits from Jonas a promise to return after driving his wife home to be with their young children.

Although Thomas, incapacitated by the flu he has been coming down with, is slumped over his desk when Jonas arrives to continue their conversation, the latter’s
reticence and sheer despondency lead Thomas to seize the reins of the conversation once again. He recalls his time as a young preacher in Lisbon during the Spanish Civil War, when his idealistic faith in the essential goodness of God and man blinded him to “what was going on” all around him. Given the autobiographical resonance of other key elements within film, this acknowledgment might plausibly be taken as a reference to Bergman’s own exposure to fascism during his adolescence as an exchange student in Nazi Germany.39 “I refused to accept reality,” Thomas insists, in a manner that resumes not only the core thematic conflict of the previous film but also, a great deal of its distinctive language and imagery, which becomes apparent as he continues to unburden himself to the now visibly uncomfortable Jonas:

My God and I resided in an organized world where everything made sense. You see, I’m no good as a clergyman. I put my faith in an improbable and private image of a fatherly god. One who loved mankind, of course, but me most of all. Do you see, Jonas, what a monstrous mistake I made?... Picture my prayers to an echo-god, who gave benign answers and reassuring blessings. Every time I confronted God with the realities I witnessed, he turned into something ugly and revolting. A spider-god, a monster.

39 As part of an international exchange program for Christian youth, Bergman spent the summers of 1934 and 1935 with the family of a Protestant minister in Germany, where he attended school and “was soon subjected to heavy indoctrination about the might and right of the Nazi cause” (Cowie 15; see also, Gado 17, whose date of 1936 for these events is incorrect, however). For a recent look at Bergman’s anguished admission in his autobiography to having harbored certain sympathies with Nazism until about 1946, when the extent of Hitler’s atrocities had become clear in Sweden, see Peter Ohlin, “Bergman’s Nazi Past,” Scandinavian Studies 81, no. 4 (2009). Ohlin’s measured and insightful conclusion in this essay is that “Bergman’s confessions of Nazi complicity are part of a self-dramatization that has less to do with reality than with his deliberate placement of himself at the heart of some of the great conflicts and dilemmas of our time, and that, at the same time, this sense of complicity is part of a very specific Swedish cultural and political context” (440). Even so, it should be noted that this experience had a profound impact on Bergman’s view of modern society, causing him to “turn his back on politics in every form. For years he did not vote in elections, did not read political leaders in the papers, and did not listen to speeches” (Cowie 16).
In the form of Thomas’ counter-religious epiphany, we witness the playing out of the broader cultural and historical narrative that Nietzsche outlines in works such as *Beyond Good and Evil* and *A Genealogy of Morals*, according to which the premium that Christian doctrine places on truth-telling gives way first to the Protestant Reformation and then to the increasingly positivist temperament of modern science, which, in the attempt to purge itself of everything false or “unverifiable,” eventually finds itself left with no other choice than to dismiss the mutually determining categories of God and the human soul as figments of a specious metaphysics. The difference is that Thomas’ reluctant secular awakening stems not from scientific conviction but rather from a growing sense of the disconnection between his religious values and the stark realities of modern life. While this revelation comes at a price, denying him any guarantee of eternal salvation or divine purpose, it also promises a certain degree of relief: “If there is no god, would it really make a difference?” he asks Jonas. “Life would become understandable.”

Jonas takes this lapse in the conversation to slip quietly out the door while Thomas remains by the window in a feverish trance, having bared his soul and exposed his occupational hypocrisy to this simple fisherman whose downward spiral into abject nihilism he has done nothing to alleviate. However regrettable, it comes as little surprise when one of the congregants from the morning service arrives some time later with the news that Jonas took a detour on the way home and committed suicide by the river. If there is something about the precipitousness, and the apparent gratuitousness, of this action that seems to verge on the melodramatic, any such impression is dispelled the moment we see Thomas, framed from above in a detached and analytical manner—which
Cowie likens to that of a surveillance camera—standing guard over the lifeless body until the ambulance arrives (fig. 5). Throughout much of scene, the roar of the river and the driving wind combine to engulf all other sound. This environmental “white noise” imposes a palpable barrier between the audience and the unfolding dramatic action, as if to suggest the upsurge into the narrative of natural forces that extend beyond the scope of human control and understanding, which now, at last, demand to be acknowledged, to be “heard.” While Thomas himself is clearly able to decipher what the officers are saying, the distance between camera and crime scene reduces their voices for us to sheer, inarticulate speech, underscoring at once the material dimension of human existence and, at the same time, the profound gulf, represented by the capacity for perception and conscious experience, that sets our animate bodies apart from inanimate forms of matter, like the rock and soil on which Jonas’ inert body is now sprawled.
As the son of a Lutheran minister, Bergman was plagued long into adulthood by his inability to find solace in the existential consolations of Christianity. It was in fact only after completing the Trilogy that he considered himself to have finally moved beyond this dilemma, which he continued to frame in the starkest of terms: “One has to settle for suicide or acceptance. Either destroy oneself (which is romantic) or accept life. I chose now to accept it.”\textsuperscript{40} In the confrontation between Thomas and Jonas, we witness the playing out of these two alternatives for coping with the profound moral and social-psychological disorientation that tends to accompany one’s sudden loss of faith in the

\textsuperscript{40} Qtd. in Gado, 279.
absolute. Jonas, as we have seen, chooses death, mostly out of fear over the prospect of nuclear annihilation but also to some extent as part of a spiritual protest against his conviction that modernity, in its endless pursuit of scientific and technological innovation, is hurling toward a new kind of barbarism that will coincide with the terrifying and insufferable revelation of our own inhumanity, as Horkheimer and Adorno speculate in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.41 But Thomas chooses life, despite all lingering religious doubts and uncertainties about the future, and a major clue as to why he does so can be found in his earlier confession to Jonas, particularly in the realization that he had put all his hope in an “improbable and private image of a fatherly god.”

Thomas cannot take full credit for this revelation because it comes as a tacit, if perhaps still largely unconscious, acknowledgment of a series of criticisms leveled against him earlier that afternoon in a letter from Marta (Ingrid Thulin), his devoted mistress of nearly four years. “I have never believed in your faith,” she had written,

Mainly because I’ve never been tortured by religious tribulations. My non-Christian family was characterized by warmth, togetherness, and joy. God and Jesus existed only as vague notions. To me your faith seems obscure and neurotic, somehow cruelly overwrought with emotion, primitive. One thing in particular I’ve never been able to fathom: your particular indifference to Jesus Christ.

Throughout the film, Marta’s warm and compassionate nature serves as an implicit rebuttal to the Karamazovian concern that without God, everything is permitted. Bergman presents her humanism as a more viable and clear-eyed alternative in the modern world to the devotion of the pious (of whom there are few actual examples in the

---

film, since most of the parishioners appear distracted during the service, as if merely going through the motions themselves), the nihilism of the world-weary, and the solemn posturing of a self-obsessed pastor who remains in denial, or perhaps just deeply ambivalent, about his loss of faith. To be sure, Marta’s unrequited love for Thomas is religious in its intensity, her constant attempts to ease his physical and emotional suffering—gestures he either takes for granted or ungenerously rejects—undeniably Christ-like. This connection is cemented during a flashback in which we are exposed to an image of the raw, suggestively stigmatic, rash that Marta recalls once spread to her hands, prompting Thomas at the time to recoil in disgust and shortly afterward to begin distancing himself physically from her. As her letter implies, there is something tellingly similar about Thomas’ “peculiar indifference” to the physical suffering of Jesus—as when, alone in the chapel, Thomas looks up at the large wooden crucifix and remarks with what appears to be a mixture of revulsion and embarrassment, “What a ridiculous image”—and his inability to come to terms with the condition of human embodiment itself, including the continuous burden it places on us of having to respond and reveal ourselves to others through actions, gestures, and all the varieties of symbolic communication that culture has placed at our disposal.

The tragedy of Jonas’ suicide forces Thomas to confront these anxieties, yet in a way that is so concrete, so absolute, so dramatic, as almost to defy comprehension altogether. The real turning point of the film comes shortly afterward, in an exchange between Thomas and Marta that recasts the ethical considerations at the heart of the film in terms of their intimate connection to everyday life. After Thomas delivers the news of
Jonas’ suicide to the newly widowed Mrs. Persson, Marta convinces him to stop by the schoolhouse, where she can tend to his illness before the three o’clock service he is scheduled to perform in the neighboring town of Frostnas. She brings aspirin and cough syrup, and a tray with several other items that he curtly rejects. Sensing the tension in his voice, she asks why he sometimes acts as if he “hates” her. Before allowing him to respond, however, or perhaps simply in the attempt help him overcome his reticence, she begins nervously rattling off a number of possible explanations for this behavior, all of them clearly the result of prior introspection: that she is crowding him; that she is too bossy; that she should have been kinder, more supportive of his personal and professional aspirations (fig. 6). Thomas, now feeling cornered and spiteful, decides to level with her in a series of invective remarks that epitomize the understated emotional brutality typical of Bergman’s chamber films, and in a way that directly anticipates the central dynamic of his landmark 1973 series for Swedish television, *Scenes from a Marriage*. “The real reason is that I don’t want you,” he tells her:

I’m tired of your loving care. Your fussing. Your good advice. Your candlesticks and table runners. I’m fed up with your shortsightedness. Your clumsy hands. Your anxiousness. Your timid displays of affection. You force me to occupy myself with your physical condition. Your poor digestion. Your rashes. Your periods. Your frostbitten cheeks. Once and for all I have to escape this junkyard of idiotic trivialities. I’m sick and tired of it all, of everything to do with you.

Although Marta is the ostensible target of this simmering, misogynistic diatribe, its concrete evocation of the extent to which she has come to represent for Thomas the messiness of the human itself, and in particular, our dependence on all manner of routines and rituals relating to the body and its recurrent needs (for food, sleep, physical contact,
medical care, and so on), is ultimately more revealing of his character than hers. Equally telling is that this gradual devaluation of Marta has happened to coincide directly with Thomas’ idealization of his deceased wife, which becomes clear as their conversation draws to its faltering conclusion:

MARTA: Why didn’t you tell me this before?

THOMAS: Because of my upbringing. I was taught to regard women as beings of a higher order. Admirable creatures, unassailable martyrs.

MARTA: And your wife?

THOMAS: I loved her. You hear me? I loved her. And I don’t love you, because I love my wife. When she died, so did I. I couldn’t care less what happens to me. Am I making myself clear? I loved her, and she was everything you could never be but insist on trying to be. The way you mimic her behavior is such an ugly parody.

MARTA: I didn’t even know her.

THOMAS: I’d better be going… before I spout even worse bits of drivel.

Bergman’s dialogue throughout this scene demonstrates an extraordinary grasp of how deeply the texture of even our most personal, and seemingly private, thoughts is interwoven with the everyday objects and practices that over time acquire a communal significance—a common sense—for those who find themselves sharing a life together, whether by choice or due to circumstances entirely beyond their control. Yet this is precisely what Thomas fails to recognize. By reducing to a “junkyard of trivialities” not only Marta’s familiar gestures of kindness and concern but also, by implication, the entire domain of everyday life in which such forms of human bonding manifest themselves, he fails to grasp the basic functional and ceremonial affinity between her “candlesticks and
table runners” and the official regalia of the religious altar over which he is even now on his way to preside.

Figure 6: Thomas and Marta in the Schoolhouse

Winter Light concludes on a deeply ambivalent note, as Thomas, with a sudden resolve whose source is never revealed, decides to proceed with the three o’clock mass at Frostnas even though Marta is the only one in attendance. Despite Bergman’s own insistence on “the new faith that is stirring in the parson,” it remains unclear whether he has experienced an epiphany of any kind, religious or secular. Critics, accordingly, have tended to read this sequence in largely pessimistic terms, as offering little hope for either

---

the fraught relationship between Thomas and Marta or the disintegrating rural community represented in the form of Thomas’ dwindling congregation. Yet as Geoffrey Macnab observes, “Thomas achieves a kind of redemption by finding the resolve to carry on with his work…. He is finally able to rise far enough above his self-pity to see the purpose he serves as a priest in helping others deal with their suffering and crises of faith.”  

Frank Gado also points to this “possibility of redemption” but is quick to emphasize that “the structure is left open: Thomas’ pain and confusion are as great at the end as at the beginning, and whether he can break through his egoism is a question that falls outside the drama.”

All of this, of course, was highly deliberate on Bergman’s part. His determination to avoid at all costs what he regarded even now as the didactic summation in the final moments of Through a Glass Darkly resulted in a film that continued to probe the sources and varieties of human conflict without permitting the reduction of its protagonists to ideal archetypes or providing the kind of denouement that would tie up all the loose ends of the narrative and make this material more palatable for the audience. I have suggested that Winter Light on the most fundamental level concerns the ever-present difficulties we face in living with and relating to others in a world from which traditional frameworks of value and belief have largely disappeared: a basic preoccupation with the social dimension of human existence that is foregrounded in the film’s original title, Nattvardsgästerna, which translates literally to “The Communicants.” In Swedish, this

---

44 Gado, 294-5.
term has a relatively narrow, religious meaning, denoting those who receive communion as part of the Christian mass. Yet Bergman is interested in exploring a thematic connection that is actually better captured by the English cognates “communion” and “communication,” which both refer to the basic human need to establish meaningful contact with those around us. Noting how prominently this theme figures in the Trilogy, Bergman reflected in 1964 on some of the cultural and environmental factors of his native Sweden that helped to shape this concern:

We’re such a huge country. Yet we are so few, so thinly scattered across it. The people have to spend their lives isolated on their farms—and isolated from one another in their homes. It’s terribly difficult for them, even when they come to the cities and live close to other people; it’s no help, really. They don’t know how to get in touch, to communicate.45

It is no coincidence that “We find it difficult to talk to each other” is the opening salvo of Marta’s letter to Thomas. We have seen how, in his deeply un-Christian rejoinder to the questions she raises about the future of their relationship, Thomas cruelly rejects her “fussing” and her “loving care,” insisting that these provides a poor substitute for the intensity of feeling his first wife was able to inspire in him. The vigor of this renunciation has led commentators to neglect a further interpretive possibility that should strike us as extremely plausible in light of the film’s overarching emphasis on communication; namely, that Thomas decides to perform the mass at Frostnas less out of a renewed appreciation of the need to “administer to his flock”46—none of whom are actually present—than out of a desire to reestablish contact with Marta herself. In this case, his

46 Singer, 127.
decision would come as a symbolic, if perhaps still ambivalent, response to her requests throughout the film for openness and reciprocity, an attempt to open up a more direct line of communication between them. It is not one that would provide a clear path forward, let alone guarantee their future happiness. Yet it would be, at the very least, a step in the right direction: the beginning of a conversation.

* * *

_The Silence_ begins in a train compartment with a close-up on the face of a sleeping boy, perhaps eight or nine years old: a portrait of innocence. His mother, beads of sweat glistening on her chest and forehead, fans her face with a newspaper, staring vacantly beyond the frame. As the camera pans slowly to the right, the presence of a second woman is revealed, of similar age and build, yet in almost all other respects the mother’s visual opposite: blond, upright, conservatively attired, jacket buttoned, hair pulled back. The women are seated about two feet apart—as far as the booth will allow—and this sense of physical separation is heightened almost to the point of hyperbole by the darkness of the upholstery behind them, establishing what might as well be a _total_ contrast with the overall brightness of their attire and complexions. They appear in sharp relief, carved-out, entirely separate both from their surroundings and from each other (fig. 7).

---

On the basis of this sequence alone, it may seem unwarranted to construe the physical distance between these women as a sign of some larger spiritual or metaphysical disconnection, yet this is exactly the line of questioning that Bergman opens up throughout the film. “The theme of these three films is a ‘reduction’—in the metaphysical sense of the word,” he insisted shortly after completing the Trilogy: “Through a Glass Darkly—certainty achieved. Winter Light—certainty unmasked. The Silence—God’s silence—the negative impression.”48 Indeed, it becomes clear soon into The Silence that the overtly religious concerns that had informed the previous films have now receded to

the background, if in fact they are present at all, allowing Bergman to focus his attention on the potentially disintegrative impact of the social, economic, and technological transformations of late modernity on the psychology of particular individuals and the increasingly fragmented communities in which they live. Even after the relative austerity and directorial restraint of a film like *Winter Light*, one would not expect Bergman to opt for the detached perspective of the documentarian or neorealist as a viable way of approaching these themes. And what we find in *The Silence* is in fact “a fluency of technique altogether new in Bergman’s work,”49 a willingness to indulge his experimental tendencies in the service of what, with the possible exception of *Persona* (1966), would become his most sustained and explicit investigation of the possibilities of the filmic medium. Although not “realistic” in the sense that would imply strict adherence to the representational conventions established by the Hollywood tradition, Bergman’s experimentation yields a mode of reflexivity that, in Hansen’s phrase, allows us to “confront the constitutive ambivalence of modernity” while at the same time striving to explore the way this tension play out in the lives of particular individuals.

All of these themes are already display in the opening sequence, which constitutes what Paul de Man might have called an extended “allegory of viewing.” After the relationship between the two women is established in the highly stylized manner I have described, the boy stands up, turns, and rubs the sleep out of his eyes, now facing the camera directly (fig. 8). He seems to be looking just beyond us, to the wall of the train car where another window might plausibly be located. But his eyes are obscured by deep

49 Cowie, 214.
shadow from the overhead lighting, lending a haunting quality to his otherwise angelic face and creating the impression that he is, or could be, looking directly into the camera, directly at us. This is in fact a slight variation on one of Bergman’s trademark gestures that had also figured prominently in Winter Light: When Thomas, still waiting for Jonas to return, picks up Marta’s letter and begins to read, the camera cuts unexpectedly to a close-up of her face. She looks directly into the camera and, like a stage actor delivering a monologue, begins to vocalize, to perform, the contents of her own letter (fig. 12). Like someone in a photograph, she becomes the dominant presence in a scene from which she is physically absent: a supremely metafilmic gesture whose force derives not only from the fact that it violates cinematic conventions but also, and more importantly, that it does so in a way that succeeds in making manifest something intrinsic to the ontology of the medium itself, to the peculiar mode of spectatorship that it sanctions, which the seamless narratives of the Hollywood tradition so often render invisible to us.
“Our condition has become one in which our natural mode of perception is to view, feeling unseen,” Stanley Cavell writes in *The World Viewed*. “We do not so much look at the world as look *out at* it, from behind the self.” In this regard, there would seem to be something incontestable about the critical cliché that equates the experience of film with voyeuristic pleasure.\(^5\) In the darkness of the theater, it becomes permissible for us to look—sometimes with desire, but always with a certain interest—at the faces, bodies, words, and gestures of others while remaining ourselves *unseen*. To say, as we often do,
that such interest “absorbs” or “immerses” us in the spectacle is therefore potentially misleading because our mode of involvement in what is presented on the screen remains fundamentally empathic in nature. This is why we do not believe that our own lives are in danger when someone in the film draws a gun, for example. To acknowledge this is by no means to trivialize the complex forms of emotional identification that cinema makes possible but rather to draw attention to the basic physical and affective distance, analogous almost to the distance between persons, intrinsic to the medium itself: a constitutive separation that the director must find compelling ways to negotiate.\footnote{By refusing to regard the experience of film as a mere fantasy—a kind of waking dream or hallucination that would automatically take hold of us, proceeding in its predetermined fashion, and render our responses to the situations depicted on screen wholly incidental—we are actually in a position to acknowledge its social and ethical force, to grant that its representations often have a direct bearing on the way we conceptualize others and fashion our own identities. I take this to be the significance of Cavell’s claim that even the most conventional Hollywood movies are not so much “escapes into fantasy” as “reliefs from private fantasy and its responsibilities; from the fact that the world is already drawn by fantasy” (\textit{The World Viewed}, 102).} What is most remarkable about Marta’s “performance” of her own letter in \textit{Winter Light} is how quickly the conspicuousness of the device, its overt theatricality, gives way to an atmosphere of total conviction, as we come to realize how significant even her most subtle inflections and facial expressions are to what she is attempting to communicate—and how little room for misunderstanding on our part they actually allow.

The case is different in opening scene of \textit{The Silence}, where the close-up on the boy, Johan, serves not to deepen but rather to “derail” the incipient narrative: to prevent it, at least for the time being, from taking hold. This generates a sense of disorientation that persists as he begins to wander down the hallway of the train car, conspicuously rubbing his eyes, peering unseen into the windows of other compartments to observe the
other passengers inside. Soon enough, we will gain a basic footing in the narrative. We will discover that the two women, Anna (Gunnel Lindblom) and Ester (Ingrid Thulin), are sisters travelling home through a war-torn landscape vaguely reminiscent of the Eastern Bloc. And we will watch as Ester’s worsening respiratory disease forces them to take a hotel room in the fictional city of Timoka (Estonian for “pertaining to the executioner”), were the plot begins to triangulate in a deliberately “reductive” fashion reminiscent of Beckett’s later plays, with the two sisters remaining largely on opposite sides of the partitioned room, and Johan, when he is not exploring the labyrinthine corridors of the hotel, acting as a reluctant intermediary in their self-destructive power struggles. But for now, coming just on the heels of the highly stylized introduction of the three principal characters, it is clear that Bergman is inviting us to regard Johan’s wandering through the train car other than naturalistically, to find in this sequence of events a significance that exceeds their role as links in a narrative chain. This basic tension between the representational and the metarepresentational becomes palpable the moment Johan walks over to the series of windows on the outer wall of the train car and begins to look out at the alien landscape: we watch him watching, and watch with him, as the landscape transitions from a naturalistic one where the sun is rising slowly over mountains to an urban one overflowing with images of industry and militarization (fig. 9). Especially striking is the row of dark steel tanks that for a time runs parallel to the train, streaming by in a flickering, kinetic blur that lends them almost an air of unreality, as Johan takes all of this in with a mixture of curiosity and amazement on his face (fig. 10).
Figure 9: Tanks Passing

Figure 10: Looking In

232
Rather than attempting to disguise the fact that these effects were generated by means of rear projection in a studio, Bergman lets their constructedness obtrude. As Maaret Koskinen observes, the tanks and other “external” images that emerge before Johan’s inquisitive gaze “seem to move not so much in an extended reality outside the window as much as on the window, as projections.” She continues:

The windowpane thus assumes the guise of a frame, or a film screen (in the screen) on which the world seems to flicker and come alive before Johan’s eyes. At the same time there is a painterly quality to this shot: Johan seems to be looking out onto a world that looks like a flat painting, while he himself is circumscribed by frames, as if caught in a painting.\(^{52}\)

Macnab also notes along these lines how the sound of the moving train resembles the “rattle of the projector.”\(^{53}\) But to what end?

I have suggested that the opening sequence of *The Silence*, and indeed, much of the film itself, functions as an allegory of viewing. However, it would be still more accurate to say that this is a film intent on generating the atmosphere of allegory in order to promote reflection on both the conditions of possibility of photographic media in general and the particular modes of affective experience to which they are capable of giving rise. In doing so, it produces at once a movement toward greater abstraction and greater concreteness. The compositional activity of the artist, foregrounded in the work, comes to serve not merely as an analogy for the processes by which culture generates the basic forms that organize the world we inhabit, making that world intelligible, meaningful, and communicable for us, but also as a concrete demonstration of these

---

\(^{52}\) Maaret Koskinen, *Ingmar Bergman’s The silence : pictures in the typewriter, writings on the screen* (Seattle: University of Washington, 2010). 118.

\(^{53}\) Macnab, *Ingmar Bergman : the life and films of the last great European director*: 169.
forces, one that is capable of showing us how things, as Stevens might say, “take on shape and the size of things as they are.” In this way, Bergman’s filmmaking comes to exemplify the dynamic that I identified earlier as a basic feature of modernist cinema more generally, a mode of formal reflexivity that exhibits a striking affinity with Wittgenstein’s notion of “seeing as,” in which interpretation is revealed as a necessary condition of intelligibility.⁵⁴

Such considerations, of course, naturally extend beyond the visual dimension of film. In closing, I want to tie these observations together with the other (meta-)sensory theme operating in The Silence, which involves not only sound in general but, as the title indicates, the conspicuous absence at least of meaningful, significant sound. I have maintained throughout that Bergman’s films of this period are driven by a basic interest in examining the many problems that modern life poses for our ability to forge and sustain meaningful interpersonal relationships, and that this coincides with a particular emphasis on the act of communication itself, of which Bergman was in fact extremely conscious. In The Silence, this sense of disconnection manifests itself most palpably in the form of the breakdown and apparent insufficiency of language. The most obvious barrier to communication is the linguistic divide that separates the three principal characters from the inhabitants of Timoka, where they remain for the duration of the film. Macnab has noted how Bergman’s conception of the modern metropolis is distinctly “rooted in early twentieth century modernist literature. The city stands for

---

⁵⁴ I take Wittgenstein’s famous example of the duck-rabbit illusion in Part II of the Philosophical Investigations to illustrate not only the culturally relative status of normative perceptions but also, and more importantly, how in ordinary cases the force of convention has always already oriented us toward phenomena in a certain conceptual and pragmatic way.
cosmopolitanism, forbidden pleasures, consumerism and display. It also stands for alienation, impersonal and oppressive bureaucracy and the potential of political upheaval.”\(^{55}\) It is telling in this regard that the language spoken by the inhabitants of Timoka, like the city itself, is entirely fictional—a gesture that pushes the film even further into allegorical territory by amplifying the inscrutability of these alien surroundings and rendering abstract and symbolic the barriers to understanding and communication that they face. This threat to the possibility of significant speech is reinforced by the many scenes in which words seem to fail Anna and Ester in their attempts to relate to one another, or those in which the characters’ voices are simply overwhelmed by environmental and mechanical noises—the bustle of the thoroughfare, the music blaring through the café loudspeaker, the air raid sirens—and reduced to mere, inarticulate sound.

One might be tempted to regard these instances of frustrated communication, and indeed the film as a whole, as providing confirmation of a broadly poststructuralist vision of language. But to do so would be to neglect the crucial significance of the opening line of the film, in which Johan, pointing to the notice on the window, turns to his aunt, and asks, “What does this mean?” This question is not as naïve as it initially seems; we discover shortly afterward that Ester is a translator of foreign literature. Although confined to her bed for most of the film with her tubercular condition, she establishes a friendship with the hotel’s elderly waiter, who brings her food, tends to her as her condition worsens, and, during the course of these interactions, teaches her several words

\(^{55}\) Macnab, \textit{Ingmar Bergman: the life and films of the last great European director}: 168.
that facilitate communication between them. Anna, meanwhile, roams through the streets of Timoka, picking up a café worker with whom she has a casual sexual encounter.

Afterward, in a particularly devastating scene, she “expresses” to him in a sudden torrent of words the full extent of her hatred for her sister, completely aware that he cannot understand anything beyond the outward signs of her emotional distress. When she and Johan leave Ester in the waiter’s care at the end of the film, we return once more to the interior of the train car, in a way that establishes a clear visual and thematic parallel with the opening sequence. Anna looks out the window, conflicted about leaving her sister behind, possibly even to die, given the advanced state of Ester’s illness and the imminent threat of war, but also relieved to be free of her judgmental gaze, her constant, unsettling presence. This explains Anna’s apparent frustration when she sees Johan with a note that Ester had given him prior to their departure. It is entitled “To Johan: Words in a foreign language” and contains a list of the words she learned during their brief stay in Timoka, along with their Swedish equivalents (fig. 11). The film then concludes very much as it started, with a close-up on Johan’s face, as he begins—silently, with careful and devout attention—to pronounce the words on the page Ester has given him and commit them to memory.
Much like the finale of Winter Light, this ambivalent, yet vaguely affirmative, sequence of events opens the door to a wide range of possible interpretations. Taking issue with the optimistic readings of critics like Steene and Cowie, Gado insists that “[n]either freedom nor hope is writ in a single line or image of the film’s conclusion,” instead finding this denouement to mark the point at which the redemptive power of human contact intimated in both Through a Glass Darkly and Winter Light is finally “rendered powerless.”56 While this may serve as an acceptable characterization of the sisters’ fraught relationship, it fails to account for the fondness both women exhibit

---

toward Johan throughout the film, as well as Ester’s final attempt to foster in him a respect for the importance of language in establishing the shared criteria through which the various aspects of our world become intelligible and communicable in the first place. In fact, I take this insight to be the fruit of Bergman’s metaphysical “reduction,” a process that despite the religious preoccupations of these films, in the end appears far less concerned with overcoming the figure of the Judeo-Christian God than with our ability, or inability, both as individuals and as an increasingly secular and diverse society to move beyond the demand for absolute moral and epistemological certainty that this god represents. For it is only in such terms that Bergman’s decision to end the Trilogy with Johan, whose passage to adulthood and full ethical agency seems to be bound up symbolically with this attempt to acquaint himself with the words and concepts of a foreign people, becomes explicable. Whether we characterize this decision as optimistic or pessimistic in nature is somewhat beside the point. What it affirms is that Bergman wishes to place less emphasis on any intrinsic significance that the many instances of linguistic breakdown and miscommunication throughout these films may be said to carry than on the tendency to take these misunderstandings as confirmation of our essential unintelligibility to one another—confirmation, that is to say, of our occasional sense, which in such cases can take on the force of a conviction, that our words and other outward forms of expression can never adequately express the complexities of our inner, private lives.

Stanley Cavell, taking a cue from Wittgenstein’s critique of philosophical skepticism, has labeled this pathological denial of our ability to make ourselves known to
others through the body’s capacity for significant speech and action a “fantasy of necessary inexpressiveness.” What films like *The Silence* make abundantly clear is that Bergman, too, however sensitive he may be to the interpersonal tensions and misunderstandings that give rise to this sense of imprisonment within the self, however skilled he may be at depicting them, is equally intent on showing us that the skeptic has it backwards, that we are not doomed to unintelligibility but rather to intelligibility itself, and to the ever-present responsibility of expressing our intentions to others and dealing with the unique demands their expressiveness places on us. Some have argued that the central focus on Johan betrays on Bergman’s part a residually romantic faith in the uncorrupted intuition of the child, but this is deeply misleading. Johan is unusually attuned to the social cues of the adults around him, even, and perhaps especially, in cases where these remain at least semi-opaque, exceeding his current level of experience and understanding. “Even the unhappy sexual acts of his mother and his aunt,” Singer notes, “are shown to us within the context of Johan’s desire to understand what their behavior signifies.”

Jesse Kalin suggests that it is ultimately this emphasis on the primacy of the social, rather than on the cultivation of an authentic and individualist stance toward the world, that differentiates Bergman from the mainstream existentialist positions so often attributed to him. From the time of *Thirst* (1949), we find Bergman beginning to invert

---

58 Singer, *Ingmar Bergman, cinematic philosopher: reflections on his creativity*: 133.
the Sartrean formulation, “Hell is other people,” when the young husband played by Birger Malmsten reconciles with his wife, affirming to her at the end of the film that “Hell together is better than hell alone.” While the Trilogy does not offer didactic moral solutions to the specific problems confronting its characters, it nonetheless suggests a way out of our confinement in the self by embracing the inherently public dimension of human life and thought, and by granting legitimacy to the range of physical and symbolic resources at our disposal for making ourselves known to those with whom we share a life. It recasts our ethical responsibility to these others as a source of perpetual possibility, finding in our basic attunement with them what Thomas, at the end of Through a Glass Darkly, calls a “reprieve from a sentence of death.”
Bibliography


Pearce, Roy Harvey. "'Anecdote of the Jar': An Iconological Note." *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 1, no. 2 (Summer 1977).


Biography

Brian Valentyn was born in Chicago in 1981 and raised in the surrounding area. He received his B.A. from the University of Iowa, where he majored in English and philosophy, and was awarded double honors upon graduation in May 2003 for the interdisciplinary thesis he completed. In his first year of study at Duke, Brian was the recipient of the Andrew W. Mellon Fellowship in Humanistic Studies. Other extra-departmental awards include the James B. Duke Fellowship (2004-2009), two Duke Graduate School Summer Research Fellowships (2008, 2010), the Franklin Humanities Institute Graduate Fellowship (2010-2011), and a grant from the Duke University Center for International Studies to organize and lead a graduate seminar on ethics during the 2008-2009 academic year. He is a current member of the Society of Duke Fellows.