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Eyebread

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

in the

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of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in Charge:

Professor Dorothy Hale, Chair
Professor Charles Altieri
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Abstract

Eyebread

By

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University of California, Berkeley

Professor Dorothy Hale, Chair

I study works of fiction and poetry that explore the process by which feelings come to seem relevant or productive to those who experience them and to others. My research seeks to contribute both to literary studies and to recent debates about the political and philosophical usefulness of lived or represented feelings. Contemporary scholars often treat works of literature as sites that help us discover why it is politically or ethically urgent, or epistemically revealing, to pay attention to other persons' and our own emotional experiences. The writers I examine do not stress forceful imperatives to attend to how someone feels. Rather, they call attention to the difficulty of knowing how intensely, when, and why we should do so. Each chapter of my dissertation focuses on one quality of feelings that, one might think, should make these feelings reliable sources of knowledge or potential change. These qualities include feelings' whimsicality (which I examine through Wallace Stevens and Sylvia Plath), their urgency (which I examine by reading Ralph Ellison), their portability (which I examine by reading Virginia Woolf and F. Scott Fitzgerald), their persistence (which I examine by reading John Ashbery), and the quality I will focus on today, their immersiveness (which I examine by reading Marcel Proust and James Baldwin).

The writers I study show why such qualities might seem politically or philosophically promising. But they also highlight why it is in fact hard to decide whether feelings that carry such qualities are significant in any larger sense. On a historical level, I argue that the definitions of feeling my chosen writers rely on are inspired by modernist philosophy, political theory, and psychology. These writers' reflections on the unclear importance of feelings can therefore help illuminate the stakes of parallel reflections taking place in these other disciplines. These writers can also thus help us appreciate literature's particular contribution to this strand of modernist intellectual history. More theoretically, I claim that my chosen novelists and poets explore a dimension of emotional experience that has been neglected by contemporary affect theory because of its prevalent emphasis on proving feelings' productivity. My research therefore aims to map out some ways in which these writers' treatment of feeling could help us think more self-critically and more expansively about our current studies of fictional or lived emotional states.

In my introduction I present the larger social and intellectual contexts and reasons for modernist literature's particular preoccupation with uncertainly important feelings. For modernist philosophy and politics, emotions are both obstacles and gateways. They are the tools and objects of new philosophical and political ideas that range from psychoanalysis to early communism. But from

the first, many thinkers also doubt whether it is possible reliably to parse apart politically or philosophically significant feelings from irrelevant ones. I outline this unease as it is voiced by Karl Marx, William James, Henri Bergson, Sigmund Freud, and Hannah Arendt. I also set these thinkers' treatments of feeling in dialogue with recent historical research on how the experience of total war destabilized Western society's standards of emotional proportion. The introduction finally frames my project within the field of affect studies as staked out by critics such as Charles Altieri, Rei Terada, Lauren Berlant, and Sianne Ngai.

My first chapter focuses on whimsical feelings. Wallace Stevens and Sylvia Plath center their lyrics on the emotional vacillations of the introspective self. Both poets showcase the way that feelings' whimsical persistence in searching for their most appropriate or appealing objects could be seen to resemble or to support a philosophical or political investigation of the proper importance of any given subjective impression or reaction. But they also suggest that the very diversity of the spans and intensities of focus feelings are capable of keeps making these feelings seem unreliable and inconsistent; proofs not of any particular importance of their speakers' inner lives, but of these speakers' confusion about its import. Stevens explores the process of trying to decide what more or less important self-knowledge could come from each momentary focus his speakers' feelings give to their experience. Plath studies her speakers' ongoing attempts to figure out whether and why the feelings they uncover could deserve to be voiced or even lingered in. Their speakers alternately lose and regain hope of finding in this whimsicality a stable sense of who they are or what they merit. Both poets keep multiplying the possible contexts, scales, pitches, and spans of time or space in which each feeling could be experienced. On the one hand, their poetry affirms emotional states as paths toward discovering or sounding new modes in which we relate to our world. On the other hand, the way their represented feelings' different scales and paces disrupt or fold into each other dramatizes how hard it is to decide exactly why each momentary worry or elation should have any significance even to the person experiencing them.

In the second chapter I examine how late modernists represent the difficulty of making sense of feelings' portability. I focus on Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* as well as F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender is the Night*. Woolf and Fitzgerald are preoccupied by the apparent difficulty of stably distinguishing between emotional experiences that stem from or react to intense personal events and ones that stem from law-like, socially instilled habits. They showcase the difficulty of expressing feelings in a way that would allow them to be stably and reliably recognized as expressions of trauma or of libido; of the sensitivity with which their characters take in the fine grain of the objects and impressions they are presented with, or the indiscriminateness with which they equate all these objects as sources of more or less lasting pleasure. Both Woolf and Fitzgerald embed emotional exchanges within descriptions of walks, parties, and teas. They frame these social events as spaces in which the long-term material labor that goes into maintaining their characters' lifestyles is set in tension with these persons' momentary efforts to lift the moods of those around them. Their characters try to use their possessions and bodies to create or demand fleeting offerings of joy or comfort. Rather than be satisfied or disappointed by what they give or receive, they keep discovering new aspects of an uncertainty about whether each such attempted exchange has been successful and about how significantly these emotional gifts affect their larger lives. Woolf introspects primarily into the process by which her characters try with varied success to apply their resurging feelings to a new context or person. Fitzgerald remains on the outside of his characters' minds, and focuses on the way their feelings are recurrently expressed within the social and material world.

The third chapter studies the immersiveness of feelings. Marcel Proust and James Baldwin explore what it would mean to try to do something with feelings that relate to enveloping sensory spaces. They ask how one nurtures such immersive feelings as potentially significant outcomes of our engagement with the world or models for how we can engage with this world further. They explore how one could try to perpetuate these feelings or satisfyingly to act on them. They also highlight the sheer effort it requires emotionally to take in or react to one's entire horizon of perception. But Proust and Baldwin also wonder how we can ever tell that any such immersive emotional experience is valuable, precise, or lasting. For both writers this preoccupation with the uncertain and unsteady relevance of immersive feelings is mediated through their simultaneous preoccupation with rooms. Both for Proust and for Baldwin rooms provide the best, perhaps even too self-flatteringly material models for how enveloping and seemingly reliable a space a feeling is able to draw us to or to discover around itself. Yet rooms also provide models for the ease with which immersive feelings are entered and exited. They showcase the constant need such feelings have for material settings to fuel and confirm themselves, the unreliability of the efforts they inspire us to apply toward the world, the paucity of such feelings' engagement with parts of the world we do not immediately sense.

The last chapter examines emotional abundance through the poetry of John Ashbery. Emotional states, as Ashbery represents them, are abundant in two interrelated senses. They are abundant, first, in the sheer number of their ongoing expressions; in the way that these expressions seem always to be vaster and greater in number than the speaker can attend to all at once. Second, they are abundant in that—rather than present the speaker merely with concepts or merely with sensations—they offer what appears to be a sensory landscape that is already suffused with its own abstract consequences and applications. Rather than represent feeling as an immediate connection or reaction to his personal history or his environment, Ashbery represents his speakers' emotional states as attempts to imagine and inhabit a landscape independent of these contexts; a landscape that the speaker seems at once to create and to fall into as his feelings' necessary corollary, one that seems to not represent but occlude and rival—or at the very least to frequently lose from sight—the context to which it would at first appear to be responding. The details Ashbery's represented environments contain seem constantly and richly to open up onto potentially universal insights; his speakers keeps encountering abstractions in what appear to be robust material forms ready to be inhabited, touched, or tested. But Ashbery also keeps showing that, in themselves, feelings are unable to turn their abundance of expression into articulable particular or universal insights. His speakers easily discard or simply forget about their disconnected momentary expressions as soon as they lose their ephemeral appeal.

My conclusion is entitled "Eyebread," taking up a phrase Walter Benjamin coined during a euphoric false revelation about pastries that he had while on hashish. I take Benjamin's reflections on altered states as a model for my research because of how well they show that, paradoxically, emotions' potential for seriousness and insight is closely related to their potential for preciosity and frivolity. I also take it as a point of departure as I propose how one could apply these questions back to the political and philosophical realms to which these literary works so unreliably and inconsistently aspire. Studying more closely the inconsistent importance and productivity of feelings can help us rearticulate both how we define the subject positions from which we conduct philosophical or political inquiry, and how we delimit the seriousness and importance of philosophy and politics in themselves. Affect theory is uniquely able to help us work toward addressing these questions, provided that—rather than try to deny the unclear importance of feelings, as it has done up till now—it embraces this lack of clarity as the defining feature of emotional experiences.

# Introduction: Amory Blaine

"He stretched out his arms to the crystalline, radiant sky. 'I know myself,' he cried, 'but that is all.'"[1]

F. Scott's Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* (1920) has had this speaker, Amory Blaine, on a wild-goose chase. Amory starts out as something out of Oscar Wilde, a younger Henry Wotton or Ernest Worthing. His means are certain, his wit daring, his sexual appeal unquestionable. But love, money, social standing, slip away one after another. His mother misallocates their funds, his Princeton degree makes him jobless, his lover turns pragmatic and marries into wealth. "The very qualities I love you for," she tells him, "are the ones that will always make you a failure."[2] Left alone, Amory falls into his inner self. It is with this plunge that the novel ends: the lines first quoted here are its last two lines. "I know myself," Amory confesses. But it is not clear what his self might be now that no one is around whom it could woo. Amory has left behind no works, tethered no person's life to his. Nor, for that matter, has he caused anyone or anything memorable harm. For all we might have seen, he is nothing but clusters of feelings that bloom or wilt with others' changing approval. He has apparently labored through nothing but these feelings' easily ignited, narcissistic sensitivity.

Walter Pater is echoed in this ending, with his swooningly corrupt Leonardo whose inner beauty feeds on and justifies "a life of brilliant sins and exquisite amusements."[3] Wilde is also still present: Amory's dramatic flourish is poised to peel off into a mask. But Fitzgerald stops short of both Pater's delighted introspection and Wilde's irony toward it. We do not reach deeper into Amory's "quickened sense of life."[4] Nor do we pull back into a social sphere that would openly mock it. Instead Fitzgerald leaves us in an intermediary space where we are made to wonder what it would take to see this ending as an incipient philosophical or political statement, either on the narrator's part or on Amory's. For the past few chapters Fitzgerald's narrator has been stressing that Amory has lost all he has ever held precious. But this narrator has also kept implying we should not pay much mind to the elations or distresses of someone as uncritically self-centered as his protagonist. The words Amory utters in this ending make him seem at once tragically clear-eyed about his losses and comically blind to how little there is to know of him as a person beyond these broken connections. To cast his distress against the "crystalline, radiant sky" seems both to indulge Amory's self-love and to set an impossibly high, condescending standard for what it would mean for this single person's anguish to matter—a standard against which any human sufferings might seem paltry.

As Amory's emotional outburst topples between appearing selfish and helpless, more and less important than its staging might make it seem, Fitzgerald keeps giving us flickers of these lines' possible significance as explorations of mourning or as social commentary. But he never lets them

[1] F. Scott Fitzgerald, *This Side of Paradise* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2005), 261.
[2] Fitzgerald, 181.
[3] Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: studies in art and poetry* (New York: Macmillan, 1903), 101.
[4] Pater, 222.

reach any clear philosophical or political payoffs. These final lines shift our attention from reasons why Amory might be pitied, admired, or scorned, to the difficulty of knowing how we might form such judgments when we are not sure toward what specifiable actions or insights the feelings he voices are capable of leading him; when all we have before us is these feelings' vehemently asserted, and tonally indeterminate, claim or aspiration to some import. Fitzgerald makes us wonder at how easily Amory can apparently take his feelings for existential insights—and at how hard it might be to decide, based on these feelings' momentary expression alone, whether or not they might be able to bear such fruit.

I want to argue that such moments of feelings' distorted or ambiguous pace, proportion, and scale—moments that divorce the sheer presence or expression of feelings from any clear insights or actions by which we could judge their relevance and productivity—are central to a major strand of modernist poetry and fiction. Critics tend to focus exclusively on modernist literature's attempts to link feelings to, or explicate them through, political or philosophical interventions that are not in themselves grounded in emotional states. My project highlights that the poets and novelists of this period also wonder how feelings could in themselves come to seem interventions into politics and philosophy—and why their political and philosophical importance turns out to be much harder to determine or sustain than it might seem at first. Literature offers a particularly striking testing ground for these questions because it transposes feelings beyond the particular individual without being able, by this same gesture, to also prove the feelings it represents to be politically or philosophically important. It provides a space for emotional expression without being able to exercise consistent power over the duration and scope of the import these represented feelings might appear to hold.

One of this project's larger aims will be to re-appreciate modernist literature and its relationship to politics and philosophy. I want to bring closer together figures such as Wallace Stevens and Sylvia Plath, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Virginia Woolf, John Ashbery and Ralph Ellison, Marcel Proust and James Baldwin. I will follow them in explorations of snobbery, preciousness, tawdriness, stickiness, slickness, lecherousness, anhedonia, and anorexia; of tea parties, deaths in the middle of parties, cut flowers, astrolabes, waves, dirt, women's hats, daddies, car crashes, bad musicians, and bodily warmth. I hope to show that these authors actively and knowingly struggle with many of the threats of emotional disproportion or self-indulgence for which later generations often criticize them. I also want to study how the models and metaphors they find for feelings' attempted paths toward productivity can help us locate and appreciate similar examinations of feeling across the whole modernist period. In a more general theoretical sense, I also want to argue that the insights these novels and poems offer into modernist debates about feeling can also enrich the current-day study of affect. They can help us reconsider the internal aims of affect theory as a discipline, as well as the ways we configure affect theory as a part of or a challenge to current-day philosophy or political theory.

Contemporary affect theory in many ways continues what Michel Foucault has called "local" critique, and what the Frankfurt School describes as critical theory.[5] Local critique as Foucault defines it is grounded in a belief that philosophical and political interventions of any sort are necessarily bound to a specific time and place. Such interventions are insightful or productive to the extent that they acknowledge their own boundedness and do not seek transcendental or universal

[5] Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976* (New York: Picador, 2003), 7-10; see also Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1996).

validity. In choosing feelings or affects for their objects, affect theorists can be seen to not only follow prior theorists' commitment to locality and temporariness, but also to take this commitment to a new level—finding an even smaller and apparently more modest set of limits within which our subjectivities and environments can be challenged or made more intelligible. One can further trace this commitment to local critique in affect theorists' particular preoccupation with historically specific feelings, or with feelings that these theorists describe as minor; with kinds of feeling that we might typically think of as marginal to our experience, so marginal that we might not even have names for them or might habitually treat them merely as incomplete or less valuable versions of feelings we are more familiar with. Lauren Berlant has thus most recently highlighted a minor feeling she calls "cruel optimism."[6] Anne-Lise Francois defines and draws attention to the vaguely passive-aggressive feelings that produce and accompany open secrets.[7] Sianne Ngai draws attention to what she calls "ugly feelings," and has also more recently argued for the contemporary pervasiveness of affects such as "zaniness" or "cuteness."[8] Heather Love articulates the distinction between productive sadness and non-recuperable melancholia and highlights the historical importance of the latter feeling to fin-de-siècle queer communities.[9] On the margins of these local investigations affect theory attempts to refine the distinctions we make among different emotional states, whether we do so on the basis of their particular expressions or on the basis of their relationship to our self-awareness. Its theorists have sought to draw distinctions between anger and resentment; between sadness and melancholia; between passions, affects, and emotions; between moods and feelings. The purpose of these definitions is, again, not any strict typology but an increased sense of locality and fragmentation; an appreciation not of how clearly various kinds of feeling or affect connect to each other, but how confusing it is to fall in and out of a variety of such states, and how much each of these states reorients or subverts the course and scope of our attention.

Affect theory has sought not merely to attend to these fragmented, minor, ephemeral states, but also to articulate why they should become objects of larger scrutiny alongside more familiar loci of political or philosophical critique. For most scholars working in the field, the turn to affect promises new kinds and levels of critical political or philosophical insight. Affects subvert in new and unexpected ways our conventional notions of proper political or philosophical takeaways, as well as our understanding of ourselves as subjects and of our personal values. In his introduction to *The Particulars of Rapture*, Charles Altieri describes this many-sidedly subversive role of affects as follows:

> [Recent philosophical and critical] work has made us aware of the many ways in which the emotions, if not all of the affects, complement reason by establishing salience and by constituting versions of value that ground private interests in shared cultural concerns. However, this work now seems to me to be fostering an intellectual culture where this new love affair between the passions and reason produces as part of love's blindness an inability to appreciate the differences that attracted them to each other in the first place. Most American philosophers and social theorists tend to dwell only on those aspects of our affective lives that complement reason. As a result we lose sight of both the danger in and the appeal of affective states that generate values resistant to reason's authority. And, even

[6] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2011).
[7] Anne-Lise Francois, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2008).
[8] Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004); Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2012).
[9] Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2007).

> more important, we are coming to depend on concepts of agency that severely reduce the many channels of mental activity fundamental to subjective life, so that we end up honoring only a very limited range of values possible.[10]

*The Particulars of Rapture* seeks to renew our awareness of, to use Altieri's language, emotions' "appeal" and "danger." Altieri aims to show that we often prize emotions for the complexly satisfying state they momentarily put us in, and not for any long-term value or public good we might already know or suspect them to foster. "There are many self-dramatizing possibilities within affective life that tend to establish their own rewards and to be difficult to reconcile with efforts at rational assessment."[11] Altieri takes Proust's Swann as a central example. "Suspicious of ordinary love talk as mere illusion dignifying biological impulses, Swann requires a theater for his erotic concerns that acknowledges how much they depend on the imagination while also preventing his making that fact the basis for cynicism about the entire process. … Jealous passion here does not overcome reason; it finesses reason so as to win for itself a more capacious immediacy."[12] Altieri celebrates feelings' delighted, delightful solipsism. He celebrates ways in which feelings can divorce us from what we consider objective truths or values, and even from our long-term plans for how we should present ourselves to others. The community before which Swann embarrasses himself thus becomes not a court of social judgment, but a personal "theater" in which to act out arabesques of passion. In terms similar to Altieri's, Svetlana Boym finds in nostalgia a way to broaden and refine our sense of the past, to reconnect our history to individual lives and material settings as opposed to their larger, frequently stereotypical social narratives.[13] Inverting Altieri's argument but giving feelings an analogous causal prominence, Philip Fisher claims that the experience of passion grounds the structure of our current notions of justice and our juridical systems by creating the need for a well-delimited space in which anger and resentment can be channeled and controlled.[14]

Affect theorists more closely bound to the legacies of poststructuralism and critical theory put Altieri's point even more strongly. For them emotions are always vehicles of potential political and philosophical work: the work of decentering hegemonies, overcoming false appearances, destabilizing the seemingly self-identical subject. To insist that each expressed feeling needs to define its political or philosophical stakes upfront is for these critics to blind ourselves to unexpected ways in which feelings might become politically or philosophically significant moment by moment, and to the productive insights such surprises might bring. Rei Terada and several other recent theorists such as Sianne Ngai, Lauren Berlant, or Brian Massumi have argued that much of poststructuralist and post-Marxist political and philosophical theory has always implicitly been a theory of feeling—of emotional experience as (in Terada's phrasing) "nonsubjective experience in the form of self-difference with cognition."[15] Terada believes that even textuality is beloved by poststructuralists primarily because it maps out the work of emotion, and showcases emotion's philosophical and political potential. "Textuality plays in poststructuralist theory the double role that expression plays in philosophy, being both a means of representing emotion and an explanatory scheme of the operation of emotion. Textuality, in other words—and differance, its dynamic force—models

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[10] Altieri, *The Particulars of Rapture*, 4.
[11] Altieri, *The Particulars of Rapture*, 17.
[12] Altieri, *The Particulars of Rapture*, 23.
[13] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).
[14] Philip Fisher, *The Vehement Passions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2002).
[15] Rei Terada, *Feeling in Theory: Emotion After 'the Death of the Subject'* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2001), 3. See also Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*; Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*; Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2002).

Derridean emotion."[16] These scholars therefore seek to broaden our awareness of feelings and actively to use them as forms of critique or tools of political engagement. As Berlant puts it in her interview for *Qui Parle*, "while one can't intend an affect, one can become attentive to the nimbus of affects whose dynamics move along and make worlds, situations, and environments, and in attending to, representing, and standing for these alternative modes of being, provide new infrastructures for extending their potential to new planes of convergence. I hope!"[17]

These affirmations of affect echo eighteenth-century sentimentalism but sharply depart from it in that postmodern thought never allows one to reach either a natural state of feeling or a state of perfect affective social harmony. The labor of feeling and of attending to feelings, thus understood, can always be productive for each individual and everyone around her because it keeps subverting the naïve realism that makes it seem as if the objects before us, and our own selves, were something we can coherently represent and relate to. It thus keeps giving us the potential to expand our ongoing political and philosophical investigations and dialogues. Thus, for Sianne Ngai, seemingly minor or petty affects such as zaniness or cuteness can become 'aesthetic categories' through which our everyday experience can be rethought and reconceptualized. Brian Massumi praises the experience of affect in its Deleuzian "intensity," by which he means its uncontrollable and unconscious emergence within our bodies. This experience is, for him, our most reliable path toward understanding how we come about our values and what they are.[18] Lee Edelman argues that it is possible and defensible to orient our lives around short-term impulses rather than around feelings that are nurtured and sustained over long periods of time.[19]

In the argument that follows, I want to emphasize with Altieri the degree to which feelings can detach us from or even blind us to what ought conventionally to be the most important objects of our attention. But I also want to think about ways in which celebratory statements such as Altieri's are of course philosophical, and political, in according the individual a dignity and relevance within his ephemeral affective experiences that I do not think can be taken for granted (and that modernists in particular do not take for granted). Rather than merely gloss over or abandon the objects and contexts feelings can temporary foreshorten or obscure, I want to follow modernist representations of how confusing and humiliating it is to rediscover these objects and contexts after the feeling that dismissed them has subsided or shifted focus. Swann is one of the figures that will help me think about these confusions and humiliations because he is not just a lover but also a snob. And he becomes more and more of a snob, Proust's narrator tells us, the more theatrical self-appreciation his love comes to require. Swann sheds his Jockey Club elegance, which he used to wear so lightly, for "the most naïve snobbery" that makes him heavy-handedly court men and women far beyond his own station but slightly above his beloved Odette's.[20] To the narrator's father and his friends this makes Swann "pestilent." "Swann, with his ostentation, his habit of crying aloud from the house-tops the names of everyone he knew, however slightly, was a vulgar show-off whom the Marquis de Norpois would be sure to dismiss as—to use his own epithet—a 'pestilent' fellow."[21] Proust's narrator is not so judgmental but he is also not awed. He observes Swann like an exotic bird

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[16] Terada, 45.

[17] Lauren Berlant and Jordan Greenwald, "Affect in the End Times: A Conversation with Lauren Berlant," *Qui Parle* 20.2 (2012): 88.

[18] Massumi, 1-5.

[19] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2004).

[20] Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Modern Library, 2003), II.2.

[21] Proust, II.1.

or vegetable whose metamorphoses are comically, vulnerably out of place in a world that frequently, unpredictably refuses to be for Swann the kind of theater his vanity needs. And even as this spectacle helps the narrator explore the neediness with which he similarly seeks others' approval, it does so at a cost to Swann himself, in a way that constantly undermines the dignity of his suffering. It is in this still uncomfortable, not quite respectable emotional thicket, rather than in the more honorable clearing contemporary affect theory seeks to provide for the whimsically emotional self, that I want to meet the modernist characters and lyric subjects I will study.

Much of my argument also accepts and relies on the way poststructuralist affect theorists show that the process of feeling keeps limiting and unsettling our ability stably to remain in or to think through any single subjective perspective. At the same time, I am more interested—and I believe that modernist literature is often more interested—not simply in finding links between the process of feeling and early or mid-twentieth-century notions of productive political or philosophical critique, but in exploring how the particular kinds of imprecision, blurriness, vacillation, and narrowness of vision emotional experiences involve are in fact quite distinct from and often positively disruptive of the self-conscious sense of limits to which, for early and mid-twentieth-century theorists, insightful and productive critical interventions should aspire. I want to follow my chosen modernist writers in wondering how one can ever manage to connect emotional states with vaguely or unreliably construed political or philosophical potentials to works, statements, and actions with precise and powerful political or philosophical effects. And, indeed, in wondering how and why we often make such connections very unreliably and inconsistently. The emotional states with which I want to linger do not yet yield ready material for serious self-diagnosis or political action. It remains unclear for whom they could be relevant, and for how long; whether it would be better for the person experiencing them and others if she kept them to herself or if she shared them.

Through my engagement with my chosen modernist poets and novelists, I want to suggest that it has been a mistake on the part of affect theorists in general to believe that the aim of this field—or the main reason for its contemporary importance—is or should be the defense of feelings as sources of local insight or productive action in continuity with prior theories of philosophical or political critique. My chosen novels and poems showcase that the study of feeling, emotion, or affect might offer a central and unexpected contribution to philosophy and politics precisely by helping us recognize ways in which emotional states are inconsistently reliable grounds for intervening into such larger realms, or even for achieving personal self-understanding. Rather than seek to defend an idealized notion of these states' capacity to be philosophical or political, affect theory can help us think about what it is like to engage in philosophy or politics without having that kind of consistent trust in the importance of one's feelings, or in one's ability to describe or keep to these feelings' apparently most insightful or relevant scope and limit. Instead of helping us directly to make particular political and philosophical interventions, affect theory can help us consider why and how we define the proper limits of local political or philosophical insights, and what happens to such insights when these limits are abandoned. Instead of helping us affirm the important subversive value of individual affective self-exploration and self-expression, affect theory can help us consider what it is like to be a subject whose feelings seem in turns to be more largely or more narrowly important, more or less immediately productive, in a way that cannot be predicted or managed quite consistently.

To work toward this larger theoretical end I categorize the emotional states my chosen writers represent based on the kinds of qualities that modernists attribute to feelings as at once tempting and unreliable sources of political action or philosophical insight. These qualities include their whimsicality, their portability, their immersiveness, and their abundance. I will use terms such

as affect, emotion, feeling, mood, etc.—as well as names of various types of feelings, such as disgust, joy, anger, etc.—more or less interchangeably, taking terms such as "feeling" or "emotional state" to mean a potentially wide variety of affective experiences. This is not because I do not believe such distinctions cannot be made but because these kinds of distinctions are not relevant to the problems I will study. My aim is not to differentiate among different kinds of affective experiences based on their contexts or momentary degrees of reflexivity, but to ask how we set or lift the distinction between emotional states as mere components of our experience and emotional states as trustworthy forms of understanding or guides of productive action. These questions can be asked of experiences that we describe as passions equally so as of experiences that we describe as affects, emotions, or moods; of experiences that we describe as joy equally so as of experiences that we describe as anger. Asking the kinds of questions I want to pose also shows how little designating an experience as an emotion or an affect, as joy or as anger, can in itself tell us about this experience's ongoing or potential political or philosophical uses, or about its reliability in such realms.

Modernism is famously the hotbed of what later twentieth-century scholars will describe as temporally and spatially bounded notions of politics and philosophy. The science, philosophy, politics, and psychology of this period are based self-consciously on premises of their own fragmentariness, incompleteness, and subjective partisanship—on principles of multiperspectivalism and subversiveness out of which mid-twentieth-century notions of scientific, political, and philosophical relativism as well as local political or philosophical critique gradually emerge.

But throughout both early and late modernism there is also a pronounced gap between the sense of insightfulness philosophers and scientists more readily attribute to relativity or locality in perception and conceptual thought, and the much more negative or uncomfortable associations this period's society has with the relativity or locality of feelings. Feelings come into play in modernism, as both inspirations and obstacles of this period's political and philosophical thought, not because they provide models of sharply self-conscious relativist perspectives, or of a fine attunement to particular social or political contexts, but because they offer examples and symptoms of how badly one's consciousness is often attuned to these particular contexts and perspectives; of how easily one can lose one's sense of the proper objects and proportions of one's perception or action.

This sense of doubt and worry about feelings can be traced both in modernist history and in the philosophy this period's thinkers articulate. Historians who look back on modernism find total war—the Civil War, the Great War, the Second World War—to trigger unprecedented worries about emotional proportion and seriousness in Western society at large. As Drew Gilpin Faust explains in *This Republic of Suffering*, during the Civil War experiences of grief transform from a familial concern into a public issue. Faust shows that American society overtly ponders and debates this new, more communal concern with feeling. "Such a consecration of the nation's power and resources to a *sentiment*, the world has never witnessed," says the American preacher Edmund B. Whitman in his "Remarks on National Cemeteries (1896)," which is one of the sources she quotes.[22] Faust also draws attention to the urgency with which the Civil War opens up questions of proper emotional proportion. The conflict kills four percent of America's population. Bodies lie unmarked and uncounted; then they are painfully sought out, identified, and mourned. Faust argues that these experiences make American society doubt its sense of decorum and sensitivity. "Where, then, is the proper limit?" Joseph Cross asks in a widely circulated funeral sermon "On Grief" that Faust uncovers.[23] How much emotion should one spend on each individual death? How intensely should

[22] Quoted in Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering* (New York: Knopf, 2008), 211.
[23] Faust, 166.

one feel for those whom one did not know but whose corpses one sees in the papers? And how to cope with one's growing numbness even to tragedies that hit one directly?

It is new, and confusing, Faust argues, to be making these calculi on such drastically changing scales or to feel one's body make them despite oneself. Faust juxtaposes writers who try to make individuals' grief resonate outward as much as possible—creating shared fantasy spaces of heightened, socially universalized emotion—against those who remind their readers of how discomfitingly self-enclosed and powerless feelings of loss inevitably are. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, whom she quotes, imagines a grief so overwhelming that it recreates the exact intensity of the loss it mourns, making this loss palpable to the victim's entire community (and perhaps, by sympathetic extension, to Longfellow's reading public). "The fatal bullet went speeding forth / Till it reached a town in the distant North / Till it reached a house in the sunny street / Till it reached a heart that ceased to beat / Without a murmur, without a cry / … / And the neighbors wondered that she should die."[24] The grief of Longfellow's poem is so poignant that it melts down traditional elegiac form. We are not working through sadness but merely remarking on its ravages, imagining not a world that struggles back toward stillness but one that lets itself be remolded and even destroyed by grief. Mark Twain's "Extract from Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven," so inflammatory that his wife forbade him to print it, brutally deflates such "lugubrious earnestness."[25] Captain Stormfield dies in the Civil War and goes to heaven. As Faust retells it, "Twain's hero had trouble managing his angel wings and flew so badly that he regularly collided with others. Stormfield was also startled to discover that the overwhelming proportion of American angels were in fact Indians, not white men, for Indians had been dying in the New World and accumulating in the American section of heaven for centuries."[26] Twain is being satirical, of course, but the question he raises is not trivial. He shows both the importance emotion has acquired and its continued inability to assume the power his readers might want it to have. We can create a whole heaven out of grief, with complex systems of social rewards and judgments. But what our heavens and hells keep showing us might be not divine revelation but a grand replica of our paltry grieving selves, of the painfully but also comically awkward efforts we keep making to reshape the world around what we know.

In Europe this confusion about feelings' proper weight and stakes gathers most intensely around the experience not of mourning families but of soldiers themselves, and around the gap between those who participated in warfare and those who did not. The Great War breeds jokes that are too costly for their flourish. One case in point, cited by Paul Fussell, is "Captain Nevill, a company commander in the 8th East Surreys." The captain "bought four footballs, one for each platoon. … He offered a prize to the platoon which, at the jump-off, first kicked its football up to the German front line."[27] The war also gives rise, Fussell shows, to emotional transitions that should take much time and effort but take hardly any at all: "one officer on leave, observed by Arnold Bennett in 1917, 'had breakfasted in the trenches and dined in his club in London.'"[28]

Above all, the war throws out of proportion individuals' struggles to cope with its horrors. To the shell-shocked, flashbacks still carry the urgency of life-threatening combat. But others see these feelings return in discordantly trivial contexts that make them seem merely issues of self-management. Elaine Showalter elaborates on this paradox in *The Female Malady*. Freudian ways of

[24] Faust, 143.
[25] Faust, 196.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford UP, 1975), 27.
[28] Fussell, 64.

coping with shell shock are humiliating because they scale down war's intense, manly work to the emasculating labors of unearthing feelings. "It was as if there was a tacit understanding we were all failures," recalls Siegfried Sassoon in a passage she quotes.[29] Attempts to match the initial shock's intensity are spectacularly futile as care or as science. Showalter recounts that "one of [Yealland's] patients, a twenty-three-year-old who had spent six months in the trenches near the Somme, choked and twitched continually, and dreamed of blood and being near and exploding mine. … After ten minutes of strong electric shocks he had stopped what Yealland called his 'silly noises.' That night he dreamed no more of blood and mines. He 'dreamt that he was having electrical therapy in the trenches.' Yealland considered the therapy a success."[30]

Many modernist thinkers position themselves toward emotional states with a similar combination of fascination and mistrust. For—among others—Sigmund Freud, William James, Henri Bergson, John Dewey, W.E.B. DuBois, Bertrand Russell, and G.E. Moore, feelings rise to prominence not as the goal of their inquiries, but as the stuff one has to wade through or whip into shape before one reaches this goal. They are signs that a new kind of philosophy, psychology, and politics are needed in order to resolve conceptual and sensory tangles early twentieth-century society does not as yet have the tools to deal with. But in themselves they are not the kinds of new perspectives or kinds of attention that modernists glean from sensory experience or conceptual thought. T.J. Clark describes modernist philosophy and politics as a twin dream of introspective "privacy, obscurity, and autonomy, and … history inhabiting that condition."[31] But as Clark goes on to point out, and as many modernist thinkers overtly suggest, this dream can be achieved not by following individual's inner feelings but by replacing what are currently just inner affective experiences with forms of greater intellectual and sensory precision and acuity; not merely by expressing any kinds of introspective content, but by finding means of making its current confusion and blurriness clearer and more intelligible, and thus more readily amenable to interpersonal sharing and application. In themselves, emotional states are ungainly, blundering, thoughtless, and chaotic. They are disproportionate and imprecise in their attempts to locate their origins and their objects. One can achieve clear, innovative thinking and social prosperity not by following feelings but by trying to retrace by more rigorous intellectual or sensory means the contexts and causal chains to which they so awkwardly and unreliably gesture; by treating them not as diagnoses but as confused symptoms of local areas of social or personal knowledge and perception that require further sensory or conceptual work. In this sense, emotions are both obstacles and gateways.

These tensions between modernists' fascination with feelings and mistrust of them are well showcased by Karl Marx as, in 1846, he proclaims the decay of Hegelianism. "Certainly it is an interesting event we are dealing with: the putrescence of the absolute spirit."[32] In response to this putrescence of total systems of social thought Marx urges his readers to study individuals' inchoate emotional states. He shows that the working class wilts and struggles in frustrated, pained feelings: intimations of unfairness without concepts to frame it, longings for a new system without the system itself. These feelings are the highest consciousness they can currently have of their oppression. "The dominion of the objective being in me, the sensuous outburst of my essential activity, is emotion, which thus becomes here the activity of my being…. Man as objective, sensuous being is therefore a

[29] Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (London: Virago, 1987), 185.
[30] Showalter, 178.
[31] T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1999), 225.
[32] Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 147.

suffering being—and because he feels what he suffers, a passionate being."[33] Feelings mete out the arduousness of workers' labor and make this labor's strain present to them minute by minute. But their inwardness is also a sign that workers have not yet reached the kind of self-understanding that would lead them to unalienated self-expression through action. Feelings' outward impotence in fact positively obscures their daily productivity and their potential for social influence and power. Marx compares workers' longing for inaccessible bourgeois objects to unrequited love. "If you love without evoking love in return—that is, if your loving as loving does not produce reciprocal love; if through a living expression of yourself as a loving being you do not make yourself a loved person, then your love is impotent—a misfortune."[34] Yet, he adds, the bourgeois objects that the proletariat is made powerlessly to covet are products of workers' own hands and energies. If workers only knew this, their longings could instantly turn into deeds and commands. The false appearance of their emotions' powerlessness would vanish. The world they feel unloved by would need to yield the returns they rightly deserve.

Similar gestures are to be found in the works of many other early and mid-twentieth-century thinkers. Freudian psychoanalysis, of course, finds languages for tortuously expressed feelings so as to calm them. For James emotions are immediate bodily reactions whose energies can be re-channeled to fuel the growth of pragmatic thought. "When we teach children to repress their emotional talk and display, it is not that they may feel more—quite the reverse. It is that they may think more."[35] Dewey desires a democratic dialogue that acknowledges individual feelings in order to then curb them into collectively acceptable decisions and policies. DuBois sees racial inequality in America as, at root, caused by American society's refusal to acknowledge the validity of black men and women's suffering. To understand and properly respond to African Americans' trials we need to study and translate into action the pitches, rhythms, and stresses with which they express their feelings. "The Negro folk-song—the rhythmic cry of the slave—… has been neglected, it has been, and is, half despised, and above all it has been persistently mistaken and misunderstood; but notwithstanding, it still remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people."[36] For Russell liberal social systems arise when analytic reason combs out constructive feelings from destructive ones. "The evils that men inflict on each other, and by reflection upon themselves, have their main source in evil passions rather than in ideas or beliefs."[37] Bergson sees feelings (which he bulks with pain and all other local bodily affects) as fatiguing internal efforts that obstruct intuition but can thus also make us aware of our struggle toward it. "Affection is not the primary matter of which perception is made; it is rather the impurity with which perception is alloyed."[38] G.E. Moore values emotions as necessary components of any ethical experiences. But for him they are desirable only when tethered to appropriate objects and guided by a well-educated intellect. "What value should we attribute to the proper emotion excited by hearing Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, if that emotion were entirely unaccompanied by any consciousness, either of the notes, or of the melodic and harmonic relations among them?"[39] All these other elements need to be properly in place if the emotion they spark is to be valuable. "[I]f we consider

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[33] Marx, 91; 116.
[34] Marx, 105.
[35] William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Dover, 1950), vol. 1, 466.
[36] W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin, 1989), 205.
[37] Bertrand Russell, *Unpopular Essays* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1950), 147.
[38] Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and Scott Palmer (New York: Macmillan, 1912), 31.
[39] G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (New York: Dover, 2004), 192.

what value this emotional element would have, existing by itself, we can hardly think that it has any value, even if it has any at all."[40]

Even as they plan forward—toward communism, democracy, mental health, inner revelation, or liberalism—these thinkers and other members of their societies engage in partial, intermediary ways of circumscribing and reining in the not quite productively effortful, persistently emotional selves whom they still have on their hands or who they fear they might themselves be; selves that cannot properly bear the weight of the theories associated with them, but that also keep eagerly reaching for these grander realms. While such more immediate, temporary attempts at harnessing feelings are never at the center of these thinkers' works, they seem to give form to many of their immediate stylistic practices or digressive injunctions. These digressions and details of style do not in themselves resolve the problem of feelings' persistence as confused and blurry partial motivations or guides of their thought. But they do start to show that one of the more striking and persistent problems that modernist thinkers' double attitude toward feelings raises is how one is to distinguish between feelings whose potential contexts or triggers deserve more extensive philosophical or political investigation, and feelings whose contexts and triggers are irrelevant and petty; how one is to determine whether any particular emotional tangle to which one devotes one's attention should be seen as a symptom of a genuine social or philosophical problem, or as an unnecessary expenditure of mental energy that had best merely be discarded or dismissed.

Some, such as William James and Bertrand Russell, respond to this uncertain value of any particular feeling to which they devote attention by purposefully lightening their tone. They warn their readers not to take too seriously the as-yet-unproductive feelings whose potential relevance they seek and try to ground. James' *Principles of Psychology* (1895) is a sweeping work of philosophy and psychology. Yet it is peppered with jokes, especially at the expense of the inner labors that are its subject matter. James' subjects are often awkward or naïve children. Or else they are adults who miss trains, bump into passers-by, and spend hours trying to get out of bed (they finally rise because they momentarily forget how much they did not want to). His aesthetes are effetely dainty ("*Rien ne me choque*")[41] and his peasants are endearingly earnest. "What self-abne*gation*!" a rustic couple exclaims at Titian's *Assumption*. James comments: "Their honest hearts had been kept warm all this time by a glow of spurious sentiment that would have fairly made old Titian sick."[42] When, in his chapter on "Will," James makes one of his grandest philosophical statements, he instantly turns its grandeur into half-mockery: "He [the heroic man] can *stand* this Universe."[43] Effort, he then goes on to say—even the effort of our daily survival—is just one of our subjective affections. It can be registered internally but cannot be scientifically measured. Its moment-by-moment intensity depends not on the outward glory of our choices—which is what others rightly judge us for—but on inward emotional attachments and resistances among which we struggle for focus. It is useless or at best pitiful, James claims, to think too hard about the loneliness of these internal efforts, or to ask others to value us on their basis. And there is nothing worse than persons who attend to their feelings relentlessly without pausing to act on some of them. "There is no more contemptible type of human character than that of the nerveless sentimentalist and dreamer, who spends his life in a weltering sea of sensibility and emotion, but who never does a manly concrete deed."[44]

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[40] Moore, 190.
[41] James, vol. 2, 473.
[42] James, vol. 2, 474.
[43] James, vol. 2, 578.
[44] James, vol. 1, 125.

Bertrand Russell applies a similar comic lightness to his own philosophical authority. When asked to make grand pronouncements, he often cracks glib jokes about feelings. "Philosophy," he says, "has been defined as 'an unusually obstinate attempt to think clearly;' I should define it rather as 'an unusually ingenious attempt to think fallaciously.'"[45] He elaborates. "To the completely unintellectual, general doctrines are unimportant; to the man of science, they are hypotheses to be tested by experiment; while to the philosopher they are mental habits which must be justified somehow if he is to find life endurable."[46] Russell exaggerates his own emotional needs and reactions to the point of caricature: "G.H. Hardy told me once that if he could find a proof that I was going to die in five minutes he would of course be sorry to lose me, but this sorrow would be quite outweighed by the pleasure in the proof. I entirely sympathized with him and was not at all offended."[47] He just as exaggeratingly reminds his readers how shocking others have found his interests. "[My love of philosophy] pained my grandmother, who alluded to my investigation of the foundations of geometry as 'the life you have been leading.'"[48] There is to these quips—as to his definition of philosophy—an implicit pride in what could be called emotional stamina: stamina in withstanding average opinions and remaining true to his emotional landscape. Yet Russell praises this stamina so coyly that he also seems to question whether any serious mental undertaking could rise and fall just with this effort's self-important intensity.

Other thinkers respond to these hesitations about emotional productivity and proportion by either stressing or challenging the boundaries between potentially productive feelings and unquestionably unproductive ones. Bergson's philosophy gives great value to intense feelings of inner effort or self-conflict. To reach understanding, one needs to refuse to define oneself and others through easy causal chains and habits: to "rid" one's inner self of "the intrusion of the sensible world and, in a word, … the obsession of the idea of space."[49] This process of self-liberation through introspection requires "strenuous effort of reflection."[50] Feelings are not the objects of this process, but they guide it before our intuition has clarified. We know we are making spiritual progress by how intensely introspection feels like a struggle: "you will thus obtain a vision … fatiguing perhaps for your imagination, but pure, and free from all that the exigencies of life compel you to add to it in external perception."[51] It is also by the felt difficulty of this struggle that we can measure the greatness of the human mind as such, and the depths down to which we have to sound it: "the higher the consciousness, the stronger is this tension of its own duration in relation to that of things."[52]

Against these serious inner states and their felt effort Bergson juxtaposes unserious ones, and the kinds of feelings or passions that guide them. We probably are on the right philosophical path when we feel internally strained and conflicted. Conversely we know that we are going astray when we feel too mentally relaxed, or when someone else's laxity entertains us too easily. Laughter exposes failures of introspection in ourselves and in others. It is funny to notice inner states and their expressions that come from absent- or narrow-mindedness: as when a person's greed is so consuming that anything will make her think of money, or when someone keeps pouring coffee into an overflowing cup. Laughter itself and the pleased feelings that accompany it are also just bodily

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[45] Russell, *Unpopular Essays*, 45.
[46] Russell, *Unpopular Essays*, 46.
[47] Bertrand Russell, *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 29.
[48] Russell, *Basic Writings*, 19.
[49] Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will* (New York: Dover, 2001), 224.
[50] Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 233.
[51] Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 113-114.
[52] Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics* (New York: Dover, 2007), 71.

reflexes. They come not from deep meditation but from impulses as indiscriminate as the ones they are meant to expose and curb. As such they have some superficial social value but no value at all as sources of philosophy or insight, and had best be avoided just as the similarly shallow acts they react to. "Laughter punishes certain failings somewhat as disease punishes certain forms of excess, striking down some who are innocent and sparing some who are guilty, aiming at a general result and incapable of dealing separately with each separate case. And so it is with everything that comes to pass by natural means instead of happening by conscious reflection."[53]

Bergson's descriptions of these wastes of time—automatisms, impulses and the feelings they spark—of course bring Freud to mind. Much of Freud's psychology depends on challenging strict distinctions between important feelings and banal ones. Rather than dismiss trivial mistakes or our reactions to them as distracted and silly, Freud claims that these unselfconsciously expressed sparks of anger, fear, delight, or longing should be taken seriously precisely because they seem to occur as a release from conscious effort. They thus express hidden attitudes we would have otherwise not acknowledged: "such a rage against one's own integrity and one's own life can be hidden behind apparently accidental awkwardness and motor insufficiency."[54] For Freud the reason why we know so little about our psychological makeup is because we tend to dismiss many smaller expressions of our mental states as accidents. Yet "there is nothing arbitrary or undetermined in the psychic life"; and to study why each of our seemingly banal feelings finds expression in the context that it does, and what kind of satisfaction it seeks, is to progress toward an understanding of our entire minds as such.[55] The insistence of both Bergson's and Freud's claims about what kinds of feelings can guide us toward knowledge, and the degree to which both their arguments hinge on our trust in those claims, are all the more striking given that their respective definitions of potentially relevant feelings contradict each other so directly.

Especially toward the end of modernism, such tensions also inspire a broader mistrust of any kind of politics or philosophy that chimes too well with our immediate emotional impulses. This mistrust finds one of its most prominent expressions in Hannah Arendt's 1963 *New Yorker* reports on the Eichmann trial. Arendt mistrusts emotions even of the moral sort: they are too pleasurable. "It is quite gratifying to feel guilty if you haven't done anything wrong: how noble!"[56] She is dismayed by the hair-trigger sensitivity both of the party tried and of those putting him on trial. Eichmann has endless potential to be "elated" by any connection between himself and a grand social norm or duty. "Whenever, during the cross-examination, the judges tried to appeal to his conscience, they were met with 'elation,' and they were outraged as well as disconcerted when they learned that the accused had at his disposal a different elating cliché for each period of his life and each of his activities."[57] During the war he repeatedly expressed delight at how many persons he has sent to gas chambers. And now that the war is over, he is delighted that his death might serve as a dramatic lesson for humanity. "In his mind, there was no contradiction between 'I will jump into my grave laughing,' appropriate for the end of the war, and 'I shall gladly hang myself in public as a warning example for all anti-Semites on this earth,' which now, under vastly different circumstances, fulfilled exactly the same function of giving him a lift."[58] His prosecutors let their diction be carried

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[53] Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (New York: Macmillan, 1911), 70.
[54] Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud* (New York: Random House, 1938), 127.
[55] Freud, *Psychopathology*, 142.
[56] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A report on the banality of evil* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 229.
[57] Arendt, 48.
[58] Ibid.

away by pain and anger. They repeatedly try to turn this one bureaucrat's trial into a trial of anti-Semitism as such. Arendt applauds the judges who at first try to curb these prosecutors' diction (though they will cave in during the verdict). "In an obvious rebuff to the prosecution, [the judges] said explicitly that sufferings on so gigantic a scale were 'beyond human understanding,' a matter for 'great authors and poets,' and did not belong in a courtroom, whereas the deeds and motives that had caused them were neither beyond understanding nor beyond judgment."[59]

The terrible truth that neither of these emotionally charged sides wants to acknowledge, as Arendt sees it, is that Eichmann is neither a hero nor a degenerate. He is a ridiculously self-involved, banal person. "Despite all the efforts of the prosecution, everybody could see that this man was not a 'monster,' but it was difficult indeed not to suspect that he was a clown." The reason why no one else remarks on this is because of how unserious and ineffectual it would make the whole trial seem. "Since this suspicion would have been fatal to the whole enterprise, and was also rather hard to sustain in view of the sufferings he and his like had caused to millions of people, his worst clowneries were hardly noticed and almost never reported."[60] Arendt keeps emphasizing that emotions are simply not valid parts of political judgments. She believes that the trial keeps taking comic turns not because righteous feelings are being made light of, but because—on both sides—they are being taken too seriously.

I single out these fragments from James, Russell, Bergson, Freud, and Arendt, to showcase both how cursory their engagements with feelings' unreliable importance are—how easily they are reduced to features of these writers' style or personality—and how much of an unease they showcase about disproportionate or fragmented feelings among some of the very thinkers from whose commitment to relativism and critical theory contemporary affect theorists take their cue. The process of feeling is not, for any of these thinkers, continuous with the process of philosophical and political critique. If anything, feelings constantly threaten to limit these theories' and interventions' astuteness and scope. A feeling's immediate sense of urgency can make one mistake a narrow insight for a potentially larger one; it can lead one to misrecognize the objects of one's scrutiny or to divert one's attention to inappropriate ones. What these thinkers' emphases on the locality and limitedness of individual perspectives seek to achieve is not to follow feelings' immediate tones and scopes but to refashion or curtail them; not to increase but to diminish these emotional states' direct influence on the kinds and scopes of conclusions their writings reach.

But these writers' recurrent mentions of feelings also remind one how difficult it is to speak of local or temporary perspectives and experiences without invoking emotional states as markers and components that make these perspectives and experiences local and temporary in the first place. Their evocations of feelings recall—in a way that echoes the conclusions of the historians whom I quoted earlier in this introduction—the high degree to which modernists do rely on emotional states to determine what new areas of their experience they should attend to as potential objects of new political or philosophical interventions, and within what initial temporal and spatial bounds these interventions will need to be made. I do not want to claim that these philosophers consciously make these larger hypotheses, or that the rhetorical moves I highlighted here could alone suffice to explore them. But I will try to show that a significant strand of modernist literature is highly aware of these troubling tensions between the process of feeling and the local philosophical and political interventions that are supposed, at once, to be guided by feelings and to oppose them; between the a feeling's immediate, more or less important scopes or objects, and the potential importance or relevance of insights to which it can lead.

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[59] Arendt, 193.

[60] Arendt, 49.

The history of modernist literature is famously, as Michael Levenson puts it, "a history of oppositions, disproportions and asymmetries, a history of distinctions drawn and then dramatized. … Apostles of freedom contended with guardians of order, realists with abstractionists, skeptics with dogmatists, subjectivists with antihumanists.[61] These explosive tensions come, in great part, from the divergence of means and standards by which modernists try to establish their works' relevance. Modernist writers argue whether literature should most insistently model itself on philosophy, politics, or science; whether the best path toward politically valuable literature is to give voice to marginalized particulars or to create a depersonalized abstract language unfettered by individual interests; whether art should be made for the sake of society or in defiance of it; whether the most scientific way to represent consciousness is to emphasize the regularity of social types or the small details of a particularly sensitive self's stream of thought; what kind of psychology or psychoanalysis should best be followed to represent our introspective selves. Contemporary scholars usually weigh modernist literature's successes and failures by casting it against some of these standards. They study ways in which modernist literature is able to model the more abstract or more practical systems of thought by which it is inspired. They also debate the extent to which and the means by which literary works are able to make original philosophical or political interventions into how we understand society or consciousness, or art's own status within these realms.

In the political vein, Mary Lynn Broe, Susan Stanford Friedman, and Bonnie Kime Scott explore modernism as a battleground among different views of social gender roles, as well as among rival gendered views of what constitutes literature's social value.[62] They chronicle women writers' marginalization for what was seen as their weakness or preciosity, but what they defend as politically radical diagnoses of female disempowerment. Henry Louis Gates similarly describes the Harlem Renaissance as crafting a masked, subversive language of political and social commentary.[63] T.J. Clark portrays modernism as self-conflictedly partisan, critical of society but uncertain whether to examine it or to withdraw from it: "always pulled to and fro between private (defensive) and public (expository). Always *dreaming* of the public life."[64] Emphasizing modernism's connections to science, Jonathan Crary describes modernists as aiming toward equivalents of cognitive research and theory: their art can be read, according to Crary, as a series of statements about what perception is like and of aesthetic attempts to prove these statements.[65] Daniel Albright's *Quantum Poetics* likewise seeks to show that the modernists modeled their thoughts about language on early twentieth-century physics. Albright argues that modernist poets tried to turn the affective, sensory, and cultural connotations of language back into "waves" and "particles" of meaning.[66] For those who connect modernism to psychoanalysis, such as Peter Nicholls, modernists seek to regain "masculine" reason, a "fantasy of self-transcendence" that turns time's fluctuations into the clarity of perfect spatial order.[67] Elizabeth Abel, in *Virginia Woolf and the Fictions of Psychoanalysis*, gives an account of Woolf's fiction as its author's psychoanalytic self-examination and, more abstractly, as Woolf's attempt to grapple with different Freudian and Kleinian concepts of the self.[68] By contrast, Ann Banfield finds in Woolf's fiction a deep, sustained engagement with analytic philosophies of perception: "given the difficulty

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[61] Michael Levenson, *The Genealogy of Modernism* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 1984), 186.
[62] Bonnie Kime Scott (ed.), *The Gender of Modernism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990).
[63] Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988).
[64] Clark, 160.
[65] Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of perception* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).
[66] Daniel Albright, *Quantum Poetics* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 1997), 1-10.
[67] Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (New York: Macmillan, 1999), 76; 81.
[68] Elizabeth Abel, *Virginia Woolf and the Fictions of Psychoanalysis* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1989).

of the philosophy in question and Woolf's lack of formal training, it is the more striking the way her work and her aesthetic seize the real possibilities of Russell's thought for art which he himself could not see."[69] Philip Fisher studies Theodore Dreiser to reveal in his fiction a radically externalist theory of the mind and of its social conditioning.[70]

Each of these studies of course devotes significant attention—an attention my project will often rely on—to how often modernist writers fail to defend their work's relevance by any of these terms, and how conflicted and shaky each modernist movement's hopes for such larger payoffs are. But what I want to question is these critical frameworks' shared emphasis on some combination of politics and philosophy (or philosophical and political uses of science) as the standard by which we judge what parts of modernism should still matter to us, and what made modernist literature seem to matter to those who read and wrote it in its day. In all these studies to speak of modernist literature's successes is to speak of emotions harnessed, analyzed, or stilled: turned into recognizable values, articulable perceptual phenomenologies, theories of perspective, processes of learning, generalized social issues, calls to action.

This critical alignment with modernists' quests to prove the productivity of emotions threatens to obscure much of what we might now learn from modernism, as well as—I would argue—much of its own greater self-awareness and conceptual fluidity. The strand of modernism I want to study is concerned with the changing tones with which feelings find expression from one moment or context to another: with feelings' shifting intensities and foci, their falls in and out of scales, rhythms, and proportions, and the way these fluctuating tones affect the apparent importance attached to them. It is concerned with expressions of feeling that are still in the fuzzy realm of style, personality, mannerism, charisma, tact or tactlessness, unfriendliness or friendship. This strand of modernism attends to the way attending to some feelings, and some persons' feelings, eventually seems to bear political or philosophical fruit. And, conversely, it attends to how an emotional impulse that seemed to have grounding in larger social reality can turn into a mere reflection of the momentary inner life of its utterer. It asks what shades of difference or overlap there are between these divergent endpoints, and what happens to feelings in the limbo of seeming neither whimsical nor relevant, neither quite serious nor quite silly. This strand of modernism then finally tries to consider how literature can define itself as a site where these various possible directions and imports of emotional effort can be explored more freely and more riskily than in non-literary contexts. This is not because literature has least at stake, but because in some sense it has most, in making the feelings it represents seem relevant and productive in the broadest sense possible.

On the one hand, I want to describe the modernist writers I study as, in some sense, precursors of contemporary affect theory—to suggest that the kind of attention to feeling that we conventionally associate with our current historical period in fact began to take place much earlier. These novelists and poets take seriously the crucial role attending to feelings seems to play, in the philosophy and politics of their period, as a starting point for what eventually become political or philosophical interventions and insights. Rather than treat feelings as preliminary stages in such interventions and insights that can eventually be discarded, these writers represent the way such insights and interventions cannot merely discard or transcend their emotional components; the way these insights and interventions are always made from within an emotional process and shaped by feelings' particular qualities. In the qualities they attribute to feelings, which include whimsicality, portability, immersiveness, and abundance, these poets and novelists find promises of feelings' capacity to in themselves lead their bearers toward the kinds of local philosophical and political

[69] Ann Banfield, *The phantom table* (New York: Cambridge, 2000), xiii.
[70] Philip Fisher, "Looking around to see who I am: Dreiser's territory of the self," *ELH* 44.4 (1977): 728-748.

interventions to which modernist philosophers and political theorists aspire; toward interventions that are cognizant of their particular situatedness but are also able to derive from a particular context and personal background an insight or a course of action that can be relevant and productive to more than just its most immediate bodily and mental experience.

But unlike contemporary affect theorists, these poets and novelists do not then defend emotional states as consistent and reliable grounds of critical interventions. Emotional states as these poets and novelists represent them seem at once persistently to inspire attempts at political or philosophical interventions, and to restrict the precision, accuracy, and reliability these interventions can achieve. For these writers, emotional experiences offer occasions to consider and to highlight the difficulty of determining either the most immediate or the most appropriate scope of local philosophical or political interventions or insights. They are reliable not as sources of local philosophical or political subversion, but as paths toward conceiving and considering the difficulty of knowing how one should best define and delimit the scope of one's political or philosophical interventions—or even how one can properly conceptualize these interventions' ephemerality and locality.

To apply these novelists' and poets' treatment of feelings to contemporary affect theory is thus to suggest that there is a logical gap—perhaps even a contradiction—between affect theory's emphases on the disconnectedness, minorness, blurriness, and inarticulacy of emotional states, and its simultaneous insistence that these states lead us to precise and particularly well-bounded local or temporary critical interventions. It is also to suggest that in emphasizing the way in which emotional states make us confused about both the immediate and the most appropriate limits of our apparent or potential insights affect theory can find a new and striking way to help us think about what we want our philosophy and politics to achieve: about the challenges that not being able to give our affective self-expression a consistent and predictable direction and scope poses to our understanding of what philosophy and politics are or should be able to do for individuals, or how individual self-expression can or should form a part of these larger realms.

My first chapter focuses on whimsical feelings. Wallace Stevens and Sylvia Plath center their lyrics on the emotional vacillations of the introspective self. Stevens explores the process of trying to decide what more or less important self-knowledge could come from each momentary focus his speakers' feelings give to their experience. Plath studies her speakers' ongoing attempts to figure out whether and why the feelings they uncover could deserve to be voiced or even lingered in. Their speakers alternately lose and regain hope of finding in this whimsicality a stable sense of who they are or what they merit. Both poets keep multiplying the possible contexts, scales, pitches, and spans of time or space in which each feeling could be experienced. On the one hand, their poetry affirms emotional states as paths toward discovering or sounding new modes in which we relate to our world. On the other hand, the way their represented feelings' different scales and paces disrupt or fold into each other dramatizes how hard it is to decide exactly why each momentary worry or elation should have any significance even to the person experiencing them.

In the second chapter I examine how late modernists represent the difficulty of making sense of feelings' portability. I focus on Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* as well as F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender is the Night*. Both Woolf and Fitzgerald embed emotional exchanges within descriptions of walks, parties, and teas. They frame these social events as spaces in which the long-term material labor that goes into maintaining their characters' lifestyles is set in tension with these persons' momentary efforts to lift the moods of those around them. Their characters try to use their possessions and bodies to create or demand fleeting offerings of joy or comfort. Rather than

be satisfied or disappointed by what they give or receive, they keep discovering new aspects of an uncertainty about whether each such attempted exchange has been successful and about how significantly these emotional gifts affect their larger lives. Woolf and Fitzgerald highlight the difficulty of stably distinguishing between emotional experiences that stem from or react to intense personal events and ones that stem from law-like, socially instilled habits. They showcase the difficulty of expressing feelings in a way that would allow them to be stably and reliably recognized as expressions of trauma or of libido; of the sensitivity with which their characters take in the fine grain of the objects and impressions they are presented with, or the indiscriminateness with which they equate all these objects as sources of more or less lasting pleasure. Woolf introspects into the process by which her characters try with varied success to apply or convey their resurging feelings in a new context or to a new person. Fitzgerald remains on the outside of his characters' minds, and focuses on the way their feelings are recurrently expressed within the social and material world.

The third chapter studies the immersiveness of feelings. Proust and Baldwin explore what it would mean to try to do something with feelings that relate to enveloping sensory spaces. They ask how one nurtures such immersive feelings as potentially significant outcomes of our engagement with the world or models for how we can engage with this world further. They explore how one could try to perpetuate these feelings or satisfyingly to act on them. They also highlight the sheer effort it requires emotionally to take in or react to one's entire horizon of perception. But Proust and Baldwin also wonder how we can ever tell that any such immersive emotional experience is valuable, precise, or lasting. For both writers this preoccupation with the uncertain and unsteady relevance of immersive feelings is mediated through their simultaneous preoccupation with rooms. Both for Proust and for Baldwin rooms provide the best, perhaps even too self-flatteringly material models for how enveloping and seemingly reliable a space a feeling is able to draw us to or to discover around itself. Yet rooms also provide models for the ease with which immersive feelings are entered and exited. They showcase the constant need such feelings have for material settings to fuel and confirm themselves, the unreliability of the efforts they inspire us to apply toward the world, the paucity of such feelings' engagement with parts of the world we do not immediately sense.

The last chapter examines emotional abundance through the poetry of John Ashbery. Emotional states, as Ashbery represents them, are abundant in two interrelated senses. They are abundant, first, in the sheer number of their ongoing expressions; in the way that these expressions seem always to be vaster and greater in number than the speaker can attend to all at once. Second, they are abundant in that—rather than present the speaker merely with concepts or merely with sensations—they offer what appears to be a sensory landscape that is already suffused with its own abstract consequences and applications. The details Ashbery's represented environments contain seem constantly and richly to open up onto potentially universal insights; his speakers keeps encountering abstractions in what appear to be robust material forms ready to be inhabited, touched, or tested. Ashbery keeps highlighting this sense of abundance as a feature of emotional expression thanks to which it is possible to conceive of feelings as something distinct from their particular occasion—as something that could not only mediate this occasion, but add to the speaker's self-understanding in a way whose stakes might not be identical to the stakes of each particular context. But he also keeps showing that, in themselves, feelings are unable to turn their abundance of expression into articulable particular or universal insights. One is often led to call the images and aphorisms that proliferate in Ashbery's poems instances of emotional expression via elimination; not because they seem to be appropriate emotional reactions to some articulable concept or event, but because they seem to have no consistently articulated aims or takeaways more

concrete or more abstract than subjective affect. Rather than represent feeling as an immediate connection or reaction to his personal history or his environment, Ashbery represents his speakers' emotional states as apparent incentives or attempts to imagine and inhabit a landscape independent of these contexts; a landscape that the speaker seems at once to create and to fall into as his feelings' necessary corollary, one that seems to not represent but occlude and rival—or at the very least to frequently lose from sight—the context to which it would at first appear to be responding.

My conclusion is entitled "Eyebread," taking up a phrase Walter Benjamin coined during a euphoric false revelation about pastries that he had while on hashish. I take Benjamin's reflections on altered states as a model for my research because of how well they show that, paradoxically, emotions' potential for seriousness and insight is closely related to their potential for preciosity and frivolity. I also take it as a point of entry into trying to discover what it means to apply these questions back to the political and philosophical realms to which these literary works so unreliably and inconsistently aspire. These questions can help us rearticulate both how we define the kinds of persons capable of philosophical or political inquiry, and how we try to define and delimit the seriousness and importance of particular political or philosophical interventions.

## Whimsicality: Wallace Stevens and Sylvia Plath

Experiments with shifts of pace and focus are something we are used to associating with modernism. Indeed, they are one of the most obvious things modernism's particular creativity and innovation seem to be built on. To mention these key terms in sequence easily makes one think of Eadward Muybridge's photographs of running horses, of Albert Einstein's physics, of paintings by Claude Monet that, as Jonathan Crary describes them, try to prolong and expand a momentary sliver of perception.[71] Such changes of proportion show modernists something new about themselves and about their world. They also give modernists reasons to value as sources of knowledge constellations of objects and experiences to which society might have not previously accorded much weight: among them, dreams, anecdotes, tics, and photographs. To be able precisely to maintain and describe such different kinds of attention seems in itself a form of philosophy, or of an art that approaches philosophy's precision and aims. To act on one's investments in such new perspectives is also the beginning of a revisionary politics.

But these spectacularly productive shifts also raise the question of how one should attend to fluctuations in the pace and span of one's perception that have not yet shown themselves to have clear payoffs—to new perspectives whose exact foci, goals, and stakes are still being negotiated and tested. I will try to show that Wallace Stevens' and Sylvia Plath's poetry centers around such concerns. In a way that sets them apart from most poets of their day, Plath and Stevens have resisted scholars' attempts to find in their work either consistent philosophical and political outlooks, or consistent rejections of these larger realms. They are hardly ever discussed without reference to politics or philosophy but there is exceptionally little critical consensus as to what views and commitments, if any, their poetry expresses. I argue that Stevens and Plath have posed these critical problems for similar reasons: they both pay sustained attention to the process by which we try to figure out the aims and stakes of feelings about whose relevance we are not yet certain. I do not want to suggest that Stevens and Plath are alone in noting questions other modernist poets failed to address. But I would like to use these two poets' particular preoccupation with these issues to shift emphasis from modernists' political or philosophical goals per se to the way modernists grapple with emotional vacillations before their larger relevance is beyond doubt. By following these preoccupations throughout Stevens' and Plath's poems, I want to find in modernist literature a concern not only with new kinds of philosophy and politics that should matter to us, but also with the question of how we are to treat our emotional states while they reach toward these realms without as yet attaining them.

Stevens and Plath are particularly attuned to these questions because both poets' primary aim is not to model a philosophy or politics they already value, but to create a sensitive lyric subject and a world that would properly showcase this sensitivity's acuity, goals, and scope. They discover, and come particularly to insist, that to follow moment by moment the shifting objects and intensities of each feeling is to pass through a wild variety of registers, scales, and paces. Rather than settle into

[71] Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of perception* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).

one rhythm or scale that could be generalized into a consistent perspective, these feelings' spans and intensities keep oscillating so widely and so whimsically as to make the person who experiences them seem to pass through wildly contrasting shades of self-control or helplessness, blindness or self-awareness, urgency or leisureliness, voraciousness or restraint.

Stevens and Plath represent these fluctuations through persistent tonal shifts—which also bring with them persistent shifts in their poems' apparent momentary aims and stakes. Both poets keep multiplying the possible contexts, scales, pitches, and spans of time or space in which a feeling could continue. They make us aware of feelings' startling versatility and plasticity; of the freshness of associations they can pull together; of the boldness with which they can expand or narrow our focus. On the one hand, their poetry thus affirms whimsical emotional experiences as paths toward discovering or sounding new ways in which we relate to our world. It allows us to locate within the process of feeling itself the kind of open-ended, persistent search for the proper objects and pathways of thought and action that we might normally attribute to politics and philosophy alone. On the other hand, the way their represented feelings' different scales and paces disrupt or fold into each other dramatizes how difficult it is to decide exactly why each momentary worry or elation should have significance to others or even to the speaker experiencing them. Their poetry shows how difficult it is to decide at which point such a search is still productive, and when it has devolved into trivial indecisiveness; when a feeling's whimsical vacillations lead us toward some sustainable insights, and when they lead us to positively abandon the objects and courses of thought and action to which we might have needed to pay attention. Stevens thus explores the process of trying to decide what more or less important, more or less accurate knowledge could come from each momentary focus his speakers' feelings give to their experience. Plath studies her speakers' ongoing attempts to decide for what reasons and to what ends the feelings they uncover could deserve to be made known to others.

By rendering these unresolved transitions between registering a feeling and assessing its weight the proper province of poetry, Plath and Stevens give a fresh twist to the lyric's timeworn worry about how it can defend its usefulness to others. They also give us tools to trace out and appreciate similar unresolved tonal ambiguities in other modernist poets: to begin to see such ambiguities not as a refusal of intellectual engagement with philosophy and politics but as one of its sophisticated, particularly modernist forms. Within the broader theoretical scope of my project, their work offers yet another way of describing feelings' appeal and unreliability as seeming sources of political or philosophical innovation—of showing both how difficult it is to distinguish a particularly striking emotional shift from a conceptual insight, and how difficult it is to draw such insights from feelings sustainably and consistently.

As Harold Bloom puts it, "Stevens is uniquely the twentieth-century poet of that solitary and inward glory we can none of us share with others."[72] Helen Vendler similarly emphasizes that Stevens refuses to admit to poetry any aims prior to the unveiling of a sensitive individual's emotional experiences.[73] Stevens himself states that his subjects are not eternal entities but momentary attachments to "the world to which we turn incessantly."[74] His goal is not to prove these attachments exist but merely to contour and study their forms.[75]

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[72] Harold Bloom, "Introduction," *Wallace Stevens*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea, 1985), 5.
[73] Helen Vendler, "Wallace Stevens: The False and True Sublime," *Part of Nature, Part of Us: Modern American Poets* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP), 1-14.
[74] Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), 31.
[75] Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*, 56.

Vendler and Bloom tend to put these assessments of Stevens' subject matter in neutrally formal terms. They are most interested in showing how Stevens conveys emotional experiences, not in defending why the content of his poems should matter to anyone but their speaker. But for later readers of Stevens, Bloom's and Vendler's accounts, as well as Stevens' own comments on his poetry, do crucially raise these latter concerns. Recent scholars thus often see it as their task to explain how and why his speakers' emotional self-examinations are valuable in larger philosophical or political senses. Some have sought to depict him as a cultural critic by citing moments in his poetry where he seems obliquely to take a stance about larger social conditions. Bonnie Costello finds in Stevens' depictions of still lives a meditation on our fragility during states of war.[76] James Longenbach and Alan Filreis variously connect Stevens' metaphors to contemporaneous political events.[77] Stephen Burt reads Stevens as trying to study and commemorate Connecticut's changing geography.[78] Elisabeth Oliver finds critical potential in Stevens' poems about interior design: "They echo the attention given by the American press to stories of worker rebellions on banana plantations, of loss to American profits due to tropical storms, of failures of crops due to pests and disease, and of public concerns over the sanitary quality and healthfulness of the fruit."[79] Lisa Siraganian claims that Stevens' poetry openly rejects fascism in favor of the capitalist free market.[80]

To others, Stevens matters not as a political poet but as a philosophical one. In his unstinting focus on a single person's immediate perspectives, these scholars claim, Stevens can tell us more about the fine grain of experience than writers with more engrossing worldly commitments. In this sense his poetry rises and falls with its ability to illustrate defensible epistemologies with precision and complexity.[81] Some, such as Krzysztof Ziarek, map out Stevens' poetic principles onto Heidegger's epistemology to make his poetry valuable as this philosophy's nuanced enactment and illustration.[82] Many also see Stevens as a philosopher in his own right. For Simon Critchley, Stevens traces with exceptional fineness the line between how the world reveals itself to us and how it might exist beyond ourselves: "the cry of things is *like* a new knowledge of the world, but it is not in any sense a knowledge understood as the unity of concept and intuition."[83] J. Hillis Miller finds in Stevens' poetry a long philosophical path from seeking pure reality in sensory richness to discovering, as "the search for fixity led to perpetual errancy," that the "nothing" he keeps coming up against in his pursuits is "being" itself. This being "turns out also to be his own secret self."[84]

For Charles Altieri, reading Stevens through the lens of affect theory, interpretations of his poems as paths toward stable political or philosophical conclusions are misguided. They gloss over the very qualities that make Stevens' poetry most uniquely insightful. Stevens' work represents not a quest for increasingly certain knowledge but fine gradations in the affective paths we take toward and within what we sense or imagine. According to Altieri, Stevens thus showcases the process not

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[76] Bonnie Costello, "Planets on Tables: Still Life and War in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens," *Modernism/modernity* 12.3 (2005): 443-458.

[77] Alan Filreis, *Wallace Stevens and the Actual World* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991); James Longenbach, *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things* (New York: Oxford UP, 1991).

[78] Stephen Burt, "Wallace Stevens: Where He Lived," *ELH* 77.2 (2010): 325-352.

[79] Elisabeth Oliver, "Aestheticism's Afterlife: Wallace Stevens as Interior Decorator and Disruptor," *Modernism/modernity* 15.3 (2008): 539.

[80] Lisa Siraganian, "Wallace Steven's Fascist Dilemmas and Free Market Resolutions," *ALH* 32.2 (2011): 337-361.

[81] See, for example, Bart Eeckhout, "Stevens and Philosophy," *The Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens*, ed. John N. Serio (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 2007), 103-117.

[82] Krzysztof Ziarek, *Inflected Language* (New York: SUNY Press, 1994).

[83] Simon Critchley, *Things Merely Are: Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 73.

[84] J. Hillis Miller, *Poets of Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1965), 265-254.

of following feelings to some crowning epistemic revelations or political ends, but of exploring feelings' sheer variety as a source of their philosophical import:

> Stevens had to find a style that could honor what it meant for the mind to live continually in the sense of change and variation honored by both Pragmatism and Deconstruction. But that style would not just embody a version of epistemology. It would become a self-conscious medium by which to reflect on and demonstrate the values involved in thinking when it comes to distrust description, proposition, and system.[85]

A heightened attention to our emotional landscapes makes us realize that they do not always change for rationalizable, systematic reasons. To study feelings' metamorphoses as closely as Stevens leads him, Altieri argues, to embrace a vision of the self that mistrusts any systems of epistemology—and accepts our affective equivocations as our best (if always partial) ground for understanding ourselves. This frees Stevens to represent feelings not for the sake of total knowledge, but as a "medium" in which to explore and to celebrate a mode of "thinking" that has abandoned such grand goals. Altieri mentions deconstruction and pragmatism as models of feelings' relationship to thought that Stevens' vision of the emotional self in part follows and in part presages. In making this connection Altieri echoes other recent affect theorists, such as Rei Terada, who argue that late modernist and postmodern philosophy and politics have always, if covertly, been attempts to restore our confidence in feelings' fluctuations as the most accurate way we have of experiencing and assessing who we are.[86] By Altieri's argument, Stevens would be these later theorists' poetic precursor—and his work would provide yet another piece of evidence for why these theories rightly put so much stock in feeling.

My path toward Stevens proceeds through Altieri's suspicion of stable truths and values, whether social or philosophical, as in themselves Stevens' poetic goal. It also follows Altieri's intuition that Stevens' speakers take their form and resonance not from their association with any specific philosophies or political aims, but from their reflection on the very process by which their feelings' changing foci, lengths, and intensities keep opening up new modes of experience. But I want to press on the vulnerability—on what Bloom designates as Stevens' vulnerable solipsism, and Vendler calls his "almost killing" self-doubt[87]—to which such a reading reopens Stevens' fluctuating emotional selves. The different terms—'style' and 'tone'—that Altieri and I use to describe Stevens' language in themselves showcase where the difference lies between his emphasis and mine. To call Stevens' language a style is to draw attention to the unity of his speakers' concerns. It is to suggest that his poems, and these poems' different parts, coalesce into a lyric sensibility whose value they enact and defend. In framing my reading of Stevens' poetry as a study not of his style but of his whimsically shifting tones, I want to suggest that it is in part anachronistic—and that it occludes some aspects of Stevens' poetics we can still learn from—to suggest that he already has in feelings' whimsicality the kind of confidence that postmodernism has taught us to be unselfconscious about. I want to find in Stevens not an early affirmation of feelings' potential as a medium of deconstructive or pragmatic thought, but an exploration of the intermediary state of figuring out what it would mean for feelings to bear any philosophical weight: of how one is to square feelings' constantly shifting aims, directions, and stakes with any sustainable notion of their gravity, worth, or takeaways. To draw attention to Stevens' variety of tones is to stress not his lyric subjects' unity but

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[85] Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from or paraphrases of Charles Altieri in this chapter refer to the manuscript of his *Wallace Stevens and the Demands of Modernity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2013, forthcoming).

[86] See Rei Terada, *Feeling in Theory*.

[87] Bloom, "Introduction," 8; Vendler, "The False and True Sublime," 1.

their lack of a shared center of weight. It is to highlight Stevens' awareness of the disproportion between the way a momentary elation can seem fully, overwhelmingly epiphanic, and the rapidity with which each such elation soon comes to seem fuzzy or narrow, and as such to have possibly wasted one's time. In this sense I want to shift focus, in J. Hillis Miller's words (whose reference I here radically expand), to that "something disquieting about [Stevens' images] reiterated fluttering or undulation. Such poems make the reader feel vaguely uneasy, as if he were a little seasick."[88]

Stevens himself calls poetry "a cemetery of nobilities" and, compared to philosophy, a "light-footed," "unofficial" pursuit.[89] I want to take this to mean not merely that Stevens is often interested in apparently unimportant particulars and momentary impressions, but also that he is interested in what it means consciously to face and represent the difficulty of making these not yet noble, grounded, or official experiences seem worthy of scrutiny. Stevens' poems move among feelings' various foci, speeds, and scopes, to showcase their speakers' attempts at deciding when their affective enthrallments could be moments of learning or discovery and exactly what they could learn from each feeling. His poetry thus takes on not philosophy in itself, but moments when a feeling we register seems to engage in what appears to be a near-philosophical search for its best or most appealing objects—and in the process shows not only how indiscriminate its searches for these objects are, and how much difficulty the person experiencing these feelings might herself have to assess or to make sense of this indiscriminacy.

Many of Stevens' early poems are studies of a self that seems to test its gradually unveiled emotional acuity. They are representations of a sensitivity exercised acutely but perhaps not yet thoroughly enough; of a sensitivity apparently caught midway in its effort to renew the world it perceives through its refinement. "Earthy Anecdote," *Harmonium*'s first poem, thus creates a tension between its confident acuity on the level of sounds and particular words, and its almost childlike vagueness on the semantic level.[90] Its lines are beautifully, insistently melodious, in a way that the small number of words Stevens recycles stanza by stanza makes only more manifest. But the propositions these words string together do not hold up to the kind of intense attention this poem's finer particles invite. These propositions are not yet pieces of new knowledge, or even visualizable images, but mere suggestions of what such potential images or pieces of knowledge could be like.

Stevens begins with a grand generalization. "Every time the bucks went clattering / Over Oklahoma / A firecat bristled in the way." (3) This stanza's assonances and alliterations make it seem tight and controlled, aware both of its intent and of its joyous power. The second and third stanzas then unpack the bucks' and firecat's movements through parallel syntactic structures and expanding repetitions. It is as if the poem's central image and thought kept being appreciated and savored in ever new shades and constellations. "Wherever they went / They went clattering, / Until they swerved / In a swift, circular line / To the right, / Because of the firecat. // Or until they swerved / In a swift, circular line / To the left, / Because of the firecat." (3) Stevens' geometry is crisply clean. His melodiously insistent repetitions of the same phrases, that we are made to linger over ever longer, make the poem seem precise and formal, concerned with nothing but small sharp-edged sounds and shapes. But at the same time, the propositions these melodies and geometries compose are hard to visualize or to take in as bits of insight. The first stanza could not conceivably

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[88] Miller, *Poets of Reality*, 226.

[89] Stevens, *Necessary Angel*, 35; Wallace Stevens, "A Collect of Philosophy," *Opus Posthumous* (New York: Knopf 1989), 277; Stevens, *Necessary Angel*, 40.

[90] Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1974), 3. Hereafter cited parenthetically in-text.

sum up what goes on in an entire state. And even as the second stanza's grammar is geometrically precise, the physical movement "to the right … or to the left" that it traces remains vague. Instead of representing this firecat's movement, these stanzas seem merely to sketch out the initial verbal and auditory components and prospective aims of such a representation, and slowly to test the skills the speaker will put toward it. Rather than show their knowledge of firecats, bucks, and Oklahoma, they seem to gesture to such knowledge as a point somewhere on the horizon, an object that this poem chases much as the firecat chases his bucks.

Stevens re-compresses this represented world in his fourth stanza into a burst of melodious sounds and rapidly accumulating lines: "The bucks clattered. / The firecat went leaping. / To the right, to the left, / And / Bristled in the way." (3) This is the third time we are savoring the same scene. We have savored it as an assertion and as a pair of alternatives. Now we take in its few components, one by one, in a breathless list. There is a great self-satisfaction to the speaker's voice, and a great confidence. As Altieri puts it, "it is as if the language were miming the force of the firecat, even to the extent of not having to reveal anything about itself, or about the allegorical situation, except what manifests itself as quiet confidence in how it can produce effects on other beings." And yet this list again tells us very little about these animals' movements toward each other; we do not even know exactly where respective to the bucks the firecat bristles. Stevens seems to be drawing our attention both to the clarity his speaker is able to achieve in defining his art's smallest components, and to the large-scale discoveries toward which his sensitivity has not yet worked its way. As if to emphasize this tension the poem ends in an image of exhaustion and pause, as the firecat eventually falls asleep: "Later, the firecat closed his bright eyes / And slept." (3) The firecat has not hunted anything down. He seems merely to be resting so that the hunt may be resumed elsewhere, just as the speaker's hunt for images and stories his feelings lead him to will keep on going throughout *Harmonium*. It is not merely, as Altieri suggests, that this last image allows us to enjoy the poem for what it can give us, as a sort of open-ended allegory. But Altieri is right that this ending opens up within the poem a space for some sensitivity's future labor. To the extent that we take this poem to represent the work of energetic feeling—the liveliness of this animal as it pursues within its world something that feels worth chasing, and also the emotion that it takes on the speaker's part to imagine such an animal and seek to represent it—this double hunt is vigorously ongoing but unresolved. We know neither the definitive object of this speaker's feeling nor the full stakes of the poem's representative effort. We are made to focus, instead, merely on what it is like to persist in this feeling while its objects and stakes are still being parsed out.

*Harmonium*'s last poem, "To The Roaring Wind," condenses this double impression of acuity and open-endedness into a single stanza. It also returns to "Earthy Anecdote's" metaphors of sleep. "What syllable are you seeking, / Vocalissimus, / In the distances of sleep? / Speak it." (113) These lines are formulated with sonorous precision. Their alliterations seem onomatopoeic of the wind's own sound. Stevens' carefully articulated syllables repay an attention mirroring the speaker's own studious focus on the wind's as-yet undeciphered roaring—and in this sense they seem tests or preparations for the larger interpretative enterprise that is this poem's subject. But semantically the poem presents itself as, for the time being, little more than a tissue of fantasies and dreams. The wind's metaphoric sleep is not broken. All we know is the ambiguous urge for its voicing. This urge seems to come at once from the uneasily sleeping wind and from the speaker fantasizing about it. We do not know what the wind's unarticulated syllable could mean, or why it should be meaningful either to the speaker or to ourselves. For the speaker to call the wind "vocalissimus" calls attention not only to the wind's potential for articulacy, as Stevens' alliterations also illustrate it, but also to the way this potential has not yet been fulfilled to the full extent of the speaker's wishes. The poem's

acute sensory sensitivity on the level of individual sounds is put to use, on the semantic level, in what is as yet only the barest sketch of the aims and stakes of what it is seeking. This sense of incompleteness again does not simply make the poem comic or anticlimactic. Instead it presents this poem as a gesture toward an object whose full worth this sensitivity does not yet know; as the springboard for a feeling whose success in capturing what attracts it, and in choosing stakes that could make its acuteness worthwhile, remains to be seen—but which takes as its goal nothing less than the location and circumscription of an object that would be worthy of itself.

*Harmonium* also begins—in ways Stevens' later poetry elaborates on much further—overtly to designate philosophical inquiry as a model for the kinds of emotional vacillations in which his poems engage. In "Sunday Morning" Stevens thus traces what seem to be a mind's attempts to test its philosophical limits and strengths. On the face of it, the poem is a Nietzschean affirmation of human beings' continued beauty and power after the death of their gods. As J. Hillis Miller puts it, "Bereft of the supernatural, man does not lie down paralyzed in despair. He sings the creative hymns of a new culture, the culture of those who are 'wholly human' and know themselves."[91] Stevens interweaves a woman's voice with the speaker's commentary in a way that makes it seem as if this speaker were articulating, or helping to articulate, a chain of philosophical associations that stem from this woman's fluctuating feelings. The poem leads us into many surprising constellations of concepts and sensations. It strings together series of uncanny images, of beautiful sounds, of lush pastoral images and comforting religious or mythical tropes. In one sense these various vistas that its represented feelings open for the speaker resonate together as a portrait of a self-affirming sensibility. This sensibility keeps surprising us by how many different dimensions of sense and concept it can draw on and how vividly it can constellate them into unexpected associative links or causal chains. Thus the "complacencies of the peignoir, and late / Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair" can be enough to make one doubt one's faith in God (66). Shadows around the orange tree can become reminders of God as death and eternal life. The blue sky can make one think of divine indifference. Stevens' stanzas are unrhymed but they keep to the same lengths and meters in a way that makes them seem, at once, leisurely and formal, unquestioning of their own orderliness. The choice eccentricity of his diction—"complacencies of the peignoir" not least within it—mimics on a small scale the mixture of erudition and surprising newness that structures the poem's represented world.

But there is to Stevens' focus on this Sunday morning armchair philosophy not just a refreshing creativity but also a hint that its open-endedness might be potentially troubling. "He moves himself," says Harold Bloom of the poem's speaker, "as he does us, yet he cannot persuade himself."[92] There is no clear existential urgency to the state from which this woman, or the speaker who describes her, reach out to the various realms of myth, sense, and religion that they savor. The woman might have discovered in herself a lasting existential angst, or merely one hot morning's lazy malaise. The speaker's and the woman's mental meanderings leap between the various levels and kinds of emotional need with which we would reach for fruit, for Jove, or for June, for the Christian God or for the drunkenness of orgies. They shift between the various depths and spans of self-understanding each of these cravings in turn might disclose. The poem finally settles for death as its philosophy's node: it is "the mother of beauty," the future event whose expectation makes its speaker's emotional efforts worthwhile. But death is something that this lush garden's radiance seems as yet incapable of representing except through many greater or smaller, more or less lasting myths, sensations, and fantasies that do not yet add up to a uniform pitch and scale of despair or

[91] Miller, *Poets of Reality*, 222.

[92] Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1977), 29.

defiance, pleasure or insatiability. We never find out quite how intensely the speaker or the woman he describes feel for the world of whose passing they keep being reminded. We do not how resigned or rebellious, sweet or bitter a vision of death this speaker or this woman might ultimately settle into, and for what reasons. Stevens heightens this ambiguity about "Sunday Morning's" ultimate aims and stakes by making it uncertain how much of the incipient philosophy this poem collages comes from the woman it represents and how much of this philosophy comes from the speaker, whose language might still be beyond her reach.

Helen Vendler calls this a poem not of philosophy's success but of its acknowledged failure: "the exquisite cadences of Sunday Morning are in fact corpse-like, existing around the woman's desires in a waxy perfection of resignation."[93] But that seems to belie the poem's many images of bold, ongoing exploration. The death- or night-bound birds that at the end of the poem "sink / downward to darkness / on extended wings" are an especially powerful metaphor both for the poem's persistent lack of clarity about where it is going and for its persistent effort and risk in seeking to be taken there. Stevens is not merely making light of orders of thought that one can so easily assemble and disassemble. He is also not just mocking feelings that would keep struggling toward death without quite knowing how to make sense of it as a concept or an event. Instead, in a way that echoes "Earthly Anecdote," Stevens seems to be representing not the philosophical takeaway of these exploratory existential feelings but their attempts to test what kinds of takeaways they might be capable of reaching, and with what depths and dimensions of happiness or despair they resonate. He thus seems to be offering this intermediary stage in feelings' transition toward what could turn out to be philosophy not as a sign of such feelings' failure but as an aspect of what it means to be having an emotional experience—of why this experience is difficult both to abandon and to trust. He seems to show that the dimension of emotional experience he probes—feelings' restless, whimsical search for new objects—is in itself much like philosophy. But he shows also that these feelings' imperfect discrimination and their open-endedness cast doubt on our ability to make the kinds of judgments about the appropriate objects and scales of our thought that we might credit philosophy with; he suggests not merely that feelings might not be as philosophical as we might in the moment believe them to be, but also that—in such a moment of euphoria—we might not be able to tell philosophy and feeling apart from each other.

In Stevens' later poetry these emotional states that do not yet realize their full significance are often represented through such changes in the size, scope, and intensity of what his speakers momentarily attend to. But these speakers' feelings no longer keep reaching toward aims and objects as precise as death or the sound of the wind. Instead, his speakers try to discover how the various momentary foci and objects of their feelings could even begin to relate to each other, and what namable endpoint they could possibly share. Earlier poems often stage what seems to be an incremental refinement in the sensitivity with which their speakers follow their emotional experiences. These later ones start even to ask whether one could trace within feelings' uncertainty such narratives of progress or improvement.

Stevens himself describes these uncertainly progressing emotional investigations as states of being able self-consciously "to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else." Vendler calls moments when this ability is exercised "sublime" experiences.[94] Critchley describes them as "intuitions overflowing concepts without the source of the intuition."[95] For Altieri they are experiences of "breaking through to [a] sense of force or necessity and finding it

[93] Helen Vendler, *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1969), 57.
[94] Vendler, "The False and True Sublime," 1-3.
[95] Critchley, 73.

gorgeously intricate."[96] For all these critics, such experiences are reached by falling in and out of different kinds and directions of affective attachment to one's world, living them out in what is at once an earnest and a hypothetical mode. I agree with these assessments in principle, but I want to press on the conclusions we typically draw from them. For most of these critics, to accept the temporariness and partiality of each momentary perspective gives one's life some measure of self-awareness and dignity. It is, at least, a sophisticated existential standpoint. I want to argue that Stevens' later poems represent experiences not of learning to accept such ephemerality but of figuring out what it would mean for the feelings they represent to teach his speakers something, and what the exact value of such learning could be. In this sense Stevens does not represent his poems' momentary fusions of what seems like feeling and what seems like philosophy as something uniformly admirable or insightful. Instead these fusions make feelings seem all the more helpless and vulnerable as it turns out there might be no independent conceptual criteria based on which we could decide what a given feeling's proper object should be—and that these feelings' whimsical vacillations do not seem to bring it anywhere closer to ascertaining what these proper objects might be, or even what their general scale and scope should be like.

"The Poems of our Climate" thus might seem to follow what Bloom calls Stevens' Freudian trajectory: "in Freudian terms, [Stevens' poems] tend to begin as reaction formations, pass through the defense of isolation, and climax as sublimations."[97] But while it is true that sublimation—or at least some way of ascertaining that his feeling has found its proper object—is something its speaker is seeking, as the poem ends he has not yet found it. The poem's chain of associations does not simply take us through scopes of sensation or abstraction embedded in each other or reducible to each other, toward a final personal discovery. Instead it makes us move around among foci that are in turns large and small, significant on larger or smaller, individual or universal scales. It traces out a path not of approximating a feeling's previously determined object, but of trying to figure out where the speaker's emotional sensitivity might best be applied, and for what reasons. On the one hand, this feeling seems again motivated by what seems like a persistently quest for understanding—as it so widely and obstinately seeks to find the proper measure and scope of its expression. On the other hand, all that these whimsical shifts of focus showcase is how easy it is for this feeling to shift dramatically from trivial objects to grandiose ones; how little measure it seems to have, or even gradually to acquire, of the kind of scope and span its current expression could properly deserve, of the kind of conceptual or physical object or objects in which it could best recognize itself.

The speaker is initially moved by a bowl of flowers. The poem then develops as a series of discoveries as he unravels a rapidly shifting world of images this bouquet brings to mind. Each line redraws this feeling's initial aims and scope. Each next line at once completes this contour and surprisingly strings in yet another, at least partly dissonant association. "Pink and white carnations. The light / In the room more like a snowy air, / Reflecting snow. A newly-fallen snow / At the end of winter when afternoons return." (193) It seems that the flowers' whiteness, resonating with the light falling into the room, reminds the speaker at once of the freshness of snow and of the refreshing realization that winter is about to end. Like Stevens' line breaks, these images at once blend into and pull away from each other. The carnations' whiteness and the light's whiteness blur together in the image of a "snowy air" but fold apart in the image of light reflected on a white surface. The notion of freshness brings together the speaker's images of "newly-fallen snow" and of the beginning of springtime, but also pries them apart as each other's limits. Marie Borroff says

[96] Charles Altieri, *The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry: Modernism and After* (New York: Blackwell, 2006), 131.
[97] Bloom, *Poems of Our Climate*, 88.

Stevens' poems contain not arguments but climates.[98] But to say this stanza establishes such a climate is to belie the insistence with which parts of it work toward anchoring its central feeling around ornaments or pieces of interior design. It is also to belie the tensions among these various embodiments Stevens finds for the feeling whose proper match his speaker seeks. What this speaker contours is not a coherent vision of nature or simplicity, but a fantastical world that is in turns and sometimes at once flower and light, winter and spring, climate and afternoon, season and bowl—a world wildly responsive to the momentary scope, focus, and degree of precision his feeling takes moment by moment. Paradoxically, his very wish for simplicity—a simplicity whose contours he does not yet discern—is what makes him so intensely and rapidly crowd this poem with image after image of this simplicity's momentarily most proper content, span, and standard. This feeling's various inner and outer foci do not quite blend together. The stakes of attending to each one of them are starkly varied, from the pastoral to the existential. As it moves from one such object to another the speaker's feeling appears alternately more or less urgent, more particular or more abstract, dogged or dawdling.

The poem's later stanzas start to juxtapose these possible external aims and scopes against internal ones. Stevens' speaker imagines that one of these sensory foci could help him simplify the person he is to the point of forgetting himself entirely. "Say even," starts the second stanza, "that this complete simplicity / Stripped one of all one's torments, concealed / The evilly compounded, vital I." (193) But even as he ponders this self-erasure, the mind he tries to conceal suddenly starts to seem central to his "delight" in simplicity (194). The third stanza expresses joy in the mind's continual wish to "escape" what now holds its attention and return to its prior objects, and in the satisfaction it takes from "flawed words and stubborn sounds." (194) For the stanza to end with words and sounds rather than with the mind itself enacts this mental restlessness and circularity. Right as we reach the poem's most self-enclosed moment of introspection, we return to the small grains of sensation with whose obstinate physical presence the poem's train of thought first started. Now the poem's own words and sounds also seem implicitly included among these small, as yet unaccountably affecting sensory grains. One can see within this stanza the outlines of what could be a celebration of the mind's restless acuity, of sensations' general plentitude, of the poem's particular sensory occasion, or of this poem itself as a piece of beautiful language. Stevens has given us ways to see how rapidly one could cycle from one such focus to another but he has not given us a way to choose among them as the poem's more or less important aims. He leads us into what is not yet a poem of this climate but a poem that shows how hard it is to figure out what the "poems of this climate" would be like. He lets us follow his speaker as he hesitates whether the 'climate' his feelings should most focus on is the climate of this speaker's own inner sensibilities or of the place he lives in, or of his language, and how large or weighty a scope of these realms he could outline. The poem thus represents not consistent reasons why any of these observed or forged sensations, or the mind that attends to them, are worthy of scrutiny, but the pathos of finding oneself in a feeling and making an effort to discover in this feeling some recognizable pattern and scope of attachment. Stevens makes us see that all this effort can for now produce is an image of its own inability to tell what motivates each of its shifts from one object to another—whether each such particular moment of its whimsy could or could not be a potential insight.

Especially in his long later poems, Stevens dramatizes not merely the variety of scopes feelings can take but also their various possible lengths and rhythms. Throughout "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens gradually divorces each feeling's momentary tone even from its

[98] Marie Borroff, "An Always Incipient Cosmos," *Wallace Stevens*, 106.

immediate objective correlatives—showing that each of these feelings' foci can be approached with or trigger a variety of more or less dramatic emotional responses. He asks not merely what we are to make of feelings' seeming readiness to keep changing their momentary objects, but also of the very different tones and speeds with which they return to objects that occupied them previously. Rather than lead us toward higher or "supreme" knowledge, "Notes" highlights the moment-by-moment difficulty of knowing why a feeling is sometimes discouraged by its recurrent object very quickly, and sometimes lingers with it for a long time; why even while it keeps focusing on the same object it can begin to pass among a wide variety of intensities and tones.

I will study two fragments of "Notes" in which these shifts of pace seem particularly striking. The first comes from around the middle of the poem:

> To discover winter and know it well, to find,
> Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all,
> Out of nothing to have come on major weather,
>
> It is possible, possible, possible. It must
> be possible. (404)

The poet has been describing the joy of discovering the world's preexisting order. On one level the first of these stanzas continues this description. But the poem's images also start to shift in ways that undercut this initial joyful confidence. Rather than seeking or celebrating a knowledge of summer—with which this section began—the speaker starts to wish for a knowledge of winter, with all the overtones of desolation and blankness this season holds in Stevens' poetry. The next line brings two negations: "not to impose, not to have reasoned at all." These negations at once restate Stevens' distinction between the imposed and the discovered and start making this distinction seem awkwardly effortful. Instead of merely stumbling upon winter, the speaker now needs to prevent himself from "imposing" on it or "reasoning" about it. The third line continues this change of perspective. The speaker gets his experience of the world not out of the world itself, but "out of nothing." It is as if the things in themselves of winter have become obscured. What he is able to "come on" is not a definable season but "major weather." The word "weather" repeats and summarizes his prior list of the seasons, but in a manner that is much more vague and immediate, and seems not merely to allow but to beg for the speaker's interpretive efforts. The following two lines: "It is possible, possible, possible. It must be possible" openly re-center the poem on the now-troubled subject. This subject finds himself half demanding, half begging for a world that will allow itself to be discovered by him, a world that will allow him to believe his feelings had no agency in its creation.

This seems to be a sequence of discoveries that depend on rapid shifts in the scope, intensity, and objects of the speaker's feelings. First, the speaker describes the delighted surprise of feeling himself open up to the external world. Then he lets himself fall into an increasingly raw, self-centered fear that this world might not give him what he wants. This section is part of the poem's longer meditative course around the possibility of a "supreme fiction." But the power of this fragment does not come from the newness of the twist it stages. The whole prior part of the poem has been, in various ways, outlining and rehearsing similar oscillations in what Helen Vendler calls "a constant motion back and forth… or else a recurrent convergence" between "the subjective and the

objective."[99] The speaker has been following his feelings as they flicker between seeming internal and external, expressive of his hunger for the world or of this world's abundant benevolence toward him. Shortly before these lines we spent an entire section following the poet's explanations of what it would mean to discover the order of a sensory world beyond oneself. And in the immediately preceding stanzas, a dozen lines followed similar expositions of what it would be like to sink into a blank inward state. Instead what makes this passage stand out is the quickened pace of Stevens' shifts between these two perspectives. He retraces within five lines a hinge in thought the poem previously unraveled over the span of two sections. These lines themselves echo this shift in speed. Their rhythm is clipped in the last couplet even while this couplet does little more than repeat a single word, drawing attention to how much less space this word occupies from one line to the next.

Vendler calls such transitions "a civilized passage from tone to tone, with a flicker of grossness, a tinge of humor, a touch of logic or illogic, as Stevens moves within the various discourses of his ample harmonium."[100] I agree with her choice of adjectives, but to call this a "passage" among tones seems not quite right. This change in the pace of how the speaker's feelings oscillate reveals not simply one more possible transition among these feelings, but a wide array of more or less dramatically optimistic or pessimistic, comic or tragic tones in which each moment in his feelings' newly paced progression could be read. The quickness of this movement might mark the speaker's increased self-awareness or his growing hysteria. It might show that he is closer to fully grasping these emotional oscillations, or that he is beginning hastily to oversimplify them. Since the poem is still searching for the proper intensity, direction, and span the speaker should give to each of his represented feelings, we have no reliable standard against which to test if this quickened emotional pace improves on or regresses from the poem's prior rhythm. We also have no means of measuring how much importance we should attach to this potential progress or regress. This quickening thus enlarges our sense not of how much the speaker's feelings have taught him, but of how many dimensions there are to his persistent uncertainty about these feelings' precision and stakes. To say this is not to propose, with Critchley, that Stevens is exposing our isolation from the elusive things in themselves among which we live.[101] The way Stevens frames this fragment makes it seem as if it could be a moment as much of revelation as of blindness. Nor do I want to suggest, with Altieri and Vendler, that we are here invited to explore these feelings merely for their own sake. Our inability to tell whether this shift in the speaker's pace of feeling makes his emotional states more or less worthy of serious engagement reminds us that we do need to know toward what larger standard of care and precision these feelings are working in order to appreciate them. The fragment's pathos instead comes from the way that, even though we register a change in how the speaker oscillates among his feelings, this change only highlights more strongly how little we know of these feelings' aims and potential payoffs. Even though we recognize the speaker's emotional shifts as familiar ones, we are unable to tell whether these shifts' greater rapidity showcases the speaker's greater or lesser skill in making sense of them. The passage also highlights how easy it apparently is for the speaker to fall in step with this feeling, and to articulate its changed pace as if it held a genuine insight, even though there do not seem to be any immediate grounds for doing so; how easy it apparently is for the speaker momentarily to treat this change in the rhythm with which he circumscribes his feelings' object as a sign that this feeling has now definitively found its proper span and location, even though his attention will be diverted from this recurrent object only a few lines later.

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[99] Vendler, *On Extended Wings*, 172.
[100] Vendler, *On Extended Wings*, 189.
[101] Critchley, 73-74.

To now take another example, from the second section entitled "It must change":

The old seraph, parcel-gilded, among violets
Inhaled the appointed odor, while the doves
Rose up like phantoms from chronologies.

The Italian girls wore jonquils in their hair
And these the seraphs saw, had seen long since,
In the bandeaux of the mothers, would see again.

The bees came booming as if they had never gone,
As if hyacinths had never gone. We say
This changes and that changes. Thus the constant

Violets, doves, girls, bees, and hyacinths
Are inconstant objects of inconstant cause
In a universe of inconstancy. This means

Night-blue is an inconstant thing. The seraph
Is satyr in Saturn, according to his thoughts.
It means the distaste we feel for the withered scene

Is that it has not changed enough. It remains,
It is a repetition. The bees come booming
As if—The pigeons clatter in the air.

An erotic perfume, half of the body, half
Of an obvious acid is sure what it intends
And the booming is blunt, not broken in subtleties. (389-90)

This passage is explicitly about feelings' persistence and inconstancy. What I want to focus on most are its two shifts in tone—the movement from pleased interest to "distaste" in the first four stanzas, and then the turn back to intoxication in stanzas five and six. The first two stanzas begin with several changes of perspective. Each line break marks an addition to our landscape. We are informed of yet another human or animal presence moving within it; of another dimension in which this scene is harmonized within a pastorally self-contained, self-perpetuating sphere of scents, movements, bodies, and gazes. But a subtle undercurrent of doubt or boredom echoes in these descriptions. One could argue that this undercurrent starts, subtly, with the early mention of the word "appointed." The adjective is affectively neutral, but it begins the poem's slow shift from an evenly joyful to a frustrated, probing tone. This shift in emphasis culminates in stanza three. The speaker lists the components of this pastoral with cool detachment. In the next two lines, he repeatedly accuses this scene of being both "inconstant" and paradoxically—too "constant," at once "withered" and insufficiently changed. The night sky is at once constant and inconstant because "the seraph is satyr in Saturn." The sky moves forward, but it does so in a predictable cycle. His world can never "change enough" because one always keeps returning to states one already knew. At the beginning

of this section this predictability seemed vaguely soothing. Now the same rhythm seems to leave the speaker repulsed and exasperated.

The last two stanzas do not resolve these questions. But suddenly they bring the speaker a spark of the delight for which he has been steadily losing hope since the beginning of this section. The steady sound of bees—a sound whose description is about to repeat the exact line with which the section started—is interrupted, mid-phrase, by a "clattering" of pigeons. Both are repetitive undulating sounds, so similar to each other that in the final line these sounds all fuse in the same gerund, "booming," that was previously associated only with bees. The clattering-booming of the pigeons is now not merely repetitive; it is intoxicating. At the beginning of the section the speaker seemed no more than calmly accepting of the old seraph who breathes in the odors of the pastoral scene. Now the speaker himself absorbs this odor with an erotic delight that "is sure what it intends." As Vendler puts it: "whatever our determinist metaphysics, … the experience of energetic free feeling flaunts its own truths, as spring, however predictable in theory, brings golden furies rising in us."[102]

Suddenly the speaker can no longer, as he did before, list the fine differences among the ways this scene repeats itself. He is experiencing it as a throbbing, unbroken cocoon. It is hard to know whether the real source of his momentary delight is this surrounding nature or an unexpected, objectless sexual excitement. More broadly, it is hard to describe this section as either a scene of progress or a scene of regress. The problems of pacing that seemed crucial to the first passage from "Notes" I studied are again foregrounded here. This time, rather than change pace, the speaker keeps changing the apparent stakes and significance of the emphatically steady, seemingly very predictable rhythm to which his feelings attach themselves. The same resonant booming, whose ebb and flow seems so regular and predictable, first beats out his peaceful happiness, then his aggravation, and then his intoxicated pleasure. This rhythmic predictability opens up several possible narratives among the discomforts or enthusiasms these beats so erratically pace, but does not definitively confirm any of them. The speaker could have arrived at this delight by discovering and accepting that his experiences form a predictable cycle, or by forgetting the lesson about their boring regularity that he articulated right before this section's ending. Even as something seems momentarily to make the speaker ecstatic, we have no guarantee that this scene will remain delightful to him—that it will not again, sooner or later, become withered and disappointing. His feelings' pace might finally have harmonized with its objects to give him insight into and peace within his world, or it might have helped him block these objects from his mind entirely, reducing them to merely a trivially hypnotic steady beat. The form of this section draws attention to this puzzle without offering any immediate solutions. Its stresses are prominent, and prominently regular throughout, as steady in the first pastoral stanzas as in the later distressed or delighted ones. Phrases such as "the seraph / Is satyr in Saturn," in which the same stress pattern, and a pattern of near-identical sounds, leads us through three drastically different frames of reference, enact these stanzas' surprising shifts of momentary tones and objects within apparent rhythmic predictability, a predictability that seems, at once, insightful and comically reductive.

Stevens does not offer us reasons why we should treat any of these momentary feelings as more important or more insightful than the others. Instead the passage explores the various questions the process of registering his speaker's shifting affective attachments raises about how much of his emotional life he understands or controls. Stevens keeps gesturing toward new possible ways of interpreting his speaker's feelings as more or less helpless, more or less urgent, more or less

[102] Vendler, *On Extended Wings*, 196.

finicky, grander or lesser riddles to make sense of. He shows how difficult it is to make sense of his speakers' feelings even when they do temporarily settle on a single object; how easily their response to this object can draw from it a confusingly wide variety of potentially but not definitively important insights.

These studies of feelings' unpredictability and shifting pace finally lay the ground for Stevens' last poems. These poems' speakers keep being surprised by waves of attraction they feel toward a world that seems to have sated them completely as well as to have completely lost its past appeal. Like "Notes," these later poems draw more attention to the form of emotional expression than they do merely to this expression's momentary objects. The speaker's feelings seem whimsical and inconsistently reliable not merely because they can be drawn to so many possible objects, but also because they seem so easily to discard—or in this last poems, perhaps even to forget—the prior response they might have had to each of their successive foci. These are poems at once, as Vendler puts it, of the imagination effortfully "coming out to see"[103] what is left out there for what might be the final time—and as Altieri observes, of "drowsiness," now finally accepted as the speaker's way of communing with the world. They draw attention not just to feelings' momentary foci but to the sheer effort with which they still try to reach toward the world around them, and to the way that this effort could just as easily signify the speaker's cognitive weakness as his definitive, final philosophical revelation. "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself" stages a moment at once of recalling and of forgetting. The speaker returns to an excitement about the world he had not thought he could still feel. "It was like / A new knowledge of reality," he says of the cry of a bird he hears at sunrise (534). This is a cry that the speaker has heard many times before. Now that he hears the sound once more, it instantly folds into a larger choir of associations. They bind the bird to the rising sun and make it seem, fantastically, as if this sun, though "still far away," could like the bird's voice also approach toward him (534). He describes the bird's "scrawny cry" as "A chorister whose c preceded the choir. / It was part of the colossal sun, // Surrounded by its choral rings."

"It was not from the vast ventriloquism / Of sleep's faded papier-mâché …," he emphasizes. "The sun was coming from the outside." (534) For the speaker to stress that he is not asleep draws attention to how laboriously he orients himself around this newly noticed sound. It also highlights how many details of this vision, including the sun's approach toward him, are in fact dreamlike. The way the line breaks and stanza breaks fragment his description into short phrases makes it seem all the more slow and effortful. On the other hand, they also remind us that the original event that startled this speaker was very brief. By setting up these tensions Stevens stresses his speaker's emotional effort but also makes it hard to tell whether the vision toward which his awakened sensitivities are working is a grand revelation or a trivial event whose details this aged speaker had temporarily forgotten. To follow this feeling is to discover not how well or how poorly this aged speaker has at his life's end come to appreciate his world, but how easily both alternatives could be mistaken for one another; how little this speaker might recall of his past engagements with this world, how readily what he takes to be a grand synthesis might be the simplest case of everyday Gestalt.

Thus to describe Stevens as a poet of emotional experiences whose stakes are never made quite clear is not to accuse him of imprecision or carelessness. Nor is it to suggest that he celebrates his speakers' incomplete, temporary foci as knowledge. Stevens keeps highlighting how many different forms, registers, and scales our emotional engagement with our world can take, and to how many disparate sensory and abstract spheres our feelings draw our attention. But he also frames

[103] Helen Vendler, *Last Looks, Last Books* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010), 31.

emotional experience as the experience of reaching into such new loci, breadths, and precisions of vision without being able consistently to distinguish between more and less insightful, more and less promising foci. Feelings' whimsicality makes them seem potentially capable of insights that we might not have consciously predicted; of leading us to forms of attention that might change our understanding of what parts of our world matter to us and how intensely we should focus on them. But this whimsicality also exposes how little guidance the emotional experience itself can give us about its possible outcomes, and how little insight it seems to have even into its immediate objects. Feelings as Stevens represent them cycle among various possible foci without being able even to form a consistent response to any of its objects. As they are drawn back to and away from these immediate spans of focus they do not seem able to synthesize these recurrent moments of attention into consistent, predictable attitudes, or perhaps even always to recall how significant a given object seemed to them previously. Stevens draws our attention both to how little these shifts of focus have to do with the reliability of philosophical thought, and to how easily his speakers seem moved to believe—in the moment—that their whimsical feelings are in fact leading them toward memorable insights, that each new focus they find might turn out to be their most proper and enlightening one. Rather than simply dissociate philosophy from feeling, he keeps challenging us to dissociate them in the experiences he represents—and shows both how vulnerable and how powerful feelings come to seem when we realize this distinction is so difficult to draw in practice.

Sylvia Plath's poetry shares with Stevens' this preoccupation with shifts in feelings' tone and apparent significance. Like Stevens, Plath represents feelings not as they reach toward any definitive objects or payoffs, but as they keep vacillating among a wide range of momentary foci foci. Her poetry most differs from Stevens' in the dimensions of her lyric worlds that these fluctuations make uncertain. Stevens is concerned with how such shifts in feelings' momentary apparent relevance complicate our efforts to treat emotional experiences as processes of learning about our world and our attachments to it. For Plath these states of feelings' uncertain productivity most centrally question her speakers' ability to justify why they keep uncovering and expressing their feelings. Her speakers are stuck in ongoing attempts to outline causes, objects, and ends that would account for why their feelings need to be made known and how they should be attended to. They also strive to understand and to protect their personal boundaries. In this sense Plath and Stevens differ most not in their greater or lesser certainty about the stakes of the feelings they represent, but in the kinds of stakes and goals whose potential presence seems most often to come to their speakers' minds—and, thus, in the kinds of tones their poems fall in and out of most frequently.

Seamus Heaney well summarizes the critical unease that surrounds Plath's lyric selves. "There is nothing *poetically* flawed about Plath's work," explains Heaney. "What may finally limit it is its dominant theme of self-discovery and self-definition. … I do not suggest that the self is not the proper arena of poetry. But I believe that the greatest work occurs when a certain self-forgetfulness is attained, or at least a fullness of self-possession denied to Sylvia Plath."[104] Plath draws attention to her represented selves and does not give us good enough reason to either dismiss these selves or embrace them. She looks to the outside world, as Marjorie Perloff and Hugh Kenner have variously put it, not for what it is but for how it can support her tottering, uncertain but certainly self-obsessed speakers. Perloff calls this Plath's "angst" and "animism."[105] Hugh Kenner more colorfully

[104] Seamus Heaney, "The Indefatigable Hoof-Taps: Sylvia Plath," *The Government of The Tongue: Selected Prose 1978-1987* (New York: Faber and Faber, 1988), 168.
[105] Marjorie Perloff, "'Angst' and Animism in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath," *JML* 1.1 (1970): 57-74.

describes her poems as made of "naked negation spilling down the sides of improvised vessels."[106] This self-obsession and pained vulnerability are all the more unnerving since unlike many other writers of her generation Plath was not directly touched by the world wars. "Are we surprised," as Charles Newman puts it, "that such fierce talent could develop in Wellesley, Massachusetts and Cambridge, England?"[107]

Critics have long been at a loss as to how to recuperate these ungrounded selves, or how to express why they continue to be attended to and valued. Vendler merely reiterates that, in the limited sphere and scope of its preoccupation with solipsism and self-destruction, Plath's poetry is as good as we could hope it to be. "It ought to be enough that a writer possesses a convincing sense of contemporary experience (no matter how dark) and can bring it unmistakably to life."[108] Plath should not be criticized for not making her subjective, exhaustingly emotional visions brighter or more socially productive; but we should also therefore not assume her poems could yield such larger payoffs. Perloff similarly claims that we should appreciate Plath's modesty in not trying to be more politically militant than her palette could credibly allow her to be.[109]

Others psychoanalyze Plath to show that such more rigorous attention recuperates behind her superficial emotional messes veins of coherence, regularity, and insight: insight into one woman's intricate mental life, and thus potentially into others'. As Axelrod puts it, "Her wish to tell the truth (as a dream may tell the truth of the unconscious) attached itself to her need to camouflage (as a dream tells the truth in disguise)."[110] Britzolakis reads Plath's poetry as an exploration and enactment of the Freudian death drive and the return of the repressed.[111] Axelrod himself claims Plath cannot progress beyond Freud's oral stage, and blames her parents (mostly the mother) for it. "Plath's compulsive orality appears throughout her discourse in the linked figures of *mouthing* and *eating*. These metaphors suggest that her need to voice poems was connected to disturbances in her earliest experience of parental nurturance."[112]

More recent critics have followed A. Alvarez (who called her poetry a "murderous art") in claiming for Plath's writing subversive political value.[113] Vivian Pollak well summarizes these views when she casts Plath as the figure of the tragically incapacitated ambitious woman: "Plath intended to have it all and, in her optimistic moods, believed that having it all was possible, especially if financial pressures abated. … She wanted to exemplify personal ambition, personal pleasure, social usefulness, and the institution of bourgeois motherhood. Seemingly none of her colleagues at Smith had succeeded in this project, but Plath was convinced that the personal could be the political."[114] Plath's work, Pollak claims, chronicles these ideals' disappointment and its political consequences for women like her. Deborah Nelson similarly calls Plath "a remarkably astute cultural critic."[115] Peel claims Plath is obsessed with the way her perspective as a historical subject changes based on the

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[106] Hugh Kenner, "Sincerity Kills," *Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry*, ed. Gary Lane (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1979), 42.

[107] Charles Newman, "Candor is the only Wile—The Art of Sylvia Plath," *The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium*, ed. Charles Newman (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), 53.

[108] Helen Vendler, *Coming of Age as a Poet* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2003), 144.

[109] Marjorie Perloff, "'A Ritual for Being Born Twice: Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*," *Contemporary Literature* 13.4 (1972): 515.

[110] Steven Gould Axelrod, *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990), 143.

[111] Christina Britzolakis, "*Ariel* and other poems," *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, ed. Jo Gill (New York: Cambridge UP, 2006), 108.

[112] Axelrod, 5.

[113] A. Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath," *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, 67.

[114] Vivian Pollak, "Moore, Plath, Hughes, and 'The Literary Life,'" *ALH* 17.1 (2005): 95.

[115] Deborah Nelson, "Plath, history, and politics," *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, 21.

context from which she is speaking.[116] Harold Fromm and Susan Gubar defend Plath's self-destructiveness—including her frequent portrayals of starved or suffering female bodies—as attempting to assert her female disempowerment, or to fight against the constraints of being embodied and historically constrained as such.[117] Jacqueline Rose claims that Plath dramatizes her inability directly to engage history in her lyrics as a sign of her social oppression.[118]

I want to side with Vendler and Perloff in emphasizing the degree to which Plath's poetry does keep struggling with, and thematizing, the ungroundability and confusion of its speakers' preoccupations. But I also want to find in Plath's slipperiness and disproportion a way of thinking about what it means to make one's emotions worthy of political or psychoanalytic scrutiny, and about the very process of considering how much such weight they should have. Plath's poems are not political statements; nor are they acts of psychoanalysis. But in dramatizing how widely feelings can range in search of their proper objects and consequences, they open up the larger question of what it means to follow one's feelings into what one cannot as yet claim is their proper ground; what it means to seek in the very whimsicality of feelings a means of testing what kinds of insight they might be capable of.

In her earliest poems Plath's speakers often strive to find within their world some objects that would appropriately respond to the feelings they articulate. Plath dramatizes both these feelings' rising pitches and her speakers' inability to figure out for what internal or external reasons they cannot find satisfying objects or embodiments. She struggles to make these tonal troubles and disproportions vehicles of and not obstacles to her craft.

Ted Hughes recounts that Plath's youthful "evolution as a poet went rapidly through successive molts of style, as she realized her true matter and voice."[119] Many of these poems self-consciously stage the artificiality of such "molts." "Rhyme" brings out much of what Robin Peel diagnoses as Plath's youthful "admiration for Nietzsche and her celebration of artistic individualism."[120] It also brings out Plath's uncertainty about how much of this self-celebratory confidence can be hers. The speaker tries and fails to curb a violently impatient greed. She owns a goose that does not lay golden eggs though she believes it could. In the course of the poem she grows frustrated and disembowels her fowl. Much of the poem's tension comes not just from this macabre scenario, but from the way its narrative seems to be taking place at once within and beyond her daydream, on the physical and on the verbal level. The speaker apparently attempts at once to make herself believe in a vague fairy tale and to make her language as meticulously, precisely accurate as possible. Plath makes us struggle not simply to sort out how this speaker's feeling is shaping her perceptual experience, but also to understand why or to what end this feeling needs to be sorted out.

Plath's speaker compares her goose to an old, rich woman who buys sex with her wealth. "She … struts / the barnyard like those taloned hags / Who ogle men / And crimp their wrinkles in a grin, / Jangling their great money bags." (50) The metaphor roams far from how a goose would normally be described. A goose's feet are webbed, not taloned. Geese have no wrinkles; they cannot grin. It is as if the speaker were trying not merely to describe her world but to bring about a world

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116 Robin Peel, *Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics* (London: Associated University Presses, 2002), 108.
117 Harold Fromm, "Sylvia Plath, Hunger Artist," *The Hudson Review* 43.2 (1990): 256; Susan Gubar, "Prosopopoeia and Holocaust Poetry in English: Sylvia Plath and her Contemporaries," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14.1 (2001): 202.
118 Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993).
119 Ted Hughes, "Introduction," *The Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Harper, 1981), 16. Plath's *Collected Poems* are hereafter cited in-text.
120 Robin Peel, "The Ideological Apprenticeship of Sylvia Plath," *JML* 27.4 (2004): 61.

that would better match her feelings' intensity. This obstinate, precious goose seems to be at once part of her environment and an elaborate daydream, as well as a metaphor for the poem itself as the speaker tries to make it seem valuable for her own and our benefit.

When the speaker finally kills the goose, its "gut" is not, as the first stanza promises, "honeycombed with golden eggs." Instead there "exit from a smoking slit" not gold but "ruby dregs." (50) This macabre jewel is the poem's most acute moment of realism, as the speaker finally applies her meticulously crafted language to what a goose's shiny entrails could actually look like. But it is also its highest point of solipsism: she apparently still refuses to see the goose as anything else than treasures even after she has been proven wrong. We seem to be seeing a show both of this speaker's ruthless pursuit of her wants and of the world's mocking resistance to her attempts at making her feelings seem worthwhile. Her final act of violence at once perpetuates her daydream and undoes it. Each of these interpretations gives the poem a different tone. They make the speaker sound miserable or self-mocking, horrified or pleased, at what could be either a traumatic event or not a real event at all. But rather than help us choose among these options, in leaving us with this final image the poem merely contours out the various weights we could give to its violent emotions, and the various kinds of inner and outer experience against which we could test the accuracy and intensity of Plath's language. The poem does not explore why it is particularly urgent to pity, condemn, or support its speaker's efforts, but why it continues to be difficult to know what outcomes these efforts might have had, and against what standards they should be measured. To the extent that this is a poem about making poems—which its title, "Rhyme," would suggest—it seems to represent writing as the process not merely of parsing out a troubled feeling, but of acknowledging how easily this feeling seems to fold now into a more trivial and now into a more serious context; how difficult it is to tell, based on comparisons among this feeling's divergent foci, which of these foci might be most appropriate for it.

As Plath's poetry matures she finds ways of turning such uncertainties into ways of exploring not just her writing process, but also the very relationships that apparently make her speaker's emotional self-control and clarity of vision so hard to achieve. Her poems ask what kinds of attention each of her speakers' feelings deserves from these speakers themselves and from others. There is always a pathos to the way her poems search for answers to such questions. But this pathos comes not from their emotional stakes but from the way Plath's speakers keep waiting to ascertain them. The speakers' plights seem in turns self-fabricated and oppressively imposed upon them, existential and non-existent. The whimsicality with which the feelings she represents keep attaching themselves to ever new objects and narratives makes these feelings seem at once restlessly, persistently inquisitive, and incapable of setting any limits to the scale and span of what they successively attach themselves to.

Plath's initial path toward this larger poetic range passes through a series of failed elegies. "The Colossus," "Tulips," and "Parliament Hill Fields" are three major poems from this period. In all three, Plath's speakers are stalled in an attempt to proclaim and to accept a passing: the passing of a father, an unborn son, and the speaker's own body fallen into illness. The speaker wonders what relationships or experiences she has lost and which ones still sustain her. She seeks to know whether she could fully reclaim any of them or abandon them completely. The poems begin by juxtaposing against each other tonally dissonant images, and eventually—as in "Rhyme"— combine them into a single manifold image. These final images represent both the persistence of her speakers' feelings and their persistent confusion; both these speakers' apparent readiness to direct their emotion to some new, potentially enlightening object, and their tragicomic continued inability to discern—even

after the course of the entire poem's emotional explorations—what new scope, span, or intensity, their feelings now can or ought to take.

"I shall never get you put together entirely," Plath begins "The Colossus" (129). She claims to be "scaling little ladders with gluepots and pails of Lysol" to piece her father together (129). But we never get a sense—not even a hypothesis—of what the father would look like were he reconstituted into a "pieced, glued, and properly jointed" thing (129). Plath moves between portraying her speaker as dominating her defenseless dead father and feeling entirely overwhelmed by him. She makes him seem, in turns, comically small and mythically great, eerily accessible and distant. "Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles / Proceed from your great lips," her speaker first proclaims, surprising us both that the father is still talking and by how brutally she can insult this miraculously animate mouth (129). Then this insulted mouth becomes a gold miner's river, but one in which no metaphoric nuggets of wisdom are to be found. "Thirty years now I have labored / to dredge the silt from your throat. / I am none the wiser." (129) The poem is carried onward by the many ways the speaker applies herself to this fragmented body and the many fantastic orders or textures it gives to her world. The father's "brows" are "weedy acres." She has vainly been trying to clear the "tumuli" of his "eyes," which are so large they look "bald" like hills or heads (129). The father's body transforms the sky above them into an *Oresteia*—and it is also, "all by [itself]," "pithy and historical as the Roman Forum." (129) His ear is a "cornucopia" in which she "squat[s]" to keep herself from wind (130). She lunches among his bones. His tongue is so large the "sun rises under" its "pillar." (130) Plath's speaker performs a self whose shifting momentary impulses—toward aggression, anger, sadness, laughter, self-aggrandizement—in each line give us a new idea of how large a part of her father she mourns, and how essential or superficial the feelings she expresses are. Vendler calls her tone "equivocal and volatile: it is by turns satiric, disconsolate, impertinent, quiet, and resigned."[121] It is in part for such ruthless, self-punishing slides of register that critics such as Kathleen Lant criticize Plath as having no respect for female bodies and rights—and others, such as Lisa Narbeshuber, praise her as a feminist provocatively flaunting her own disfiguration.[122] But Plath is not merely rejecting her speaker's feelings. Her speaker seems to cast them against the world to see what resonances each such feeling creates and what these resonances tell her about the depth of her loss or her ability to manage it. Vendler shows that these stanzas' rhythms are guided by the stresses of the four words, *Electra*, *Colossus*, *Oresteia*, and *father*, around which the speaker's thoughts circle. Vendler claims that these regular rhythms are intended to measure the centeredness of the speaker's thought.[123] I would argue instead that they mete out the mere time during which the speaker keeps following her feeling's shifting spans and pitches: the time during which we cycle through these feelings without getting closer to a full view of these four central presences toward which the poem keeps reaching. In a sense, as Britzolakis has argued, Plath is depicting returns to melancholia in the Freudian sense—to the double state of believing that one's lost love is a part of oneself and that this person is no longer attainable.[124] But her persistent tonal shifts stage these transitions as attempts to figure out not only her feelings' direction but also their tone and importance. They represent her speaker's ongoing hesitations both about what parts of her father she mourns and about how important it is to anyone, even to herself, that she still feels compelled to

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[121] Vendler, *Coming of Age*, 125.

[122] Kathleen Margaret Lant, "The Big Strip Tease: Female Bodies and Male Power in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath," *Contemporary Literature*, 34.4 (1993): 620-69; Lisa Narbeshuber, "The Poetics of Torture: The Spectacle of Sylvia Plath's Poetry," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 34.2 (2004): 185-203.

[123] Vendler, *Coming of Age*, 126.

[124] Britzolakis, "*Ariel* and other poems," 118-121.

mourn them; about how she would need to imagine her father in order to make her feelings towards him seem consistently and lastingly understandable and significant.

In the poem's ending the speaker fuses these various pitches of aggression, condescension, admiration, and gratitude. This ending also makes most explicit the temporal dimension of the speaker's grief. It seems to be an ambiguous moment of waiting for new tones and intensities of feeling to announce themselves to her. "My hours are married to shadow. / No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel / On the blank stones of the landing." (130) This could be an image of Electra after Agamemnon's homecoming and murder, but also of Penelope losing hope of Ulysses' return or of Iphigenia dead after her father sacrificed her to help his ships sail away. For the speaker to say that her "hours are married to shadow" makes it seem, ambiguously, as if she has given up on her beloved person entirely and definitively refused to give up on him. Vendler proposes that these last lines' ever greater melodiousness makes its final images seem soothing and definite.[125] But these vague visions of shadows, waters, and long periods of time—along with their as-yet unpacked manifold mythic associations—seem instead to mark out as a yet-unknown territory in which new forms of grief might clarify before the speaker's eyes. They gesture not toward her mourning's endpoint but toward its constant open-endedness, to the way that this moment of apparent resolution might soon be belied by a new emotional outburst whose possible contours she can only discern in very vague, tragicomically disparate ways. This impression that we are left waiting for something that is about to take shape is reinforced by the stanza's sounds. "Scrape of a keel" imitates the sound the keel would make right after the speaker says she "no longer" listens for it. "Blank stones of the landing" echoes the coming and going of the waves to which the speaker claims to have ceased attending. Plath makes this final open-endedness seem a sign both of the poem's restless eagerness to keep taking in her father, and representing him, in ever new ways, and of the doubts the poem keeps expressing about how, among the poem's whimsically shifting and never crystalizing aims and scopes, the value and importance of the feeling she is trying to express might become clear to her.

"Parliament Hill Fields," a poem about a miscarriage, takes its pathos from partial, imperfect overlaps among many kinds of emotional isolation and porousness. "The round sky goes on minding its business," says Plath's speaker in the first stanza. "Your absence is inconspicuous; / Nobody can tell what I lack." (152) The sky is not merely inattentive. It is "minding its business," as if it knew of the speaker's bereavement but chose not to prod her about it. In the next two lines the unborn child becomes so "inconspicuous" that the only one who knows about its absence is the speaker herself. Between these two opening phrases the speaker stages herself as not merely grieving in privacy, or grieving in front of an indifferent public, but confronting us with a grief of which we do not know how much is hidden and how much is disclosed. The speaker seems at times to assume others could or should resonate with this feeling, and at other times makes the persons or sensations around her seem entirely divorced from her inner experiences.

The poem continues as a series of encounters in which such degrees of communion or isolation are uncertain. The speaker's "eyes wince / and brim," but she claims it is just because of the sun (152). The wind "stops [her] breath like a bandage" and the comparison is ambiguous enough that it could describe not only the wind's outward effects but also memories of the hospital or the speaker's efforts to keep herself from sobbing (152). "A crocodile of small girls /… / Opens to swallow" her, and "One child drops a barrette of pink plastic." "None of them seem to notice," writes Plath, making us wonder if what they do not notice is the speaker's bereavement, her

[125] Vendler, *Coming of Age*, 132.

motherliness, her unfitness to be a mother, or merely the absence of the pink barrette (152). Gulls fly above her as what Vendler calls "surrogate spectators," put in this poem for what seems like no further end beyond making the speaker seem even more exposed.[126] For Perloff this speaker urgently wants to, and cannot, be claimed by her environment.[127] But such a reading sells short the oscillation between the public and the private that makes her walk so unbearable. Plath makes it seem both as if all the presences and sensations around her speaker momentarily became parts of how her grief finds expression, and as if no single one of these momentary outward foci did much more than distract or lead on a person who wants nothing but the child she lost. The larger or smaller, more or less moving objects to which her speaker shifts her gaze are all potential paths toward understanding how she feels, as well as—in the sheer multiplicity of the tones they strike—constant obstacles to it.

The poem ends with an unfulfilled vision of a more private sphere out of Wallace Stevens—a small world of objects and associations the speaker could call her own, one in which she could more comfortably test and mirror the extent of her grief. "The day empties its images / like a cup or a room," she comments (153). Plath telescopes the day-lit park in which her speaker has been walking into the room of her surviving child. She transcribes these hills, fields, and radiances into the curves and angles of nursery plants, furniture, and family photos: "the little pale blue hill / In your sister's birthday picture starts to glow." (153) It is as if this smaller space, of which she can better claim possession, might let her speaker parse out less ambiguously the ways this unborn child has been with her throughout the day.

But in the last stanza Plath reverses this resolution. "The old dregs, the old difficulties take me to wife. … "I enter the lit house." (153) We realize that we have previously seen the speaker not in the nursery but in her fantasy of a nursery. We have seen not the grounding of the speaker's daylong grief in a familiar, controllable external setting, but an as yet unfulfilled hope of doing so. To the "dregs" of her reality she is not mother but "wife," a position not of parentage but, as the transitive "take" suggests, of unequal partnership. As she enters the house we see neither its interior nor any resolution to the grief that has ambiguously racked her throughout the poem. The speaker's disappearance through the door of this building echoes the half-divined ships and lapping waves of "The Colossus." The ending gestures not toward the possibility of clear-eyed stillness but toward a momentary occlusion of the next way the speaker's grief will find expression. It hints at a new possible but as yet invisible space onto which her feelings might now start attaching themselves, and within which their tone and stakes might keep unsettling even further. This speaker's restless feelings seem at once dignified and helpless, perceptive and confused, in refusing to recognize anything around themselves as a proper objective substitute for the child she grieves. This final dream of a physical space that mapped out this dream entirely suggests that such a substitution might be possible—that what this speaker seeks is not this child's impossible return but a complicated, multifaceted way of making sense of its passing. But this ending also raises the question of how this speaker could ever build such a space in the world she shares with others; how this feeling could ever articulate its weight and resonance so unquestionably in anything but a fantasy.

In "Tulips" the speaker vainly tries to attain a state of deathlike stillness. She keeps testing the boundaries this stillness would need to fill in order to match the sensitivity and intensity of her frustration. The speaker begins by describing an initial interval of hopeful peace. She claims that she has given her body entirely to others. "I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions. / I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses / And my history to the anesthetist and my

[126] Vendler, *Coming of Age*, 138.
[127] Marjorie Perloff, "On the Road to 'Ariel': The 'Transitional' Poetry of Sylvia Plath," *The Iowa Review* 4.2 (1973): 97.

body to surgeons." (160) Then she imagines that, rather than relieve her of her body, these persons and the death they augur are filling it with stillness: "I imagine them [i.e. the dead] / Shutting their mouths on it, like a Communion tablet." (160) The nurses who bring her "numbness in bright needles" similarly make her calm by steadily drugging her (160).

But this growing calm keeps being interrupted. The speaker devotes herself ever more fully to locating the full scope of this interruption and figuring out how she could do away with it. Even as she dreams of self-relinquishment and of soothing ingestions, she feels force-fed by other sensations that penetrate her purview too insistently. "They have propped my head between the pillow and the sheet-cuff / Like an eye between two white lids that will not shut. / Stupid pupil, it has to take everything in." (160) She finds herself stared at with similar insistence by the "baggage" she brought: "my patent leather overnight case" that shows she will be coming home in not very long; "my husband and child smiling out of the family photo." (160) This half-comic force-feeding, and the speaker's uncertain degrees of agency or self-awareness within it, echo the famous passage in *The Bell Jar* where Plath's protagonist describes the many life paths before her as a bunch of ripening figs:

> I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet.[128]

Like "Tulips," the passage embeds violence in the lap of luxury. What Plath's speakers worry about is not bread or water, but dessert food or freshly cut flowers. They are not concerned with scarcity, but with their apparent inability to control their easily ignited attractions to or repulsions from all manner of comforts within reach. Rather than explore a well-defined political claim for gender equality, both passages present us with a feeling that finds in its vaguely comic embodiments a sign both of its own intensity and of its continued apparent incoherence. They represent the process of trying to figure out to what extent this incoherence exposes the feeling's own presumption and to what extent it showcases the oppressiveness of the world within which it tries to carve out a space for itself; whether this feeling's whimsical indecision is a sign of her right to better things or merely of her hypersensitive lack of discernment.

"Tulips" next stanzas stage a crescendo of this irritation. "The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me," the speaker starts dramatically (161). She goes on to accuse the tulips of conspiring against her and of weighing her down like "a dozen red lead sinkers round my neck." (161) They finally become a "loud noise" around which all of her sensations center "the way a river / Snags and eddies round a sunken rust-red engine." (161) Plath makes us follow how exuberantly the spans and pitches of her speaker's feelings keep changing from one moment to the next. She again draws attention, through her metaphors' tonal dissonances, not to any coherent reasons why this frustration should matter but to her speaker's ongoing attempts to articulate such reasons. Scott DeShong thus describes Plath's effect on him as a reader: "There is more here, and indeed less, than an association of images with particular emotions; the words contain, represent, or transmit feelings less than they serve as a dwelling place for them."[129] This seems true to the pathos of "Tulips"—and

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[128] Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 75.

[129] Scott DeShong, "Sylvia Plath, Emmanuel Levinas, and the Aesthetics of Pathos," *Postmodern Culture* 8.3 (1998), online only. Accessed through Project Muse on 8/2/12, at http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/postmodern_culture/v008/8.3deshong.html

these dwellings are also all temporary, as the speaker's feelings seem constantly to shrink away from them or overspill them.

Even as these accusations keep escalating, they also begin to loop back into descriptions of that which the tulips have apparently been trying to invade—of the speaker's wounded, recovering body. Plath refolds her speaker's hospital room into a ribcage within which beats a flower-like heart. "And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes / Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me." (161) She ends by seeming to taste blood in her mouth: "The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea, / And comes from a country far away as health." (161) The image of communion is back, and of death. But this time Plath's speaker is communing with herself. This time we also do not know if what Plath's speaker feels enveloped in is merely her physical body or the whole room whose distractions she has managed to accept. She might be sensing, in her felt smallness and stillness, the proper bounds of her flesh or merely the shrinking of her focus as the drugs she has been given begin to work. Her images of the sea and faraway countries, and of future health, again seem measures both of how far away these feelings' potentially trustworthy resolutions still continue to be, and of how easily this speaker might be crediting her feeling with a scope and ambition that do not properly belong to it—letting what might be merely her dazed irritation against simple hospital procedures spiral out into imagined realms of personal power and self-assertion that might have little or no bearing on the immediate situation at hand. Rather than merely assert this stay at the hospital as a symptom of how society treats her as a woman, Plath exposes the confusion and vulnerability involved with trying to make this move; the difficulty and vulnerability of trying to show why this feeling's initial object might not be its most proper one, and of trying to figure out what the scope and span of its proper objects should be.

Plath achieves what most critics call her mature style when her poems move more decisively from reminiscence into the present. Rather than poems of attempted mourning they become ones of working toward action and confrontation. Plath shows how tonally unstable emotional expression is even when it appears, ostensibly, to be directed merely toward a single object or a single person; how easily feelings' seeming import unravels in and through the very diligence with which they seek to touch on and to mine every possible aspect and detail of their foci.

The first stanza of "Daddy" gives a good sense of how these lyric strategies reshape Plath's poems in *Ariel*. "Daddy" makes us aware of the ease with which the speaker's feelings turn from what appear to be long personal narratives to brief, stereotypical assessments; the ease with which such divergent depths and intensities of accusation are often condensed within a single line or a single word she throws at her father. These feelings' constantly changing expression marks the ever-varying apparent distance from this poem's occasion to the origins of this speaker's anger, as well as from its utterance to the way this utterance could eventually become a larger or smaller, more or less life-changing event. It is as if the very thoroughness with which the speaker tries to lay out and to synthesize every possible level on which her father's treatment of her could be expressed kept unraveling her attempted accusation into apparent confusion and helplessness.

Each of Plath's phrases compresses many possible short-term and long-term reasons for why the speaker hates her father. The speaker starts *in medias res*: "You do not do, you do not do / Any more, black shoe." (222) All these words implicitly refer back to one man, but they do not add up to a coherent picture of him as one person. It is, as Jahan Ramazani puts it, as if Plath's speaker could at once think about nothing but her father and anything but him.[130] The adjective "black," for example, pulls us into several registers and narratives at once. It could refer to mere physical fact, to

[130] Jahan Ramazani, "'Daddy, I have had to kill you': Plath, Rage, and the Modern Elegy," *PMLA* 108.5 (1993): 1149.

the father's character, or to a marker of historical or sexual identity. The first is anticlimactic: it turns the speaker's aggression into a question of immediate taste or idiosyncrasy. The second is so broadly metaphoric it sounds infantile, or makes it seem as if the speaker were unthinkingly quoting a nursery rhyme. The third, if one already connects the black shoe to Gestapo leather or to the sexual significance it has acquired by the sixties, is charged with traumatic world history or with an eroticism that makes the speaker's angry pain a form of pleasure. Susan Gubar goes so far as to see this last double reference, and its further echoes in the poem, as a series of "brilliant insights into a debilitating sexual politics at work in fascist anti-Semitism."[131] The word is disarming because it could be attempting to express a moment's childish fury or a long period of complicated individual or communal angers and desires. It shows us many conflicting paths toward this feeling—each of which seems to come from and to merit a different length and intensity of consideration—and seems to endorse all these paths with equal force. As the stanza continues, these ambiguous tones and potential contexts of the speaker's words keep multiplying. The speaker fits into this shoe "like a foot." (222) The noun comes with singsong predictability at the end of a triple rhyme: do / do / shoe. A "foot" is the first thing one would think of fitting into a shoe. This association is so incontrovertible that it makes her anger seem at once securely premeditated and comically on-the-spot. While this shoe has oppressed her she has been "poor and white." Both adjectives could refer to either long-term or short-term conditions. They could hint at the speaker's past suffering or just at her present self-pity. She has "barely" dared to "breathe or Achoo," she says as if the two were equally large rights to be deprived of, or equally regular long-term needs (222). These metaphors all play with different lengths of thought, habit, and experience. The feelings these metaphors express could be momentary or long-standing, carefully weighted or spontaneous. The speaker finally also mentions that the father has been hurting her for "thirty years." This time frame reminds us that her feelings could have lasted all her lifetime. But it also highlights that it is still not clear how much of their ground this poem has been able to express—or, indeed, whether the speaker has been able to limit herself to recalling just her own life experiences. It is not merely, as Kendall argues, that Plath is trying to collapse all these options into a mass "holocaust" of real and mythical, past and present victims.[132] Each of the narratives Plath's ambiguous nouns and adjectives fold together presupposes for her speaker and her speaker's father a different degree of agency, size, power, and self-awareness. The stanza's pathos turns not on the father's monstrosity or the grandeur of the daughter's hurts, but on the way the process of exploring her unanswered rages seems to unravel into mere sentimentality precisely because of its apparent attempts at thoroughness; the way in which her feelings' whimsicality makes her angers seem the more groundless, the more grounds for her anger they allow her to find.

"Ariel," the speaker's famous self-portrait, turns on the uncertain, dreamlike materiality these incomplete attempts to sound and define her feelings' objects give to the speaker's body. For Rose poems like this one showcase the "provisional, precarious nature of self-representation," the way the body and its urges resist verbal labels.[133] For Britzolakis "Ariel" is a poem that systematically "forges its own myth" into which this speaker's restless Nietzschean mind could settle.[134] In a sense, both Rose and Britzolakis are right—and much of the poem's power comes from this duality. In a state that seems half-dream, half-waking, at a time that seems to be nearing dawn, the speaker feels her body reshape itself. We begin with "Stasis in darkness. / Then the substanceless blue / Pour of

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131 Gubar, 203.
132 Tim Kendall, *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), 127.
133 Rose, 5.
134 Christina Britzolakis, *Sylvia Plath and the Theater of Mourning* (New York: Oxford UP, 2000), 184.

tor and distances." (239) Plath enacts this transition from stasis to blurred movement visually and aurally: "the substanceless blue" 'pours' into "substanceless blue pour" after the line break, and the sounds of "blue," "pour," and "tor," meld into each other. But even as she thus makes this transition melodiously vivid, she also draws attention to the gap between its formal precision and the abstract haze of the way these opening lines semantically describe what is happening to her. This represented experience seems at once acutely, self-controlledly subtle and blindly intoxicated. The speaker seems to be applying an extremely refined sensibility to express and give weight to nothing more than a feeling of confused disconnectedness.

The speaker is then surrounded by various large and small presences, all of them resonant with myths and other cultural tropes. She unites with these images, feels assaulted by them, ingests them, flies apart from them. As Heather Clark puts it, the speaker "is a wild animal in motion, shape-shifting, … eluding both reader and writer who seek to capture its essence."[135] She "grows" one with "God's lioness" (the meaning of the word "Ariel" in Hebrew),[136] splits off from her as in a splitting "furrow," is caught by "nigger-eye / Berries" that "cast dark / Hooks" and leave a taste in her mouth that is "black" and "sweet" but also like "blood." (239) Their shifts in register, from the biblical to the racist, seem governed as much by semantics as by mere melody. It seems as if the speaker or the implied author were making tiny, precise steps from one sound to another, as well as huge, as yet unaccountable leaps from one social sphere to the next. We are following a mind that seems both meticulous and disoriented; a mind whose very acuity on one level seems to propel the speaker into a loss both of logic and of self-awareness.

All these wild transformations lead to the speaker's being hauled through air, flaking away into a "White / Godiva," turning—like an inverted Aphrodite—to "foam," to "glitter," and finally to "dew" that is about to steam up into air with the coming morning (239-240). Plath reduces the speaker to one self-enclosed point, and in the same gesture contours two different paths—a mythical and a physical one—toward this speaker's past or future transformations. This double movement of effortful concentration and dispersal is echoed on the auditory level. As Vendler observes, these final lines more and more obliquely but also more and more obsessively repeat the pronoun "I." It appears first in its proper meaning, then in puns ("the red / eye") and in assonances ("flies," "suicidal," "drive," 240).[137] These puns highlight both the I's persistence and the morphing boundaries of what it is part of. They make us aware both of an ongoing effort to follow and trace a presence the speaker identifies as her own, and of this effort's disconnected fragmentariness. Plath's final gestures toward this speaker's endpoints and origins could of course be read as hints of her coming death or rebirth. But I want to draw attention to the difficulty of either separating the two very disparate levels—the semantic and the auditory one—on which these transformations could be understood, or of fusing these two levels on which the poem's feelings are expressed into a single view of the speaker's self-awareness and agency. The speaker's feelings seem almost childishly modest in their objects—and effortlessly skillful—on one of these levels, and hopelessly confused and ambitious on the other. As in "Daddy," Plath challenges her speaker to separate from each other—or harmoniously to synthesize—these different levels on which her feelings seem to be operating all at once in each of their expressions; to either fully embrace or fully reject these whimsical feelings that are equally surprising in how precise they momentarily seem and in how easily they can overreach themselves in this same, apparently precise gesture. Merely noting these

[135] Heather Clark, "Tracking the Thought-Fox: Sylvia Plath's Revision of Ted Hughes," *JML* 28.2 (2005): 106.
[136] Kendall, 68.
[137] Vendler, *Last Looks*, 54.

different levels of expression seems, at the same time, to make these feelings seem admirably sensitive and to make them impossible consistently to justify.

Most of *Ariel*'s other poems dwell on this process of working through feelings whose aims and stakes are at once admirably and confusingly varied—on trying to rebuild a sustainable self out of and around them. Critics have made much of these poems' self-reflexive fascination with the form and direction of their speakers' outbursts. Paula Bennett has described Plath's poems about bees as a woman's discoveries of a more authentic or a more plastic sense of self.[138] In David Holbrook's analysis, they showcase Plath's debilitating cognitive distortions.[139] For Carole Ferrier and Jessica Lewis Luck, they have been models for a new kind of feminism.[140] As Luck puts it "in the bee poems, Plath moves beneath the surface of the performative model of identity … exploring in the image of the hive a more deeply biological foundation for identity and source for feminist resistance."[141] While these poems certainly reach toward discourses of self-transparency or self-control, I would argue that they are all most immediately preoccupied with how difficult it is to tell that such a moment of heightened, stabilizing self-awareness has occurred, or to know what weight to give to it.

Plath's bee poems follow her speakers' bees as they become more and less excited and more and less mobile—as they threaten more and less to hurt the person who buys them, keeps them, takes their honey. These poems hinge in great part on the analogy one could make between the bees' shifting degrees of energy or freedom and the way these speakers' feelings alternately still and intensify, appear to clarify and then to cloud her judgment. But they also depend on the speakers' and the bees' incommensurability. Plath stresses the very different stakes of observing or experiencing a hive's fear and one's own. These poems also try to imagine what it would be like to understand and to predict the similar incommensurability of a single person's successive emotional foci. In these late poems Plath's speakers attempt to contour out both each of their immediate feelings and the fringe of what might lie beyond them. They strive to understand each feeling's current stakes but also to prepare themselves for their undoing.

In "The Arrival of the Bee Box" the bees are in a box. The speaker keeps imagining this box as the origin or endpoint of a more or less momentous transformation. The speaker first describes the bees as if they were one person, either newborn or just deceased: a "midget" in a "coffin" or "a square baby." (212) Then the bees fragment in her mind into their individual tiny bodies. She imagines they are shrunk persons who could again be brought back to their full size, making her the owner of a great slave ship: "the swarmy feeling of African hands / Minute and shrunk for export, / Black on black, angrily clambering." (213) As she hears the bees' buzzing she describes them as "a Roman mob" calling to her though she is "not a Caesar." This could mean either that the bees are attacking her by mistake, or that they are trying to grant her a power she does not yet have over them (213). She imagines herself removing these loud bees from her sight more or less quickly, by sending them away or starving them: "They can be sent back. / They can die, I need feed them nothing, I am the owner." (213) And then, as if the bees were not a mob of "maniacs" but a Greek god, she asks whether they would eventually stop searching for her if she turned into a dryad. "I wonder if they would forget me / If I just undid the locks and stood back and turned into a tree."

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[138] Paula Bennett, *My Life a Loaded Gun: Female Creativity and Feminist Poetics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986).
[139] David Holbrook, *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence* (London: The Athlone Press, 1976), 214-216.
[140] Carole Ferrier, "The Beekeeper's Apprentice," *Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry*, ed. Gary Lane (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1979), 203-217; Jessica Lewis Luck, "Exploring the 'Mind of the Hive': Embodied Cognition in Sylvia Plath's Bee Poems," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 26.2 (2007): 287-308.
[141] Luck, 290-291.

(213) The poem ends with an image of the gratitude she hopes the bees might feel for her tomorrow, if not yet today. "Tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will set them free. // The box is only temporary." (213)

As Luck puts it, the speaker seems to both fear and revel in the states of mind into which these bees throw her. "At the same time that she fears the seemingly chaotic box, she also begins to embrace her lack of control over it."[142] I do not agree with Luck that the bee-box can merely be equated with the speaker's own mental states. Much of the poem's power comes from how different they are. Yet I think Luck is right that in her interactions with these bees Plath's speaker is trying to imagine what it would be like to circumscribe and come to terms with a shifting and fragmented emotional landscape. Each of her scenarios of these bees' escapes or transformations tries not merely to find matches for her momentary feelings but to imagine narratives that could curb these feelings into larger landscapes with clear endpoints and starting points—and with a single leader ruling over them. Yet while she throws threats and insults at her bees, Plath's speaker also keeps showcasing how little the disconnected mental explosions these words signal can as yet do to change the bees' current state or even properly to assess the speaker's degree of agency over them. What Vendler designates and parses out as Plath's "melodrama" and her "restraint" here fold into each other.[143] We are shown both this speaker's ongoing attempts to curb her feelings into a single, coherent landscape, and the extent to which none of her metaphors come close to securing for her feelings sustainable, real ground. We see both each line's attempts to contour out the new shapes the speaker's feelings might now start taking, and the ways in which her successive images never quite line up into a coherent set of expectations—the ways in which her talk of leading her bees makes her spiral out into grand historical comparison but does not lead her even to touch the box she claims she might so easily take control of. As we are finally left waiting for another day when the box will be opened, the poem makes the speaker's imagined sense of control seems both hopeful and comically untested. The speaker seems vulnerable in her minimal hopes of controlling nothing more than a swarm of insects, and eerily presumptuous in instantly trying to also model this sense of control on so many lofty precedents—while never, in the process, applying any of these efforts to shore in the fragmentariness of her expressed feelings and thoughts in themselves.

In these representations of her speakers' attempts to discover the origins, objects, and import of their feelings, Plath focuses more than Stevens on these speakers' uncertain personal boundaries and dignity. But both poets' tonal shifts seem to stem from the same kinds of preoccupations. Like Stevens, Plath shows what we can find out about feelings if we pay most attention not to their most promising stakes but to the difficulty of making sense of these stakes. She draws attention to the process of trying to figure out what kinds of payoffs each feeling might yield and how important these feelings' potential payoffs are. Plath's poems are never quite political statements, but they also do not assume that the emotional experiences they stage should matter merely for their own or for their speakers' sakes. Plath makes us notice both the ways in which the feelings she represents seem to enact what might appear to be precise and creative attempts at self-discovery and self-analysis, and the ways in which the very diversity of the motivations they can momentarily find for themselves can unravel any hopes of proving these feelings' importance or productivity. Rather than merely assert these feelings' connection to or detachment from political or social action, she challenges us to see how difficult these lines might be to draw—and to appreciate how much hinges on setting such limits.

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[142] Luck, 297.

[143] Vendler, *Last Looks*, 47-48.

Plath and Stevens do not embrace any particular kinds or directions of their shifts of perspective as their poetry's guiding force. Instead they both focus on emotional experiences that seem momentarily to alter one's viewpoint but have not yet crystalized into reliable political and philosophical statements. Both Plath and Stevens thus confirm and celebrate feelings' role as potential sources of productive additions or revisions to our larger beliefs and commitments. But they also disrupt the ease with which we might want to either trust or dismiss feelings' easily shifting foci as a source of political or philosophical insights. To follow their speakers' attempts to express their feelings properly, and to make full sense of them, is to note how easily what might appear to be these feelings' presumption fuses with their apparent analytic diligence and modesty; how easily these feelings' tone and importance seem to be confused because of the very acuity with which they focus on and test their sensitivity against ever new spans of concepts or sensations. Rather than merely praise these feelings' resourcefulness as sources of new perspectives and foci—or dismiss them as bad versions of more astute philosophical or political searches for such perspectives—Plath and Stevens show how challenging it is for their speakers to decide how broad or how local, how narrow or how varied an application of these feelings would be politically or philosophically significant; to separate from each other these feelings' trivial and insightful or productive expressions. Instead of separating philosophy and politics from the realm of feeling, Plath and Stevens seem to represent these larger realms as something that emotions reach locally and inconsistently only to lose them rapidly from sight—as something that emotions lose hold of, paradoxically, by the very eager gestures that might have allowed them productively to attain and to add to these larger realms in the first place. Even as feelings' capacity to momentarily draw our attention to new and unexpected foci might be a source of their capacity to enrich our understanding, it might also make feelings easily seduced into asserting or hoping for philosophical or political potential in foci that cannot effectively yield it.

To reconsider their poetry from this angle within a modernist context can enrich our understanding of both poets' relationship to this period's larger debates about the relationship of politics and philosophy to individuals' inner lives. It can help us understand their work not as a rejection of politics or philosophy—or a more or less presumptuous appropriation of them—but as an assertion of the difficulty of making either of these gestures; of expressing feelings that could either be made entirely unrelated to these other realms, or that could belong to them consistently. Within the context of current-day affect theory, these poets' exploration of whimsical feelings opens up avenues of analyzing not merely feelings' capacity to become politically or philosophically significant, but the locality and ephemerality of the ways in which they appear to gain each particular kind of potential significance; the difficulty of transposing what might appear to be an insightful feeling in one kind of perspective to other, larger or smaller scopes of vision—or even of redirecting such a feeling to its initial focus productively.

## Portability: Virginia Woolf and F. Scott Fitzgerald

In *Difference and Repetition*, Gilles Deleuze draws a distinction between "repetition" and "generality." "Generality," he explains, "expresses a point of view according to which one term can be exchanged or substituted for another." "Repetition," by contrast, "is a necessary and justified conduct in relation to that which cannot be replaced." In other words, "if exchange is the principle of generality, theft and gift are those of repetition."[144] To repeat something is to recognize and reenact it as uniquely tied to some contexts, meanings, or persons, and deriving its meaning from their particularity. To generalize something is to recognize it as an iteration of a general law or regularity that can be dissociated from any such particular context or setting.

Deleuze's distinction looks back to, and synthesizes, many modernist precedents. It echoes and rephrases more abstractly Walter Benjamin's distinction between objects with and without an aura; Karl Marx's distinction between use value and exchange value; Sigmund Freud's distinction between the death drive and the libido. The readings this chapter offers will to some extent confirm the endemic presence of these distinctions within modernism. Virginia Woolf and F. Scott Fitzgerald are both preoccupied with the portability of feelings: with the possibility of experiencing a feeling in a new context, or of sharing one's emotional state with another person. They also wonder exactly what depths or patterns of experience such portable feelings carry with themselves to each such new person and setting. They orient their fiction around their characters' and narrators' struggles to draw boundaries between recurring emotional echoes of personal events and context-independent emotional habits. The persons they represent assume that such distinctions between repeating and generalized feelings—if one could draw them consistently—would be the most reliable ground for deciding what kind and degree of respect and attention a feeling should be accorded, and how, if at all, it could prove to be insightful or useful.

But rather than simply follow one of the above sets of distinctions, Woolf and Fitzgerald explore contexts and situations in which such distinctions cannot be made consistently or reliably. They are preoccupied with the apparent difficulty of stably distinguishing between emotional experiences that stem from or react to unique personal events and ones that stem from law-like, socially instilled habits. They convey the sense of shock and humiliation that comes with realizing that one could be confusing the erosion of the self with its enlargement and fulfillment; unique past memories with habits of relating to them; the complex gestures of long-standing romantic commitments with the motions of a brief, stereotypical affair.

The medium of fiction seems especially suited to these emotional explorations because both writers' greatest concern is not merely each immediate emotional state, but its larger temporal and interpersonal ramifications. Rather than seek some especially sensitive individuals and moments that could mark an apex in how a given feeling could be used or understood, both Woolf and Fitzgerald wonder how one navigates everyday, typically clumsy attempts at emotional exchange and self-management. They represent not just moments or intervals of particularly memorable emotional

[144] Gilles Deleuze, *Repetition and Difference*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia UP, 1994), 1.

experience—the way a poem might—but the difficulty of squaring each such moment with others that precede and follow in closer or more distant quarters, or of relating each feeling's echoes as they spread across many individuals. Woolf introspects into the process by which her characters try with varied success to apply their resurging feelings to new contexts or persons. Fitzgerald remains on the outside of his characters' minds, and focuses on the way their feelings are recurrently expressed within the social and material world.

*Mrs. Dalloway* begins with Clarissa Dalloway heading to the florist's. "And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning—fresh as if issued to children on a beach."[145] Clarissa is alone, and has been reflecting on her inner states. But instead of focusing on her own immediate love of this morning she imagines the time of day as a potential gift—a gift that could be "issued" not to herself but to "children on a beach" and for which she would be, ambiguously, witness or giver. For this morning to be imagined as a gift, it has to be wrapped up in a metaphoric, imaginary freshness that displaces this experience from both Clarissa herself and this part of London. She is in the city, not on the beach; she would presumably not feel toward this morning the kind of innocent, unknowing surprise that a child might feel. The displacement gestures toward an emotional exuberance that is implicitly not part of the buildings and the streets themselves. This emotion is represented to us not simply as something that belongs to Clarissa and to this moment in her walk, but as something that could have weight beyond Clarissa's mind alone and beyond this immediate occasion. Indeed, as the metaphor obliquely suggests, these other persons and this other context might receive and fuel this feeling better or more appropriately than its current recipient and setting.

Woolf's narrator presents Clarissa's momentary happiness as an entity in some ways distinct from the immediate context and person in which it arises—as something that could be significant to more than a single woman in more than this one street. But what is a feeling—how can it be understood—if we try to think about it as if it did not belong merely to any single person or context? And if not through such necessary, persistent connections, how is it useful or meaningful at all? These questions inform the thematic and formal principles of *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Critics often single out *Mrs. Dalloway*, among Woolf's other major works, as the novel that dramatizes most forcefully and most open-endedly the tension between individuals' inner lives and the way they can convey these inner lives to others, or even integrate them into their own ongoing sensory perceptions. George Ella Lyon thus phrases the novel's guiding question: "how to overcome the barriers between themselves and the world without being destroyed in the process."[146] Howard Harper describes the novel as a "narrative" that "searches for the most appropriate forms for its feelings."[147] Maria DiBattista describes it as representing "a life whose inner dynamic has been one of dispersing and projecting the self out of the body that houses but cannot contain it."[148] For some critics, the boundary *Mrs. Dalloway* draws between individuals' inner lives and their shared sensory and social world is sharp and unambiguous. As Tori Haring-Smith puts it, in *Mrs. Dalloway* "Woolf carefully delineates between two kinds of mental activity: a public consciousness, whose content is available to those who experience it and can be communicated to others, and a private consciousness, filled with ideas, perceptions, and emotions too highly censored for

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[145] Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (London: Harcourt, 1981 [1925]), 3. Hereafter cited in-text.
[146] George Ella Lyon, "Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Body," *Virginia Woolf: Centennial Essays*, ed. Elaine K. Ginsberg and Laura Moss Gottlieb (Troy, NY: Whitston, 1983), 118.
[147] Howard Harper, *Between Language and Silence: The Novels of Virginia Woolf* (Baton Rouge, LN; Lousiana UP, 1982), 3.
[148] Maria DiBattista, *Virginia Woolf's Major Novels: The Fables of Anon* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1980), 35.

communication."[149] For others, what creates the dramatic miscommunications or moments of emotional blindness that Woolf describes is the impossibility of drawing this distinction accurately: "an image that conveys an acute sensory experience," explains Jean O. Love, "may also stand for an aspect of the perspective, and it may at the same time forward the action by recalling a memory that also characterizes and illuminates the present moment."[150]But no matter how starkly this boundary is drawn, critics agree that the most pressing questions driving *Mrs. Dalloway*'s narrative structure are how and why an individual's private emotional life could be successfully made public—and what the stakes are of the successes or failures of such self-expression.

Scholars tend to assume that, in raising these questions, Woolf ascribes some implied value to feelings as sources of personal growth, political action, or philosophical insight, that this novel—and her later writings—gradually attempt to prove over and against the emotionally repressive social conventions of her time. For DiBattista, Woolf celebrates the introspective emotional life as a realm of experience that ought to be valued and expressed as a counterweight to the superficialities of Woolf's contemporary public discourse, however difficult it is to convey its intricacies in practice. "The privacy of the soul," DiBattista claims, is Woolf's "only absolute."[151] Wendy Faris similarly suggests that those realms of experience that are conventionally left unexpressed can, for Woolf, refresh our staid abstract conceptual frameworks: "The unheard or ignored pulse of life—'little things'—takes over from the conventionally important and often destructive rhythm of large abstractions, and carries Clarissa along…. The small forms, like the moth, are enlarged by possessing the momentous, luminous Life, and this Life itself is made yet more wonderful in the process."[152] Psychoanalytic critics such as Elizabeth Abel further suggest that Woolf sees in these seemingly insignificant, confused private feelings a source of self-understanding superior to social conventions.[153] Feminist scholars such as Brenda Silver, Michele Pridmore Brown, and Ellen Marcus, claim that *Mrs. Dalloway* paves the way for Woolf's later, more explicit feminist writings. It dramatizes how difficult it is for women's emotional lives to become part of social and political discourse, and starts to make the case for why their feelings do deserve fuller affirmations and expression. [154] Recent literary historians have also read Woolf's depictions of sadness and trauma in Mrs. Dalloway as an early criticism of her society's attempts to repress the dramatic emotional upheavals created in British society by the First World War. As Tammy Clewell puts it, "anticipating the innovative memorializing acts of Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, Woolf's textual practice of endless mourning compels us to refuse consolation, sustain grief, and accept responsibility for the difficult

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[149] Tori Haring-Smith, "Private and Public Consciousness in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*," *Virginia Woolf: Centennial Essays*, ed. Elaine K. Ginsberg and Laura Moss Gottlieb (Troy, NY: Whitston, 1983), 143.

[150] Jean O. Love, *Worlds in Consciousness: Mythopoetic Thought in the Novels of Virginia Woolf* (Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1970), 108.

[151] DiBattista, 45.

[152] Wendy B. Faris, "The Squirrel's Heart Beat and the Death of the Moth," *Virginia Woolf: Centennial Essays*, ed. Elaine K. Ginsberg and Laura Moss Gottlieb (Troy, NY: Whitston, 1983), 83.

[153] See, for example, Elizabeth Abel, *Virginia Woolf and the Fictions of Psychoanalysis* (Chicago, U of Chicago P, 1993), or Thomas C. Caramagno, "Manic-Depressive Psychosis and Critical Approaches to Virginia Woolf's Life and Work," *PMLA* 103.1 (1981): 10-23, which also contains a useful summary of psychoanalytic criticism done on Woolf's fiction up to that point.

[154] Brenda Silver, *Virginia Woolf: Icon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Ellen Marcus, *Art and Anger: Reading Like a Woman* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1988); Michele Pridmore-Brown, "1939-40: Of Virginia Woolf, Gramophones, and Fascism," *PMLA* 113.3 (1998): 408-421.

task of remembering the catastrophic losses of the twentieth century."[155] The stakes of the inconsistently successful attempts at emotional expression dramatized in *Mrs. Dalloway* are interpreted most ambitiously and most abstractly by critics who treat this novel as a philosophical text. A group of critics who include Louise Westling link these ambiguous boundaries between the self and its world to the principles of perception enunciated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty.[156] According to Ann Banfield, Woolf's closest philosophical model is Bertrand Russell, and her representations of feelings dramatize the difficulty of conceptualizing or communicating subjective states.[157] Martha Nussbaum attributes to Woolf an astute representation of the universal difficulty and universal value of empathy.[158]

My own reading of *Mrs. Dalloway* is inspired by these critics' shared belief that the novel treats individuals' private inner states—that is, primarily, feelings—as entities that can be transposed from one context to another. Feelings in *Mrs. Dalloway* are not merely immediate relationships between one person and one setting, but entities that one person can try to give to others—or that a person can try to use time and again to draw connections among various past and present, private and public aspects of her life. As all these critics also suggest, Woolf does not foreclose the possibility that individuals' emotional states could become useful in contexts that could be as broad and abstract as politics, philosophy, or social history. In the course of this chapter I will show a number of ways in which the feelings Woolf's characters express seem to be transposed into each of these realms in turn.

But I also want to return to Woolf's preoccupation with the effort it takes to make any of the feelings her characters experience seem wholly useful or significant even to her very small fictional communities, and indeed even to the particular individual experiencing them moment by moment. I also want to suggest that Woolf attributes at least part of this difficulty not simply to her social mores, but to the qualities of feelings themselves: to the very frequency with which they are echoed, brought back, or transposed in ever new contexts and situations. These feelings' constant resurgence seems at once to confirm the importance of the past contexts they keep accumulating and echoing, and to blur or erode these contexts with each iteration; they seem never to convey their past iterations quite precisely, but also never to fit quite seamlessly and habitually into these characters' current desires and needs. As we follow the characters' attempts to make sense of their feelings one after the other, it is difficult even in each particular case to discern at which point their relationship to these feelings slides between repetition and generality, profundity and shallowness, between a respect for and a dismissal of their suspected origins. Rather than fear merely that emotional expression is being artificially constrained by society, Woolf wonders also how much insight feelings could actually be counted on to carry given how freely they seem able to change their context, stakes, and settings, and thus also to keep changing these characters' relationships to their past and present life events.

*Mrs. Dalloway*'s major events take place not during moments of work or decision-making, but in the intervals before and after such tasks: during walks, receptions, teas, and lunches. The greatest physical effort that the novel depicts—the majority of which we do not see—is not directed toward any goal more lasting than organizing a party. In letting these characters' emotional upheavals take

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[155] Tammy Clewell, "Consolation Refused: Virginia Woolf, The Great War, and Modernist Mourning," *MFS* 50.1 (2004): 199.

[156] Louise Westling, "Virginia Woolf and the Flesh of the World," *New Literary History* 30.4 (1999): 855-875.

[157] Ann Banfield, *The Phantom Table* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2007).

[158] Martha Nussbaum, "The Window: Knowledge of Other Minds in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*," *New Literary History* 26.4 (1995): 731-753.

place during moments of leisure, Woolf emphasizes how stubbornly these feelings recur in her characters' lives beyond the events and contexts that first triggered them. But she also shows how easily these feelings might dissipate without any apparent larger consequence; how easily what might seem to be their subversive political content, or their complex psychoanalytic insights, can be temporarily shed or rendered impotent in this lighthearted context whose tone and stakes they are apparently unable consistently to alter.

*Mrs. Dalloway*'s first forty pages give a good sense of how pervasively such questions of feelings' unclearly useful portability organize its form and content. In this brief span Clarissa Dalloway senses within herself and tries to put to use several feelings. The first of these is the joy she feels at the freshness of the morning with which I opened this section a few pages earlier. Clarissa instantly transposes this joy onto a group of children—imagining it as something that could fuel and be partaken of by more persons than just herself. It seems as if Clarissa were representing this feeling as something she has not completely exhausted; as a whole to whose full potential significance her current state does not yet do justice. This opening scene does not yet highlight any obvious obstacles to this new use she imagines for her feeling. But the unreality of her description, and the fact that we do not see this transposition fulfilled now or later in the novel, already begin to point to ways in which these attempts to quantify to what context or habit a feeling is most strongly tied, and how productive it might continue to be in its continued iterations, are persistently fraught.

In these opening pages, as Harper well puts it, Clarissa apparently "wishes both to escape from that role [of Mrs. Dalloway] and to enter into it more fully."[159] Each feeling she expresses is remarkable both in the resistance it seems to put up her current preoccupations, and in the rapidity with which it is eventually woven into them. This lack of clarity about her feelings' directedness and stakes is developed through the second extended feeling Clarissa experiences during her walk. This feeling is her returning love for Peter Walsh, a man whom she at one point seriously considered marrying:

> For they might be parted for hundreds of years, she and Peter; she never wrote a letter and his were dry sticks; but suddenly it might come over her, If he were with me now what would he say?—some days, some sights bringing him back to her calmly, without the old bitterness; which perhaps was the reward of having cared for people; they came back in the middle of St. James's Park on a fine morning—indeed they did. (7)

On the one hand, this description seems to fulfill the promise of productive plasticity at which the metaphor of children on the beach initially hinted. Her relation to Peter has become a way to ignite and to make precious her relations to other aspects of her experience. It structures and informs a context that it was not originally a part of; helping to shape her experience of this morning in an unexpectedly satisfying fashion. But as she also acknowledges, this returning feeling for Peter is not completely present to her. Its past undertone of bitterness is no longer there. It is not clear if the world beyond her—in which she has just expressed such joy—contributes to her happiness more by helping her forget Peter or by helping her remember him. Her current elation seems to have to do as much with the way this past love works as an unexpectedly successful catalyst or mediator of her present state, as with the way her other environments and experiences seem to have been able to whittle away at this feeling, to carve away from it parts that she does not want to recall. It as if she were partly appreciating her love of Peter, and partly discarding it or selling it short; as if this feeling

[159] Harper, 112.

were being presented to us as at once productive and incompletely present, partly a hollowed-out habit and partly a resurging unique event. Woolf's very syntax in this passage highlights these tensions and ambiguities. Peter's capitalized, dashed question stands out within Clarissa's sentence as both a breathless part of it and a truncated piece of dialogue cut out from a different context and not yet fully assimilated to this new one. The way Clarissa then repeats personal pronouns in ever more complicated, ambiguous phrases seems to make present not merely a recollection of Peter but a conscious, not consistently successful effort to refer to him. This is the first we hear of Peter Walsh, and we do not yet know anything of the intense history that binds him and Clarissa together. Since we do not know the details of their breakup, we cannot discern how significant the bitter side of this feeling might be compared to the happy use to which it is now put; whether Clarissa has found herself discarding an episodic detail, or whether she is stubbornly struggling with a crucial mistake from her earlier life.

Much has been made by critics of how intensely Woolf dramatizes the momentary importance such resurgent feelings have for their characters' sense of themselves. Karen Smythe praises *Mrs. Dalloway* as a book that makes us appreciate small moments of consolation as the true grounds of our daily sustenance and happiness.[160] Jane Duran adds that it is around such moments of heightened emotional intensity that Woolf's characters organize their sense of reality: "What is real for a given character has a great deal to do with the importance of a given moment in the character's internal construction of self and time."[161] In stressing not merely the thrill of this emotional experience but also its sense of incompleteness or omission (an omission whose weight we cannot quite test), I do not want to make these scenes seem less central to Woolf's enterprise. But I want to highlight how inherently Woolf's representations of feelings as entities in themselves—as entities that could resurge after the immediate moment of their emergence—hinge on representing not feelings' positive productivity of the kind Duran and Smythe praise, but a continued effort that it seems to take to keep assimilating their reappearances as part of one's life, and the continued sense of hesitation that surrounds both the usefulness and the sheer possibility of either treasuring a feeling in its original form or smoothly reshaping it to fit into these characters' immediate attitudes and habits. I also thus want to argue against more confidently feminist readings of this strand of the novel such as Suzette Henke's. Henke argues that this passage reasserts how right Clarissa was to reject Peter's dominating advances: "With the wisdom of instinct Clarissa chose privacy of the soul over the kind of masculine power that would eventually threaten her creative freedom and spiritual autonomy."[162] But the way Clarissa describes her continued attachment to Peter in passages such as this one make the task of ridding her self of Peter's influence at once impossible and anticlimactically simple. The power of this scene lies not in Clarissa's ability precisely to recall or forcefully to discard Peter's dominating presence, but in the ease with which her feeling for him can apparently be in turns recalled and discarded, considered wholly or in part—to never be quite lost but also never fully, decisively illuminating or useful.

These representations of emotions' not clearly significant erosion and of their ambiguous, partial productivity keep multiplying. In the novel's first few pages Clarissa does not encounter either Peter or her husband Richard in person, but it is made to seem repeatedly that these two are the main relationships of her life. Then the narrative swerves sharply away from either of these men. We are told that "the most exquisite moment" of Clarissa's life was not any part of her relationship

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[160] Karen Smythe, "Virginia Woolf's Elegiac Enterprise," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 26.1 (1992): 73.
[161] Jane Duran, "Virginia Woolf, Time, and the Real," *Philosophy and Literature* 28.2 (2004): 302.
[162] Suzette A. Henke, "'The Prime Minister': A Key to *Mrs. Dalloway*," *Virginia Woolf: Centennial Essays*, ed. Elaine K. Ginsberg and Laura Moss Gottlieb (Troy, NY: Whitston, 1983), 133.

to either of these men, but a kiss she shared with another woman, Sally Seton, around the time when she was trying to choose between Peter and Richard as potential husbands. Clarissa Dalloway begins this memory by calling the sensation of kissing Sally "a match burning in a crocus; an inner meaning almost expressed." (32) She then goes on to elaborate on this scene more precisely:

> She and Sally fell a little behind. Then came the most exquisite moment of her whole life passing a stone urn with flowers in it. Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips. The whole world might have turned upside down! The others disappeared; there she was alone with Sally. And she felt that she had been given a present, wrapped up, and told just to keep it, not to look at it—a diamond, something infinitely precious, wrapped up, which, as they walked (up and down, up and down), she uncovered, or the radiance burnt through, the revelation, the religious feeling! (35-36)

Clarissa's images of gifts, radiances, and wrapping paper or wrapped petals birthing an internal light all contour out the process of separating out a feeling and carrying it beyond its immediate context. Indeed, this morning this past emotional experience becomes yet another note within her understanding of the joy she has been feeling during her walk. Clarissa compares the feeling sparked by Sally's kiss to a vaginal internally lit flower. The fiery flower then becomes a lit diamond. These metaphors slide among disparate registers of longevity, preciousness, sexual self-awareness, and intimacy. They draw attention to the ease with which this feeling can be repackaged and reproportioned. Some aspects of it can now deepen Clarissa's understanding of the morning—becoming yet another way of relating to this morning—rather than merely pull her back into the past. Meanwhile the potential self-knowledge they give her of her sexual preferences can be momentarily omitted or attenuated. Clarissa's feelings are remarkable both in what they bring back to her and in what they no longer bring back; both in how much added texture they seem to give to her current experience, and in how easily they are neutralized or flattened, changing their apparent significance and tone as they are reapplied to illuminate a context with which they would not at first have seemed to have much in common, in a way that seems at once to insist on this new feeling's uniqueness and to attempt to generalize it as the kind of consoled happiness with whose many examples this morning has been filled.

This sense of uncertainty about how much one should appreciate or be wary of these feelings' similar uses—or how much significance one should give to the momentary aura of importance and uniqueness each of them in turn acquires in Clarissa's mind—is made even more emphatic by the way these two feelings are then crowded out by yet another one. As this section ends Clarissa foreshortens her life into a single emotional gift, which she gives back to her parents:

> For she was a child, throwing bread to the ducks, between her parents, and at the same time a grown woman coming to her parents who stood by the lake, holding her life in her arms which, as she neared them, grew larger and larger in her arms, until it became a whole life, a complete life, which she put down by them and said, "This is what I have made of it! This!" And what had she made of it? What, indeed? sitting there sewing this morning with Peter. (43)

The metaphor is hard to visualize. Clarissa imagines herself as at once an adult and a child. She pictures her life as a rapidly expanding whole but describes this whole very briefly and vaguely. The surge of feeling that seems to bring her parents back to her does not crystalize into a unified vision

of her life, but, as it seems, merely into the notion that the different parts of her life could be held together as a single object. She can neither visualize nor make sense of this object. Rather than expand into an immersive environment, it remains something she could keep carrying in her hands. This imagined whole then easily loses its momentary gravity as Clarissa quips that all her life has led to is the single episode of talking to Peter while sewing. Her elation apparently has no reliable weight or resistance of its own that could prevent it from being comically reduced to the stuff of a single morning. Liesl M. Olson lauds *Mrs. Dalloway* as a novel that is particularly persistent, and particularly successful, in representing the "cotton wool of daily life." For Olson, Woof excels at showing that our lives are not made of grand singular events but the small everyday habits we repeat without thinking about them.[163] But to agree with Olson that this passage is preoccupied with daily life—with the vivacity and vigor with which we can feel for daily life, and the vivacity and vigor of feeling that this daily life seems able to nurture—is also to acknowledge the persistent vagueness in which Woolf continues to shroud these daily habits and the feelings they sustain or spark. It is also to acknowledge that what Woolf seems to foreground are not Clarissa's daily habits themselves but the emotional states that interpose themselves when she tries to think about her life. These emotional states seem to fold into Clarissa's everyday routines but also to exist independent of them; they seem powerful enough to make Clarissa feel intensely tender about the life she has lived, but—anticlimactically—not nearly powerful enough to help Clarissa clearly or consistently discern exactly what she is feeling tender about, or even to let her keep up a feeling of elation for longer than the span of what seems to be merely a few minutes.

On its own, this opening—swiftly followed by several representations of confused collective joy as other passers-by rejoice at an anonymous public figure and an inscrutable contrail ad—might seem to merely suggest that happiness in particular is not a very insightful or astute feeling. But as the novel continues these representations of uncertainly useful or insightful, surprisingly portable feelings expand onto a great range of frustrations, melancholies, and rages—and even onto the kind of intense trauma that should exemplify feelings' capacity to keep us permanently anchored to our past. This lack of clarity starts to seem a condition not merely of Clarissa's temperament, or of a particular interval on the emotional spectrum, but of the emotional process in general.

Woolf's depiction of secondary characters such as Peter Walsh on the one hand showcases how central individuals' emotional lives are in themselves to her narrative enterprise. As Harper notes, understood in conventional terms, "the emphasis given to the perspective of Peter Walsh seems out of proportion to his importance as a character in Clarissa's story."[164] But *Mrs. Dalloway* also emphasizes how flimsy and easily discardable each character's feelings are; how difficult it is to fit their expression into any coherent or complete sense even of each particular character's life and values, let alone of their importance to their larger community or to the novel's larger plot itself. This is paradoxically not simply because the feelings she represents are being obscured by other social forces, but because these feelings in themselves seem never to reliably point out their most productive or fulfilling potential uses. When Peter leaves Clarissa's house after briefly visiting her that morning, he starts to worry: "wondering whether by calling at that hour he had annoyed her; overcome with shame suddenly at having been a fool; wept; been emotional; told her everything, as usual, as usual." (49) He considers how much greater his love for Clarissa continues to be than he had thought; and how much lesser, by comparison, his love for his current fiancée Daisy now seems. Rather than be able to take either of these feelings as direct insights into himself, he keeps fighting now the overspilling of the one feeling, now the resistant scarcity of the latter. The emotions that

[163] Liesl M. Olson, "Virginia Woolf and the 'cotton wool of daily life,'" *Journal of Modern Literature* 26.2 (2003): 44.
[164] Harper, 122.

overwhelmed him when he saw Clarissa had been, he feels, incomprehensibly intense and urgent given how rarely they now communicate with each other. "No, no, no! He was not in love with her any more!" (76) He has traveled all the way from India to London for Daisy's sake. The time and effort spent on this voyage should make this seem a major love, more striking even than his love for Clarissa—for whom he never went to such material lengths. And yet, "For hours at a time (pray God that one might say these things without being overheard!), for hours and days he never thought of Daisy." (79). Meanwhile, as Harper notes, Peter's "desire is translated into lyricism": these feelings, even at their most abundant, seem unable to bring back to Peter's consciousness, let alone to evoke for the reader, any but the most abstract contours of their attachment. "Peter never thinks of Clarissa's body, even when he is said to be thinking of the time when he was 'passionately' in love with her;" nor does he, Harper observes, ever think of Daisy in any such more immediate fashion.[165] As the scene goes on we are not drawn into an appreciation of either the woman he lost or the one he now wants to marry. We also are not given a better sense of why he appreciates either of these women. Instead we keep returning to examining the way both his older and his more recent feelings always seem either too expansive or not expansive enough for him to be able to make sense or use of them, or to allow them to help us understand any better how right or wrong Clarrisa was to let Peter go. We keep being reminded there is more past interpersonal history in this novel's represented world than we currently have access to; that these characters' feelings echo many potentially significant personality traits and life events. But Woolf's narrator also keeps showing that merely to be able to discern that a character's current feeling has been transplanted or carried over from such past context does not in itself show how these characters could rely on this feeling as a guide toward how their past lives do or ought to shape their current ones, or even as a guide toward how important it is that a certain emotional state be attended to at any given moment.

While he meditates these emotional imbalances and shifts of balance, Peter gives alms to an old woman whose singing eerily echoes of his lost love for Clarissa: "with the bird-like freshness of the very aged she still twittered 'give me your hand and let me press it gently … and if some one should see, what matter they?' she demanded." (82) The old woman is singing a popular tune. This tune might or might not mean something intimate to her; meanwhile it sketches out with eerie precision the way Peter and Clarissa just pressed each other's hands a few pages ago. This echo or return of Peter's tender sadness seems at once to expand and to flatten the range of uses and significances this feeling has had in Peter's life. It makes Peter's emotional turmoil seem at least partly independent not only of any particular context of his life, but even of his very person—just as, a few pages later, Clarissa's joy at the freshness of this morning was unexpectedly joined by many passers'-by joy at a passing car and airplane. Woolf draws attention to the way these expanding contexts at once reinforce a sense of these feelings as portable entities, and make all their uses seem parts of an ongoing, more or less conscious effort to figure out what these feelings are actually good for—what it would mean to apply them to one's world without overextending them or selling them short. She also keeps making it seem as if feelings' potential productivity could lie just as well in their malleability as in their resistance to such change—as if these feelings' shifting, unpredictable mixtures of plasticity and resistance never gave characters enough cues as to which of their particular or reproducible uses these feelings are most strongly connected to, and what kinds of knowledge or sustenance they could best be mined to yield.

Septimus's presence in the novel raises the stakes of such emotional expression even further. As DiBattista puts it, he is the closest the novel comes to a depiction of a creator or an artist: "the

[165] Harper, 123.

work of art and the hallucinatory forms of madness interpenetrate and communicate with frightening familiarity. … His innumerable scribblings and his poetic testament, an immortal ode to Time, reflect on the narrator's romantic treatment of time as a structure of symbolic correspondences."[166] The events to which his feelings respond are weightier than any other characters' past histories. They are also much more immediately and dramatically tied to the major historical and social questions of Woolf's day: the First World War, psychoanalysis, trauma, changing gender stereotypes—and Septimus is more confident than any other character, in these feelings' capacity to bring into the present, and into the public sphere, all the important facets of this past history and of the larger social or philosophical questions that it raises.

"The world has raised its whip; where will it descend?" (14) Septimus' feelings bring back his past life so intensely that they keeps obscuring the world around him with visions of his killed friend and with great promises of revelation, knowledge, and import. But at the same time they are also always powerless to bring this world back to him in a way that he could successfully respond to or convey to others. Septimus's best friend Evans died in the war, and at the time Septimus did not feel a thing. The panic spells that haunt him now are, he believes, his just returns for the feelings that he was not then able to muster. They are also occasions for him to pay his amends—although he knows not how. "The world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames. It is I whom am blocking the way, he thought. Was he not being looked at and pointed at; was he not weighted there, rooted to the pavement, for a purpose? But for what purpose?" (14-15)

These feelings' combination of intense vigor and powerlessness is well showcased in the scene leading up to Septimus' death. He and Rezia pick out patterns with which to decorate an outrageous hat. Rezia sees this as a moment of hope that they can once again share a marital intimacy they lost. "How it rejoiced her that! Not for weeks had they laughed like this together, poking fun privately like married people. What she meant was that if Mrs. Filmer had come in, or Mrs. Peters or anybody they would not have understood what she and Septimus were laughing at." (143) But even as Rezia rejoices at how small and private a thing they are doing together, Septimus again veers into unshared, unchecked self-aggrandizement: "It was wonderful. Never had he done anything which made him feel so proud. It was so real, it was so substantial, Mrs. Peters' hat." (144) There is in such missed connections between what Septimus tries to discern or to express and what others take him to be saying or doing at once a constant recognition of the inexpressibly greater weight of his initial trauma, and a constant reminder of how difficult it is to use feelings to either fully sound and resolve this trauma or express why this trauma should matter to anyone but Septimus himself. All that these feelings are able to produce are half-accomplished gestures of building or making that reveal the use Septimus is trying to make of them only while also disclosing the powerlessness and partial blindness that keeps making his aims impossible to attain; gestures that make one wonder how Septimus could ever recognize or affirm the difference between a mere reproduction of this feeling's intense attentiveness—as a kind of sensitivity that can be applied just as easily to a hat as to a deceased friend—and a genuine, shareable repetition, within this new context, of the full weight and significance this feeling had for him and ought to have for others. Again, paradoxically, this confusion seems to arise not simply because this feeling is not being expressed often or openly enough, but also paradoxically because it seems to be transposed too readily and too frequently into ever new contexts starkly different than its original one; not simply because this feeling is disconnected from Septimus's immediate environment, but because it seems to be transposed into it ceaselessly.

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[166] DiBattista, 50.

When Septimus decides to kill himself a few pages later, he enacts toward his own body the very kind of aesthetic considerations that first exercised toward Mrs. Peters' hat—and that he had previously exercised in trying to transcribe his visions into works of art. Woolf spends a full paragraph following his considerations about how he should stain the world, and which part of the world, with his dead body. "He considered Mrs. Filmer's nice clean bread knife with 'Bread' carved on the handle. Ah, but one mustn't spoil that. The gas fire?" (149) This transposition of what seems to be an expression of his trauma immediately from what seems like a cheap commodity to the uniqueness and preciousness of his body—two objects between which the feeling can apparently not differentiate enough to change either its hopes of success or its expressive gestures—seems to mark one of the novel's starkest and most brutal expositions of the full stakes and consequences of this lack of emotional clarity. In "Woolf and Reality," Brian Philips highlights Woolf's near-Dickensian fascination with the grotesque. Septimus's visions are one major example of this fascination. But Septimus's plight also reveals a crucial difference between Woolf's grotesque and the Victorian grotesque.[167] It also reveals an unexpected bridge between the grotesque as an emphasis on stark, gritty reality and Woolf's seemingly more ethereal descriptions of fleeting feelings—between which Philips draws a sharp distinction. The expressions that Septimus's feelings find in his actions and in his fantasies are not signs of Septimus's character—as they would be in Dickens—but of his as yet unfinished struggle to put to use an intense emotional state. This feeling and the incompatible contexts it tries to bind itself to or to carry as part of itself might be a persistent feature of who Septimus has now definitively become, or a burden that he has the potential to shed.

As the novel progresses these questions of feelings' portability keep multiplying and folding into each other. They find their fullest expression at Clarissa's party—during which many of the novel's prior remembered or attempted emotional exchanges are returned to at once, and characters try to put them to use not only for their own sake but also for the sake of others. For Love, "the party is a grand, spiritual reunion, with and within the spirit of Clarissa, where the scales drop from all eyes and all illusions of separateness and individuality vanish."[168] Jane Novak finds that this party "is marred by triviality and egotism; the temporary order established by the party contains traces of ambitious coldness."[169] Different as their assessments are, both Love and Novak get at the heart of what seems to be this party's purpose and yardstick of achievement. Septimus's poems, hat, and finally his suicide, were to be publically shareable expressions of his feelings; this reception seems similarly to function as Clarissa's means of making public the feelings she has carried throughout the day—of turning these feelings from mere presences in her mind to gifts she could offer to others. Throughout the party Clarissa keeps trying to make others happy—she calls it her "offering." (122) But time and again it is difficult to tell whether what Clarissa is offering these persons is precious reminiscence or precious freedom from it; and to which of these uses the feelings she tries to spark or to share should best be put. Time and again we keep hearing of the effects of Clarissa's skills as a hostess or of the ways she plans to apply these skills, but we never see her exercise them directly. Instead we jump between Clarissa's consciousness—and her concern with making herself likable—and the minds of others in whom her presence crystalizes as a source now of irritation and now of wonder, now of ease and now of ecstasy. We are thus not allowed to focus on what Clarissa offers in terms of language, object, and gesture, but merely on the emotional effects of her presence and actions. We are made to keep wondering—in a way that brings into the open implicit hesitations present in prior parts of the novel—how much these feelings themselves can tell us about these

[167] Brian Phillips, "Reality and Virginia Woolf," *The Hudson Review* 56.3 (2003): 415-416.
[168] Love, 147.
[169] Jane Novak, *The Razor Edge of Balance: A Study of Virginia Woolf* (Coral Gables, FL: U of Miami P, 1975), 117-118.

exchanges; what it is that these persons are able to give each other or communicate to each other through such emotional offerings, innumerable as these many offerings start to become as the party progresses.

Weighed against the parallel climax of Septimus's final confusion and suicide, whose tragedy the party seems to at once dismiss and echo, this final section compounds the novel's ongoing unresolved question about whether joy and sorrow, apparent emotional effort or apparent freedom from emotional effort, can ever help discern what kind of deep or shallow consideration would do a feeling most justice, or even to what kind of use a feeling is being put at any given moment. Even as Septimus's sorrow is frighteningly comic in how confused it is, and in how little it is able to achieve, Clarissa's stubborn happiness has a constant lining of potential pathos and despair. Harper observes that "If Mrs. Dalloway is a moving book, its poignancy arises partly from the sense of the limitations of that world and of the consciousness which created it, and of the distance between that consciousness and the story which it is able to tell."[170] But it is also a crucial aspect of this novel—and of what makes it striking—that given these gaps and limitations we do not even know how much we should mourn the apparent partiality of such attempted connections. Woolf does not make room for us to decide what price the characters might be paying for each of their emotional experiences, how tragic or how comic each of their confusions are. Instead she confronts us with their feelings' constant resurgence—their apparent capacity to resurge constantly throughout these characters' lives—without even at the end of their lives, or at their crucial points of crisis or reminiscence, crystalizing definitively as sources of insight or immediate pleasure, as proofs of these characters' ties to their past or of their capacity to shed it as all these past events erode into mere habits of behavior.

The party's two emotional climaxes center around these problems of tone and communicability. One of these climaxes is the sudden shift in Peter's response to Clarissa. Peter is at first not at all moved by Clarissa's presence or by her efforts to please her guests. "'How delightful to see you!' said Clarissa. She said it to every one. How delightful to see you! She was at her worst—effusive, insincere. It was a great mistake to have come. He should have stayed at home and read his book." (167) And then, only a few hours after Peter has declared Clarissa false and wooden, she produces in him—with what apparently is the exact same appearance and demeanor—the elation with which the novel ends:

> What is this terror? what is this ecstasy? he thought to himself. What is it that fills me with extraordinary excitement?
>
> It is Clarissa, he said.
>
> For there she was. (194)

These emotional fluctuations—which, in different ways, go against both Peter's and Clarissa's expectations—again make these feelings seem at once prominently present and oddly disconnected. It is as if their surges bore no direct relation to the reproducible gestures with which these persons try to stoke or stifle them. But this also makes one wonder how these feelings relate to or reflect deeper insights into either their objects or their carriers. It seems that in this final moment Clarissa gives Peter a great emotional gift, the kind of gift that she has been trying to create and give throughout the party's many hours. But this gift is neither as predictable nor as constant as she had wanted it to be. Peter's sudden affection seems at once overwhelming and comically capricious. Its

[170] Harper, 134.

resurge prompts him to no action and seems to give him no clear insight into exactly what he wants from Clarissa or exactly what about Clarissa makes him happy—her being "there" for the past four or five hours had not moved him at all. Coming at the very end of the party, after all the guests except Peter and Sally have already left, this surge of joy does not even seem to be the kind of sociable happiness that Clarissa has been trying to share with him all this time, and it will most certainly not be put to the kind of immediate communal use that Clarissa had wanted these joys to serve.

Perhaps the most striking and most problematic instance of this uncertain emotional communion and productivity occurs a few pages earlier when Clarissa tries to feel for Septimus. Clarissa hears of Septimus only during the party, and only after he is already dead. She finds herself thinking about his death and discovers that these thoughts help her integrate death into her joyful present feeling in a way that, in a prior monologue, she had found impossible: "After that, how unbelievable death was!—that it must end; and no one in the whole world would know how she had loved it all; how, every instant." (122) Her new train of thought is striking both in how much more empathetic Clarissa is toward Septimus than any other person in the novel, and in how much she gets obviously wrong about what Septimus himself had tried to accomplish with this feeling:

> Always her body went through it first, when she was told, suddenly, of an accident. … This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace of death. (184)
>
> She felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away. The clock was striking. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. He made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun. But she must go back. She must assemble. (186)

Clarissa states that her body and then her mind feel with Septimus. But we are again given very few details of this moment of empathy; nothing to help us sound its depth or to find our way toward sharing it. Our focus is not on any insight into Clarissa or into Septimus, but on the feeling that this thought of Septimus seems to create. This feeling seems also instantly to be applied to Clarissa's immediate context. Clarissa initially reacted to the news of Septimus' death with dismay: it might spoil the mood of her party. "Oh! thought Clarissa, in the middle of my party, here's death, she thought." (183) In this monologue, she tries both to sympathize with Septimus and to reshape his death into something that does belong in the middle of this occasion. She gives Septimus' death a sense of optimism and bold self-confidence that Septimus himself would never would have voiced. She also voids it of the bitterness and pain that had defined this feeling, and its particular urgency, to Septimus.

Susan Bennett Smith and David Neal Miller, following many other critics, propose that this scene affirms Clarissa's capacity to feel with a man whose experience is drastically different than hers.[171] Harper claims even that this surge of feeling is what finally allows Peter to connect with her at the end of the novel: Harper: "The narrative has followed Clarissa from the noise and confusion of the party into the silence of the 'little room' of her innermost awareness. Septimus' final gesture of defiance … also turns out to be, when it is perceived by the consciousness of Clarissa, a genuine,

[171] Susan Bennett Smith, "Reinventing Grief Work," *Twentieth Century Literature*, 41.4 (1995): 315; David Neal Miller, "Authorial Point of View in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*," *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, 2.2 (1972): 126.

generous, even beautiful gift. … Perhaps Peter also becomes aware of it somehow when he feels his final 'terror,' 'ecstasy,' and 'extraordinary excitement, which he attributes to Clarissa."[172]

Martha Nussbaum makes an even stronger—not merely epistemic but ethical—claim about such emotional resonances. She argues that in such moments of emotional exchange these characters' selfishness is momentarily overcome, and an ethical community is established within what is otherwise an ethically troubling and isolating social space:

> The mysterious grand problem of other minds thus has, here, a mundane humble tentative answer or rather answers, whose meaning can only be fully grasped in the context of a narrative as complex as this novel: by working patiently to defeat shame, selfish anxiety, and the desire for power, it is sometimes possible for some people to get knowledge of one thing or another thing about some other people; and they can sometimes allow one thing or another thing about themselves to be known.[173]

I agree with Nussbaum that questions of interpersonal knowledge and ethics are at stake in this fragment. I also want to claim, with all these critics, that Woolf here probes precisely the possibility of transmitting not merely material knowledge but also, and particularly, feelings. But I want to suggest that this emotional transmission is at once easier and more fraught than Nussbaum's reading would suggest. The process of transmitting feelings and conveying them to others is in a sense, as Woolf presents it, not much more mysterious than the process of sharing physical possessions. But on the other hand Woolf makes it suspect to believe that these transmissions of what seem to be iterations of the same feeling, as this feeling is put now to one use and now to another in a new context and by a new person, are forms of genuine communion in any strong sense. This is not because each of Woolf's characters is locked in an impenetrable solipsistic world, but because feelings bear a problematic relation not only to those with whom they are gradually shared, but also to those who seem for the time being to be their bearers. As the apparent weight, usefulness, and scale of the feelings these characters handle keeps changing—and with it these persons' relationship to them—no single meaningful connection can be established between each such feeling, or each state of such a feeling, and some criterion of authenticity or sincerity that would make this feeling a better or worse expression of any particular person, or even of any particular pattern of behavior.

In her focus on feelings, Woolf thus does not celebrate them for their own sake. But nor does she suggest that they are ready material for insight or for regular sustenance. Instead she highlights how much of the effort of having feelings goes toward such smaller tasks of awkward readjustment, partial use, and temporary circumscription that prevent her characters from unambiguously treating their feelings as either faithful repetitions of some prior context or as reliably reproducible components of some desirable patterns of behavior. She also makes it seem as if the very sensitivity that makes her characters notice feelings as separate entities—as entities that seem to recur from one context to another—also makes them keep noticing ways in which these feelings never seems quite right for the uses to which they might want to put them, and in which these feelings' seemingly so productive plasticity might keep eroding from them the very significance we might have trusted them to carry. If, as DiBattista claims, in this novel "[Woolf's] art is the art of lying, the art that creates these necessary fictions that conceal the void incertitude," Woolf makes us notice not merely this art's power but also its failures; not merely the falseness of the stories her characters tell themselves, but the comic pathos of not being able to tell how great or significant a

[172] Harper, 130.
[173] Nussbaum, 752.

truth these stories might be veiling—and how much of this truth they do in fact convey.[174] It could be argued that Woolf's later novels—with their fantastically expanded timespans and polyphonic, ever more experimental modes of introspection—seek out alternative frameworks within which these questions could be answered: ways of assessing and describing the proper weight of feelings that no longer even attempt to depend on or to define these feelings' immediate material contexts or precise past origins. *Mrs. Dalloway* itself seems to leave these questions unanswered; highlighting merely the surprising degree to which these feelings' portability seems to order and frame her characters' lives in spite of how inconsistently they seem able to justify how much they attend to and follow them; the surprising degree to which the very ease with which these feelings are apparently transposed, brought back, or echoed, makes it seem difficult to tell if their recurrences could, individually or en masse, amount to something productive or insightful.

Woolf's primary worry about feelings concerns their unwieldiness and powerlessness as experienced by the introspective self: on the difficulty with which they perform the uses for which they might appear to exist, the ease with which they are bent out of shape or discarded even though they seem so to invite us to treat them as reliable, independent entities. Fitzgerald focuses on the difficulty of making a feeling's past history outwardly manifest through its expression in its new contexts and settings—or of testing the importance of preserving or discarding this past history based on this feeling's immediate persuasiveness or apparent weight. The feelings his characters express seem potentially laden with, and shaped by, vast numbers of historical and personal contexts. But it is never clear whether these past contexts have filled those feelings out with as-yet ineffable details, or hollowed them out into a general kind of vagueness and imprecision, into a set of habits used so often they no longer seem precise and appropriate anywhere.

For Lionel Trilling—one of F. Scott Fitzgerald's earliest critics—Fitzgerald seeks to be an "exemplary writer."[175] His appeal lies not merely in his individuality, but in the way he stands in for, or synthesizes, the experience of a whole generation. His two main novels, *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender is the Night*, present and comment on the apex—and then the aftermath—of the Jazz Age. But the generational experience Fitzgerald exemplifies is, for Trilling, not one of complete historical and social self-awareness but of narrow social obsessions and fascinations: obsessions and fascinations with the moneyed classes, luxury, easy wealth and entertainment. Trilling embraces Fitzgerald's fascination with the rich because they offer for his sensitivity the most refined set of subjects this society could offer. "[The rich] seem to have been the nearest thing to an aristocracy that America could offer him. … It is a common habit of writers to envision an actuality of personal life which shall have the freedom and the richness of detail and the order of form that they desire in art."[176]

For most critics following Trilling, this assessment was not satisfying. Its unselfconscious elitism aside, such a reading sells short what seems to be Fitzgerald's engagement with the larger question of how his privileged characters' feelings—fuelled and enabled as their sensitivities were by a mass of social labor and production coming from all classes and strata, and by a sequence of complicated historical changes—could possibly be seen as expressive of these larger contexts; what it would mean to find in these persons' emotional lives some proof or disproval of this society's ability to understand itself based on the way its historical and social conditions shape its members' emotional lives.

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[174] DiBattista, 55.
[175] Lionel Trilling, "F. Scott Fitzgerald," *Critical Essays on F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby*, ed. Scott Donaldson (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1984), 15.
[176] Trilling, 16.

Many of these later critics argue that Fitzgerald novels stand out as representations of his generation's failure fully to understand its historical and social context and to prepare for its consequences. Scott Donaldson, who calls Fitzgerald's narrators "snobs," claims that his novels dramatize the incompleteness and prejudice of his observers, their inability to transcend their particular social condition.[177] Richard Godden finds in his characters' obsession with money a meditation on the difficulty of relating to society's changing systems of value.[178] For Robert Seguin, Gatsby is a symbol of America's failed attempts at national unity.[179] John Callahan sees Fitzgerald's fiction as a critique of the American dream: Fitzgerald shows that the pursuit of prosperity and the pursuit of happiness are always intertwined but can never completely coincide.[180] For Mitchell Breitwieser Fitzgerald represents American society's attempts not to uncover its history but to repress it; he showcases the emotional labor that goes toward obscuring and dismissing the very details of their lives that could lead them more accurately to understand their conditions and future fate.[181] Michael K. Glenday finds dramatized in these novels' Americans' "fear of adaptation" to their changing social conditions: "fear of adaptation"—a fear that, especially in *Tender is the Night*, finds one major expression in the upper classes' expatriation.[182] For Enfield and for Timothy Galow Fitzgerald struggles to articulate and highlight a meaningful distinction between an aesthetic and a commercial attitude toward literature; he records literature's potential loss of an ability to reflect its society in any detached or disinterested fashion.[183]

Scholars who want to find in these novels some more positive view of self-expression and individual creativity claim that these novels purposefully distort and partially veil their reality to create an alternative space in which its changing conditions and its uncertain future could be explored more freely and imaginatively. For Richard D. Lehan, Fitzgerald "was pushing his sense of experience away from the middle ground of verisimilitude toward extremes—toward two kinds of distortions": "the dreamer distorted" and "the rich man distorted."[184] For Keath Fraser and Kirk Curnutt, commenting—respectively—on *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender is the Night*, Fitzgerald's narrative form embraces this sense of distortion and incompleteness as a confusing but also a potentially liberating force. "What *The Great Gatsby* seems about in part, and where it derives its suggestiveness and energy, lies in what is not accounted for, what is undisclosed," comments Fraser.[185] Curnutt observes that "what makes *Tender* a frustrating reading experience is that there

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[177] Scott Donaldson, The Trouble with Nick," *Critical Essays on F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby*, ed. Scott Donaldson (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1984), 131.

[178] Richard Godden, "A Diamond Bigger than the Ritz: F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Gold Standard," *ELH* 77.3 (2010): 590.

[179] Robert Seguin, "Ressentiment and the Social Poetics of The Great Gatsby: Fitzgerald Reads Cather," *Modern Fiction Studies* 46.4 (2000): 927.

[180] John Callahan, "F. Scott Fitzgerald's Evolving American Dream: The 'Pursuit of Happiness' in *Gatsby*, *Tender Is the Night*, and *The Last Tycoon*," *Twentieth Century Literature*, 42.3 (1996): 380.

[181] Mitchell Breitwieser, "Jazz Fractures: F. Scott Fitzgerald and Epochal Representation," *American Literary History* 12.3 (2000): 359-381.

[182] Michael K. Glenday, "American Riviera: Style and Expatriation in *Tender is the Night*," *Twenty-First Century Readings of* Tender is the Night, ed. William Blazek and Laura Rattray (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2007), 153.

[183] Jonathan Enfield, "'As the Fashion in Books Shifted': *The Beautiful and Damned* as Arc-Light Fiction," *Modernism/modernity*, 14.4 (2007): 676; Timothy Galow, "Literary Modernism in the Age of Celebrity," *Modernism/modernity*, 17.2 (2010): 315.

[184] Richard D. Lehan, *F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Craft of Fiction* (London and Amsterdam: Feffer and Simons, 1966), 73.

[185] Keath Fraser, "Another Reading of *The Great Gatsby*," *Critical Essays on F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby*, ed. Scott Donaldson (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1984), 150.

seems no logic behind the constant perspectival switches"—but this illogic is then, for Curnutt, also the means by which Fitzgerald is able to imagine a world unfettered by his social conventions.[186]

I want to follow all these critics in arguing that the central question Fitzgerald's novels explore is that of the broader personal and social value and insightfulness of emotional self-expression; of feelings' ability to convey to others, or even to the person expressing them, the weight and complexity of the larger conditions that make them possible. Fitzgerald's novels represent feelings as states that carry through from one context to another: suggesting that a continuity could exist between a past love affair and its present rekindling, between the effort of acquiring wealth and the experience of energetically spending it, between trivial entertainments and in long-term commitments. Fitzgerald does not suggest merely that feelings are unable to carry through such connections, and draw social and historical conclusions from this inability. Nor does he accept the attenuated content these feelings are able to carry as his novels' necessarily fantastical and hyper-refined subject matter. Instead he showcases the difficulty of deciding whether a feeling that has been transplanted among many contexts and persons is enriched or deformed and hollowed out by such transpositions; whether the feelings his characters express do not quite match their immediate surroundings because they are too vague and shallow, or laden with too many contexts and memories that these characters' immediate material surroundings cannot quite convey. Rather than let us gage the importance and tone of characters' feelings by their material correlatives or by these persons' reported attitudes toward them, Fitzgerald makes us notice how difficult it is to discern, from a person's emotional expression alone, how extensive a past, or how easy a dismissal of it, a feeling carries at any given moment. He makes characters' difficulties in making these feelings seem consistently and intelligibly to matter to others seem in turns comic and tragic, dumbfounding not in how much they reveal either about these feelings' bearers or about their society, but in how consistently their successes or failures refuse to illuminate either these persons' shallowness or their depth, either their separation from or their deep awareness of and connection to their larger historical and social context.

Much like Woolf's novels, Fitzgerald's fiction focuses on times of leisure. We move in and out of parties, teas, lunches, walks, and other gatherings whose ostensible purpose is nothing more than mutual entertainment. The feelings expressed at these occasions are divorced from the past histories of outward effort and inward self-reflection that might have initially triggered and shaped them. Major turning points and plot twists—such as Jay Gatsby's murder, or Dick Diver's divorce—are not shown to us directly but merely summarized or casually invoked. Even though many of these characters' successes or failures in their love affairs hinge on their degrees of upper-class sophistication and affluence, we are given a similarly oblique sense of where their money comes from or how it is multiplied; of when their lavish entertainments merely express their wealth and when they endanger or overstate it. We are also never given the kind of introspective access into these characters that Virginia Woolf does allow us to have in the midst of her fictional social occasions. Instead Fitzgerald reports to us merely the words and gestures these characters exchange, and the responses they elicit—as if these acts of emotional expressions were in themselves attempted expressions of any and all of the larger personal and socioeconomic contexts that are relevant to their current situation.

Fitzgerald often comments on the difficulty or oddity of making these intervals of leisure and the disconnected shows of feeling they make room for expressive of one's larger personal and

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[186] Kirk Curnutt, "'A Unity Less Conventional But Not Less Serviceable': A Narratological History of *Tender is the Night*," *Twenty-First Century Readings of* Tender is the Night, ed. William Blazek and Laura Rattray (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2007), 122.

social history and values. Here, in *The Great Gatsby*, the narrator Nick Carraway pauses to comment on the parties, teas, and tennis matches with which he has been relentlessly filling his pages. "Reading over what I have written so far, I see I have given the impression that the events of three nights several weeks apart were all that absorbed me. On the contrary, they were merely casual events in a crowded summer, and, until much later, they absorbed me infinitely less than my personal affairs."[187] Following this caveat Nick gives us a brief summary of what his daily schedule really looked like at the time. Then we immediately return to Daisy, Tom, Gatsby, and Jordan at another one of their tea parties, and Nick's daily work is mentioned no further. Nick signals to us how tightly and misleadingly he has packed "the events of three nights several weeks apart" into what to our eyes had been a constant flow of intense, alcohol- and dance-fueled emotional vacillations. His digression emphasizes how much of our engagement with this novel hinges on our willingness to sustain interest in these emotional vacillations without being able to follow their immediate connections to the daily material habits that first inspired their expression and that make it economically possible. The emotional experiences that find expression during the parties he represents are striking both in how stubbornly they seem to persist in spaces that offer them only trivial support or that deny their long-term interest downright—as if they stemmed from and carried with them many weighty contexts and motivations—and in how little their mere presence can reliably confirm about the larger history of the person expressing them.

These uncertainties about the insightfulness or larger stakes of feelings expressed or dwelled in after their original occurrence are dramatized most complexly in *Tender is the Night*. But *The Great Gatsby* already follows some of the narrative strategies that this later novel will more extensively develop. *The Great Gatsby* stages an ongoing disjuncture between Gatsby's love for Daisy and the objects Gatsby uses to express this love. Fitzgerald keeps emphasizing that the material proofs Gatsby keeps furnishing of his affections are never these feelings' direct objective correlatives. These feelings' persistence at the center of his narrative without such immediate objective correlatives keeps emphasizing that these feelings might not be reducible to the superficial, mass produced luxuries with which Gatsby tries to make a good impression on her; that the reasons why Daisy should love him are not ultimately reducible to his newly acquired wealth, but stem from the connection they shared before his career even started. But Fitzgerald also thus makes these feelings seem blind and vulnerable. Rather than confidently and fully transpose their past contexts into this new environment, they seem at times merely to be deformed and hollowed out by their multitude of past and recent contexts or uses; to be reduced to vague, persistent habits that can no longer grasp or relate to any immediate surroundings very precisely.

In early parts of the novel, as Daisy and Gatsby are slowly getting back together, Fitzgerald keeps creating and then troubling possible correlations between Gatsby's feelings and the nouveau-riche objects around him—suggesting, and then denying, that the form and extent of Gatsby's love could be read out of them. Thus, in what has become a famous scene, Nick wanders into Gatsby's library and hears another man describe the volumes. "What thoroughness! What realism!" this other man exclaims because the library is walled not merely with imitations of book spines, but with real books themselves. "Knew where to stop, too—didn't cut the pages." (46) Ronald Berman rightly suggests that the way Gatsby expresses his love in these early sections of the novel makes this love seem unformed and, as it seems, excessively trustful of its ready transparency to others. "Money, after all," Berman observes, "has been only a means to express otherwise inchoate ideas"; meanwhile Gatsby often treats his spending habits as if they were ready expressions of feelings that

[187] F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribner, 2004 [1925]), 55-56. Hereafter cited in-text.

are nuanced and complicated.[188] But what is perhaps most striking is that Fitzgerald makes it possible to see these feelings as at once potentially naïve and potentially complex; as not merely unselfconscious celebrations of his current wealth, but attempts at conveying a larger personal history of which this current wealth is only a small part. In this passage, the man to whom Nick is speaking treats this as proof both of Gatsby's rootlessness and of the suave self-confidence with which Gatsby does not pretend to hide this rootlessness quite perfectly. To our narrator these books are measures not merely of Gatsby's nouveau-riche self-love but also of the way he has been trying to express his affection for Daisy. As he prepares to seduce her, Gatsby keeps creating ballasts of impressive guests, furnishings, and decorations that he can potentially lean on to keep expressing how much he is now worth, and how much his love could accomplish for her. All Gatsby needs of these books to woo Daisy, or to feed his self-love, is their physical presence on a bookshelf—the appearance of their spines, and the possibility of pages behind them. This is how much it takes to make his guests believe they are in the house of a gentleman, or at least to act as if they did. To cut into these pages Gatsby had left uncut would not help weigh his love for Daisy, or even his own attitude toward himself: there is some point beyond which these books are not in themselves relevant to either of these feelings.

On the one hand, as Gatsby's dinner guest suggests with mocking admiration, Gatsby's careless, only half-hidden admission that none of these books have been read makes his emotions seem powerfully un-self-questioning. It is as if Gatsby did not really need all of these objects to understand and ground how he feels; as if the reasons these feelings should matter to him and to Daisy depended confidently on the complex past history they share, and on the implied effort that it took him to make himself worthy of her. But on the other hand to think of his love as not quite aware of the forms it takes for their expression—as so exuberantly satisfied with these book covers as to forget to check what lies within them—also makes it seem as if Gatsby did not quite understand what he is doing for Daisy or for himself. This ignorance seems impressive as a show of bold, long-standing passion—a passion that might use its immediate objects as tools but is not to be defined by them. Yet it also foreshadows the ease with which Gatsby's love will keep blinding him to aspects of Daisy's life and character that he is not a part of, and to Daisy's dependence on Tom's social standing and material security as a guide to how she should act. For Milton R. Stern, the incompatibility of the feelings Gatsby claims to be expressing with the immediate means he uses to convey them is thus proof of his nouveau-riche naïveté. "Gatsby chases the dream and, lacking all advantages, is naïve enough to believe that the actualities of wealth are the protoplasm of his vision."[189] It is not clear if these uncut pages should ultimately be taken to showcase this feeling's unique, independently weighty content, or merely the leftover habits of a man who used to be poorer and less glamorous than he now pretends to be; whether they are expressions of his inability or refusal to move beyond some past unpremeditated patterns of relating to his world, or of his preoccupation with and trust in a rich past reality that these feelings should carry with them of their own accord.

T. Austin Graham finds a similar sense of unsounded, incomplete overlap between feelings and their sensible correlates in the music that plays in the background of *The Great Gatsby*'s love scenes. When Gatsby and Daisy first meet at Nick's, Gatsby puts "Three O'Clock in the Morning" on the gramophone. Ostensibly the song's lyrics—the story of a couple reunited after a long absence—would seem perfectly to fit the mood of this scene. But as Graham describes it, to listen

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[188] Ronald Berman, "*The Great Gatsby* and the Twenties," *The Cambridge Companion to F. Scott Fitzgerald*, ed. Ruth Prigozy (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 87.

[189] Milton R. Stern, *The Golden Moment: The Novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (Urbana, IL: U of Illinois P, 1970), 197.

to the song attentively is to become aware of many qualities to which these lovers would need to close their ears for this song to carry them into a romantic evening. "By the time McCormack [the soloist] delivers his full-throated, chivalric plea—'say that there soon will be a honeymoon'—the song has come in many ways to seem too flashy, too extravagant, and, above all else, too literal for what is otherwise a brooding and ambiguous scene."[190] Rather than present us with an external objective correlative that could convey his characters' moods exactly, Fitzgerald in both cases—of these books and of this music—gives us objects and feelings that do not seem to fit each other's full lengths and depths. These objects help illuminate Gatsby's and Daisy's feelings not through the precision with which they convey these emotional states, but in the way their ill-fitted use reveals these feelings' dissociation from their surroundings. Kermit Moyer argues "Gatsby's romantic quest for Daisy Fay is circular in essence: his sustained and single-minded thrust into the future is an attempt to recapture, not merely Daisy, but *that moment of wonder which she had once inspired*."[191] Passages such as these help us see both how appropriate and how misleadingly abstract a description this is of Gatsby's aims. Fitzgerald highlights Gatsby's hope that what Daisy is now drawn to is not merely his current wealth but the whole past course of their love affair. But Fitzgerald also thus begins to showcase the difficulty of deciding at which point these emotional states have been successful in doing anything more than temporarily distract these persons from the world before them; how we could tell if these feelings are reductive patterns that enfold their surroundings into a predetermined narrative that neglects the many social disparities between them, or carriers of powerful memories that would deserve to intervene into their current social context and reshape it.

Fitzgerald relates objects and feelings in this fashion to even more striking effect when Gatsby starts showering Daisy with his shirts. To impress Daisy, Gatsby throws his wardrobe into disarray. These shirts' colorfully growing mass seems to hint at the way in which, avalanche-like, their love now returns to them from across the years. Daisy's show of sadness about these shirts' beauty could similarly be read as a confession of her continued love for him:

> He took out a pile of shirts and began throwing them, one by one, before us, shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel, which lost their folds as they fell and covered the table in many-colored disarray. While we admired he brought more and the soft rich heap mounted higher—shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple-green and lavender and faint orange, with monograms of Indian blue. Suddenly, with a strained sound, Daisy bent her head into the shirts and began to cry stormily.
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> "They're such beautiful shirts," she sobbed, her voice muffled in the thick folds. "It makes me sad because I've never seen such—such beautiful shirts before." (94)

Daisy and Gatsby are laughing and crying like children, and admiring each other's beauty and wealth. But as Kirk Curnutt reminds us, Daisy is an "ageing flapper" with the prime of her youth behind her, and what Nick witnesses here seems like a flat imitation of her past vigor and ingenuousness.[192] And as W.T. Lhamon, Jr. points out, nowhere but in this moment of apparent self-confident opulence does Gatsby reveal his working class background, and the social gap that thus separates

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[190] T. Austin Graham, "The Literary Soundtrack: Or, F. Scott Fitzgerald's Heard and Unheard Melodies," *American Literary History* 21.3 (2009): 539.

[191] Kermit W. Moyer, "*The Great Gatsby*: Fitzgerald's Meditation on American History," *Critical Essays on F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby*, ed. Scott Donaldson (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1984), 217.

[192] Kirk Curnutt, "F. Scott Fitzgerald, Age Consciousness, and the Rise of American Youth Culture," *The Cambridge Companion to F. Scott Fitzgerald*, ed. Ruth Prigozy (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 41.

him from Daisy, more devastatingly: "Gatsby's heaped belongings are fundamentally similar to Myrtle's. … When Gatsby attempts to emulate with his hotel the series of gestures that elaborate the Buchanans, the result is a heap of shirts, of rooms, of guests—expensive disarray."[193] Ross Posnock goes so far as to declare this whole display of love "duplicitous": "The use of language to establish or present one's identity to another tends toward the duplicitous, the indeterminate, and nowhere more so than in moments of supposedly sincere revelation."[194]

But to call this scene, and others like it, merely a sequence of lies, is to overlook the degree to which its apparent shallowness seems to come not from the lack of any larger context for these speakers' feelings, but from the multitude of contexts these feelings seem to carry with them all at once; from the difficulty of knowing whether these contexts are still meaningfully if obliquely present in these feelings' expression, or whether they have merely deformed these feelings to render them unable precisely to relate to any particular context, to any single immediate event. Nick, who narrates this scene, knows very little of Daisy's and Gatsby's past affair. He lists these shirts' patterns and colors, and seems to give us Daisy's exact words and gestures. To take in these details as he expounds on them is to wonder how many of these details, and which ones, are actually relevant to this scene as an expression of love; how much of the potential Proustian experience that Daisy and Gatsby might now be sharing comes from this scene's material details, and how much of it comes from the way their feelings have already leapt over these particulars and their specific shapes and prices. Again this makes these feelings seem to have a presence and a rich past content of their own that could exist and appeal to them independent of the shapes and details of these shirts and crying bodies. But it also highlights these feelings' as yet unproven efficacy in reorienting this material world around themselves; the difficulty of knowing what they could add to this world beyond a reproducible capacity to obscure parts of it from sight, and rearrange what remains into a simple vision of love and eternity. Breitwieser describes these shirts, as well as many other objects Gatsby handles, as symbols that seem to have lost their "symbolicity," their "character as vessel containing abstract reality or as portal opening onto wonder."[195] I agree with Breitwieser that these objects never carry grander emotional meanings easily or reliably. Still a great part of the thrust of these scenes comes from the way such great passions and personal or social histories do seem to hover very persistently in our purview; not from the absence of such larger aspirations but from the difficulty of knowing at which point these feelings' capacity to persist in this trivial world should become proof of how considerable a personal history they stem from.

Gatsby's belief in the power of his passion comes to a head, of course, when he tries to make Daisy tell Tom she never loved him and she refuses to do so:

> "Oh, you want too much!" she cried to Gatsby. "I love you now—isn't that enough? I can't help what's past." She began to sob helplessly. "I did love him once—but I loved you too."
>
> Gatsby's eyes opened and closed.
>
> "You loved me *too*?" he repeated.

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[193] W.T. Lhamon, Jr., "The Essential Houses of *The Great Gatsby*," *Critical Essays on F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby*, ed. Scott Donaldson (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1984), 172.
[194] Ross Posnock, "'A New World, Material Without Being Real': Fitzgerald's Critique of Capitalism in *The Great Gatsby*," *Critical Essays on F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby*, ed. Scott Donaldson (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1984), 205.
[195] Breitwieser, 361.

"Even that's a lie," said Tom savagely. "She didn't know you were alive. Why—there's things between Daisy and me that you'll never know, things that neither of us can ever forget."

The words seemed to bite physically into Gatsby. (132)

Toward the end of the novel, Nick describes this disappointment as a failure of vision. Gatsby was too preoccupied with his feeling to notice that its proper occasion had already passed—to notice, indeed, that there was a limited time and space in which its original context and stakes could have been taken seriously, and that he had attempted to carry it beyond this limit. "He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night." (180) Giles Gunn argues that Gatsby's inability to realize that his dream had long expired makes him seem fundamentally out of synch with his modern world: "Gatsby's dream belongs to a historical order which has long since ceased to exist, to a vision of possibility which had almost died on the eyes of those first Dutch sailors to these shores, who, paradoxically, were the last to look upon the American landscape with innocence."[196] To such grand parallels that the novel keeps drawing between Gatsby's failed love affair and larger courses of American history and social development there is the pathos Gunn locates, but also the persistent comic edge hinted at by Nick's comment that Gatsby's passion was transplanted way beyond its proper limit. Fitzgerald lets us see these feelings' portability—the way all of their expressions we witness are recurrences of more or less distant past emotional states—as a sign both of these feelings' potential portentousness and of the possibility that they are already worn out, trivially deformed and vague, simplified down to the barest, naïve contours of the contexts they pretend to be preserving.

What adds to the tragicomic tone of this ending—in a way that *Tender is the Night* will capitalize on much further—is the way in which, in a sense, Gatsby's love of Daisy does linger on within his life, and find a skewered kind of recognition by others, after this dramatic break. This love is noted and reacted to in contexts in which Gatsby had not intended to plant it, changing its meaning and its tone in these new settings in ways that depart from the ways Gatsby seems to have intended. Gatsby dies because he finds himself suspected of having loved and successfully seduced another man's wife. At his funeral he is rejected by the person he cared for most but celebrated by others toward whom he had seemed to feel relatively indifferent. The feelings Gatsby's murderer and most of his mourners attribute to him are at once eerily similar to the affection he wanted to express toward Daisy and anticlimactically, almost comically different from Gatsby's intended objects and scales. In their capacity to misrecognize what seemed to be such a life-defining feeling, these persons undercut the grandiose scope of Gatsby's passion. They keep at once adding to and hollowing out the personal history that he claimed his feelings were unquestionably, relentlessly attached to. Apparently capable of taking on so many possible tones and meanings—and so unreliable in transmitting any of them precisely to others—his feelings are striking both in how difficult it is to erase them from Gatsby's life, or from the lives of those around him, and how difficult it is to mine them for insights into the kind of response Gatsby's feelings might truly now deserve, or into the details and the value of the past history of devotion from which they stem.

In *Tender is the Night* these questions of feelings' relationship to, and capacity to convey, larger social or personal histories are given even fuller expression. Its plot centers around a

[196] Giles Gunn, "F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Gatsby* and the Imagination of Wonder," *Critical Essays on F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby*, ed. Scott Donaldson (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1984), 231.

psychoanalytic and personal success that then becomes a psychoanalytic and personal failure. Dick Diver, a famous analyst, cures and then marries his rich patient, Nicole, whose father raped her when she was a child. At first it seems as if Dick's and Nicole's mutual love has freed her from the dramatically persistent feelings this trauma triggered. But then their marriage deteriorates as it turns out these feelings can still not be easily managed and Dick, too, is overwhelmed by them. Dick succumbs to alcoholism and loses his prestigious job. Nicole leaves him for another lover and takes her great wealth with her.

Critics have often commented on the many levels in which this novel seems at once to be grounded in, and to dissociate itself from, the social inequalities and upper-class irresponsibility that the last years of the Jazz Age—and the incipient Great Depression—were just then making very apparent. Milton Stern lists the almost comical multitude of current social issues and cultural themes the novel apparently attempts to tackle: "The themes are many and complex. They include war … identity … wealth, the movies, acting, swimming, the New Woman, the fathers, Europe and America, priestliness, past and present, sun and moon, heat and coolness, black and white."[197] At the same time, as Arthur Mizener puts it, the novel's principal actors are entirely marginal to their country's current historical events, and the novel seems willfully oblivious of them: "Its story describes the life of well-to-do American expatriates on the Riviera during the 1920's, and such people are usually thought to be about as insignificant as Princeton undergraduates. They were especially thought to be so when the novel was published in 1934 at the depth of the Great Depression."[198] Richard D. Lehan and Linda De Roche treat the novel as a representation and (at least partly) an enactment of aesthetic and social escapism—whether it is to be accomplished, as for Lehan, through style, or for De Roche, thanks to the seclusion and natural beauty of Switzerland.[199] James Light reads it as an extended exercise in political irony: "Emphasizing the morally debilitating influences of the system on the very rich rather than the very poor, [Fitzgerald] worked with implication and irony to assert his discontent with the system."[200] Chris Messenger reads it as a representation of these characters' social alienation; of their inability truly to "belong" to the social system in which they seem to have so prominent and undisputed a place.[201]

In a sense, *Tender is the Night* makes its ambitions to resonate with or encompass such larger social contexts even more overt than such ambitions are in *The Great Gatsby*. But in a way that its richness and explicitness of such larger themes makes even more dramatic, this later novel also expresses an ever greater hesitation about whether such larger themes add to these characters' emotional lives or merely bloat, deform, and distort them; whether feelings whose echoes and resurgences range so widely should be valued or trivialized for their apparently so complex and broad origins and applications.

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[197] Milton R. Stern, "*Tender is the Night* and American History," *The Cambridge Companion to F. Scott Fitzgerald*, ed. Ruth Prigozy (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 99.

[198] Arthur Mizener, "*Tender is the Night*," *Critical Essays on F. Scott Fitzgerald's Tender is the Night*, ed. Milton R. Stern (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1986), 163.

[199] Richard D. Lehan, *F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Craft of Fiction* (London and Amsterdam: Feffer and Simons, 1966), 42; Linda De Roche, "Sanatorium Society: The 'Good' Place in *Tender is the Night*," *Twenty-First Century Readings of* Tender is the Night, ed. William Blazek and Laura Rattray (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2007), 61.

[200] James F. Light, "Political Conscience in the Novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald," *Critical Essays on F. Scott Fitzgerald's Tender is the Night*, ed. Milton R. Stern (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1986), 137.

[201] Chris Messenger, "'Out Upon the Mongolian Plain': Fitzgerald's Racial and Ethnic Cross-Identifying in *Tender is the Night*," *Twenty-First Century Readings of* Tender is the Night, ed. William Blazek and Laura Rattray (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2007), 171.

As *The Great Gatsby*, throughout *Tender is the Night* Fitzgerald never introspects into any of these characters' minds. We first meet Dick and Nicole during a party at the beach, and from then on we are made to follow their interactions with other persons at more or less crowded parties, teas, excursions, and fancy meals. The trauma Nicole is trying to escape, and the mixture of guilt and despair to which Dick is struggling not to succumb, are presented to us not as these characters might inwardly experience them—and not during any events that might strikingly illuminate their origins—but during characters' attempts to act on or to express these feelings among persons who are mostly ignorant of their life histories. Fitzgerald does not dramatize the explanatory power of Nicole's trauma, or the power that her social status has to hide it, but the degree to which the feelings he represents never seem clearly or successfully to showcase to what events or forces, past or present, they owe their intensity and shape. On the one hand, the novel keeps giving us glimpses of ways in which Dick and Nicole could be expressing their society's larger social conditions. As Bruce Grenberg notes, Nicole's letters to Dick "begin with a reference not to madness, but to the military and the war… a polyglot salutation fitting to an American in France in 1918."[202] Dick himself, in his demeanor and expressed values, "is not," as Stern observes "just young American Dick in the Roaring Twenties: he is also Doctor Diver, who was formed by nineteenth-century forebears and who has some very old-fashioned virtues and ideas of morality."[203] On the other hand, these seemingly rich references keep being flattened into what appear to be mere stereotypes or exercises in shallow snobbery: As Mary Colum puts it, "Nicole, in her insane passages seems more like a case history from a textbook than a novelist's study of a real character."[204] Eugene White observes that Dick's charisma hovers between seeming sophisticatedly self-aware and comically shallow: "There is an incompleteness in him which is covered over by the charm which he has cultivated and used to draw people to him, to sweep them up and manipulate them, to use himself to attempt their fulfillment."[205] We are always made to wonder how much of its potential past history or broader social context a given feeling has shed or still carries at any given moment; how much its persistence in this new context speaks to the continued hold a character's past or social status has on her life, and how much it speaks instead to the ease with which the shapes this past history or present status give to her life are shed, refashioned, or dismissed, according to some reproducible, oversimplified pattern that collapses these many past contexts into some vague and solipsistic set of emotional habits.

Here, in a scene early on in the novel, Fitzgerald represents what seems to be at once an attempt and a failure to draw a connection between Nicole's joyfulness on this particular day and the social structures that make her current life possible:

> Nicole was the product of much ingenuity and toil. For her sake trains began their run at Chicago and traversed the round belly of the continent to California; chicle factories fumed and link belts grew link by link in factories; men mixed toothpaste in vats and drew mouthwash out of copper hogsheads; girls canned tomatoes quickly in August or worked rudely at the Five-and-Tens on Christmas Eve; half-breed Indians toiled on Brazilian coffee

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[202] Bruce Grenberg, "Fitzgerald's 'Figured Curtain': Personality and History in *Tender is the Night*," *Critical Essays on F. Scott Fitzgerald's Tender is the Night*, ed. Milton R. Stern (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1986), 215.
[203] Stern, "American history," 103.
[204] Mary M. Colum, "The Psychopathic Novel," *Critical Essays on F. Scott Fitzgerald's Tender is the Night*, ed. Milton R. Stern (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1986), 60.
[205] Eugene White, "The 'Intricate Destiny' of Dick Diver," *Critical Essays on F. Scott Fitzgerald's Tender is the Night*, ed. Milton R. Stern (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1986), 131.

> plantations and dreamers were muscled out of patent rights in new tractors—these were some of the people who gave a tithe to Nicole, and as the whole system swayed and thundered onward it lent a feverish bloom to such processes of hers as wholesale buying, like the flush of a fireman's face holding his post before a spreading blaze.[206]

The early sections of the novel keep exposing with increasing persistence what John Callahan describes as Nicole's and Dick's uncanny, disproportionate excitement about their parties, shopping sprees, and other forms of entertainment.[207] Nicole is shopping. Rosemary, the budding film star whom she invited to join her, is mesmerized by Nicole's joyful overspending. Her seemingly blithe uncomplicated joy feeds on—as Richard Lehan puts it—many histories and past moments of labor, pain, and material output.[208] It seems at first that the passage could be read as a commentary on social inequality, on the way that, as Thorstein Veblen would have it, the leisure classes' conspicuous consumption can be read as a symptom of and a guide toward the larger social structures these classes exploit.[209] But Fitzgerald draws our attention not only to the way this feeling seems to depend on such larger labors, but also to the degree to which the objects of its "feverish bloom" seem disconnectedly, comically trivial in comparison to them—as if this feeling did not carry even a small part of the great scope of power which such extensive social labor should give it. What makes these balances of power even more complicated is the fact that Nicole seems often to depend on such trifling joys to keep herself from falling back into the horror and panic of her childhood trauma. The perfection of the lifestyle she and Dick share—of the pleasures they line up for themselves minute by minute—is so important to them in great part because each missing link in this chain of thrills can send Nicole spiraling. Nicole's happiness seems a show of detachment and independence, but it is not clear if it is detached most forcefully or most importantly from the social history of her wealth or from the personal history of her trauma. It seems to depend on a combination of embracing her social status and past history and of hollowing them out into superficial pleasure. Rather than give us means of reading this passage as a critique or an analysis of Nicole on either of these levels, Fitzgerald lets us see how little merely witnessing this feeling can do to guide us back to such larger narratives and insights. He shows how difficult it is to believe in this feeling as a reliable expression of these larger narratives even if one tries to fit it back into them with as much vigor as this passage shows, but how difficult it also is to keep such larger contexts entirely from view; to not recognize oblique, comically small echoes of them in Nicole's gestures.

Dick's love affair with Rosemary—a young actress whom he and Nicole meet on the beach—is depicted through similar uncertainly successful attempts to trace feelings back to their origins, or to assert where their origins lie. Rosemary jump-started her film career by starring in a film called *Daddy's Girl*, and she makes Dick and Nicole watch this film with her. She is much younger than Dick; he also frequently calls her a child. These details, and many more similar ones, might make this relationship seem to be Dick's Freudian enactment of Nicole's trauma. This is indeed how critics have frequently read this subplot. But perhaps the most striking aspect of this relationship is how consistently Fitzgerald manages to break or to cast doubt on these feelings' connections to any consistent narrative of vengeance or of guilt.

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[206] F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Tender is the Night* (New York: Scribner, 2003 [1934]), 55. Hereafter cited in-text.
[207] John Callahan, *The Illusions of a Nation: Myth and History in the Novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (Urbana, IL: U of Illinois P, 1972), 97.
[208] Richard Lehan, "F. Scott Fitzgerald and Romantic Destiny," *Twentieth-Century Literature* 26.2 (1980): 146.
[209] Thorstein Veblen, *Conspicuous Consumption* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

One way in which Fitzgerald troubles a straight psychoanalytic reading of the ways in which Dick expresses or articulates his feelings is by highlighting the haziness or indiscriminacy of these feelings on the sensory level. Here, when Rosemary and Dick finally have sex, we follow Dick's impression of Rosemary's face and limbs as they draw closer to him: "He breathed over her shoulder and turned her insistently about; she kissed him several times, her face getting big every time she came close, her hands holding him by the shoulders." (155) Rosemary is fragmented into disjointed body parts. These body parts absorb and reflect his breath, becoming surprisingly, almost grotesquely large as they draw nearer. Fitzgerald's phrases, which seem here to be channeling the sensory limits of Dick's perspective, are all generic and vague. Dick could be executing these same movements toward any other female body: we would not be able to tell Rosemary apart from other female characters in this novel based on this description. Their lovemaking seems to lead not to any greater depth of mutual knowledge, but merely to ever new sources or angles of pleasure, each no less hazily drawn than the others.

Laura Rattray takes passages such as these to signal Dick's "faltering vision" in both a literal sense and a metaphoric one.[210] On the one hand these suggestions that his infatuation might be dominating and overwhelming his perception—making it difficult for him to take in anything but small and basic sensations—make this feeling seem a particularly compelling, insistent component of this scene, one that changes rather than merely follow what he sees and touches based on some prior knowledge or foresight it might carry. On the other hand this feeling seems so insistently present because we are made unsure toward or out of what larger courses of action it might be building; because what it seems to let Dick discover, for all we know, might be the mere mechanical patterns of lovemaking. Whatever past histories are pushing Dick to do what he now does, his feelings themselves do not seem able reliably to indicate what these histories might be.

This uncertain weight of Dick's attraction to Rosemary—and of its consequences for his relationship to Nicole—is dramatized perhaps most intensely when Dick does, later in the novel, attempt to formulate some revelation about how he has treated these women. The police stop him after he tries to assault a taxi driver. The drunken, indignant Dick calls out:

> "I want to make a speech!" Dick cried. "I want to explain to these people how I raped a five-year-old girl." (235)

Pamela A. Boker reads this as a crucial moment of psychoanalytic transference: "by accepting Nicole's transference love, Dick has become psychologically engaged in her incestuous drama and, through identification with her father, has become the perpetrator of the original act of violence against her."[211] But what is perhaps most striking about the feeling of guilt that overwhelms Dick is how easily its expression fizzles out into a non sequitur. The persons around Dick do not begin to understand what he is talking about, and everyone's attention quickly turns to his drunken misbehavior of the night before. Even we, as his readers, do not know whether the girl he is referring to now is Nicole or Rosemary—whether he is mockingly chastising himself for a brief affair with a younger woman, or dramatically taking the whole weight of Nicole's trauma onto himself.

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[210] Laura Rattray, "An 'Unblinding of the Eyes': The Narrative Vision of *Tender is the Night*," *Twenty-First Century Readings of* Tender is the Night, ed. William Blazek and Laura Rattray (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2007), 92.

[211] Pamela A. Boker, "Beloved Illness: Transference Love as Romantic Pathology in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night*," *Literature and Medicine* 11.2 (1992): 304.

These disconnected expressions of feeling make such emotional states seem aggressively portentous, but also—of course—prepare the way for the anticlimaxes during which the claims they lead Fitzgerald's characters to make on their world are easily dismissed or shortchanged by those around them. These anticlimactic final plot twists mark the starkest difference between Fitzgerald's representation of feelings and the traditional Romantic vision of the emotional self with which he is sometimes associated. Even as his characters seem always to mistake the force with which their emotional expression can convince or appeal to others, they also seem often to mistake the finality of their feelings' initial dissatisfaction. These feelings never make themselves present in characters' worlds in quite the way they might have promised, but they also carry through to new contexts in these persons' lives well beyond the moment when their relevance or productivity was called into question. Rather than see these characters reach a final depth of despair or self-criticism, we are made to notice how easily their feelings keep resonating in changed tones, spans, and intensities; how little these feelings' continued presence depends even on these persons' continued trust in their worth. This once again makes these feelings seem at once, tragicomically, to be driven by very strong social and personal backgrounds and narratives, and to showcase these characters' failure to relate to their social and personal lives in any but the vaguest, oversimplified fashion.

In a way that echoes the distorted reactions Gatsby's love elicits after his death, as Dick's career and marriage unravel he does not dramatically lose the affection of the persons he loves. Instead he finds himself cared for in new contexts incommensurate with how he previously perceived himself. Here, shortly before the ending of the novel and Dick's final breakup with Nicole, he is trying to restore his former aura of attractiveness by lifting a man at the beach:

> Dick was going to try his lifting trick and Nicole began to watch with smiling scorn. This physical showing-off for Rosemary irritated her most of all.
>
> When the men had ridden long enough to find their balance, Dick knelt, and putting the back of his neck in the other man's crotch, found the rope through his legs, and slowly began to rise.
>
> The people in the boat, watching closely, saw that he was having difficulties. … When, with a last wrenching effort of his back, Dick stood upright, the board slid sidewise and the pair toppled into the sea.
>
> … Nicole watched for a sight of Dick's face. It was full of annoyance as she expected, because he had done the thing with ease only two years ago.
>
> The second time he was more careful. He rose a little testing the balance of his burden, settled down again on his knee; then, grunting "Alley oop!" began to rise—but before he could really straighten out, his legs suddenly buckled and he shoved the board away with his feet to avoid being struck as they fell off.
>
> … He could not rise. Nicole saw him shift his position and strain upward again but at the instant when the weight of his partner was full upon his shoulders he became immovable.
>
> … After a minute Dick got his breath, panting, "I couldn't have lifted a paper doll that time."
>
> An explosive little laugh relieved the tension caused by his failure. (283-285)

Fitzgerald has never before described Dick lifting anything before besides the body of a young lover; Dick has never before, to our knowledge, used brute physical force except when he was being overpowered by a group of policemen in Italy. In these prior contexts he is not presented as a sickly

man, but nor is his athleticism emphasized as something that particularly defines him or that he should be particularly proud of. And now, near the end of the novel—after Dick has lost his credentials as a faithful husband and a potentially brilliant scientist—he tries to assert and confirm some of his self-love by claiming for it this new context of expression. Even though Dick cannot achieve that what he set out to do, everyone is apparently captivated. This episode's ambiguous tragicomic quality lies both in his inability to gain the kind of overpowering admiration he seems to year for and in the way he does not thereby stop being felt for in smaller, more humiliating ways. Rosemary is still amused by him, and Nicole is still bemusedly, concernedly tender, giving him an attention that is less grand than he had wanted, and is directed at parts of himself he might perhaps now prefer not to think about, but appears loving all the same.

Grenberg dramatically reads this episode as an expression of the larger political commentary the novel seeks to achieve: "Dick has been slowly but irresistibly crushed by the same force giving ascendance to Nicole: by the 'billions' and 'trillions of the booming stock market, by the 'plentitude of money' which became 'an absorption in itself'"[212] Callahan also treats this passage as Dick's assertion of how little he needs from anyone but himself: of how reluctant he is ever directly to convey his feelings to others: "Time and time again, he blunts Nicole's critical perception of one or another of his failings by substituting detachment for spontaneous emotional response."[213] The ease with which Dick's skills as a husband and a doctor prove so easily dispensable—so that Nicole can now applaud him with what seems like little more than pity—does of course on one level remind us of Nicole's easily deployed economic safety net. But Nicole's easily achieved indifference could also be seen to stem from her past personal history, or from her reaction to Dick's recent love affairs; and even though her detachment shows that Dick is apparently able to seek approval from a circle wider than just herself, it also showcases how indiscriminately needy his self-love seems to be. It seems striking that Dick's self-love should still find some halfway successful forms of expression, even after he has been cut off from all that had seemed to make him feel good about himself throughout this novel—and even though he is not even a very admirable athlete. But for this self-love to be so easily portable beyond the contexts that first seemed to have justified it, makes it difficult to articulate what kinds of insights, if any, it is based on—what it could tell us about Dick's past ambitions, or even about the depth or shallowness of his current view of himself. It seems at once to reveal itself to be a part of himself Dick cannot bear to part with, and to be so malleable in its expression, so rapid to shed each of its past contexts, as to render itself unintelligible as a source of insight into who he is or how deeply we should care about his fall as compared to the relative success still enjoyed by everyone around him. Contrary to what Trachtenberg has suggested, these final scenes do not seem to thus give us insight even into Dick's final degree of disillusionment.[214]

Fitzgerald recounts Dick's years after he and Daisy have separated as a similar series of changes of the contexts in which he aspires to express or act on how he feels. Stern describes this sequence of small, opaque failures as a representation of what would have happened to Gatsby if he had lived.[215] Indeed, the way his emotional expression seems to fragment itself does strongly resemble the similar fragmentation and distortion that Gatsby's love for Daisy undergoes in the way it is reenacted by others around the time of his death and funeral. Dick seems unable to regain

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[212] Grenberg, 233.
[213] John Callahan, "The Way Home: But Here There Is No Light," *Critical Essays on F. Scott Fitzgerald's Tender is the Night*, ed. Milton R. Stern (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1986), 198.
[214] Alan Trachtenberg, "The Journey Back: Myth and History in *Tender is the Night*," *Critical Essays on F. Scott Fitzgerald's Tender is the Night*, ed. Milton R. Stern (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1986), 183.
[215] Stern, "American history," 115.

momentum. But he also seems never to lose an ability at least partially to entertain himself and others. Fitzgerald makes us notice not only how swiftly and how deeply he has fallen, but also how hard it is for his energetic joyfulness definitively to exhaust itself even now that it seems so completely disconnected from the great sense of promise that had fuelled it at the beginning of the novel:

> Dick opened an office in Buffalo, but evidently without success. Nicole did not find out what the trouble was, but she heard a few months later that he was in a little town named Batavia, N.Y., practicing general medicine, and later that he was in Lockport, doing the same thing. By accident she heard more about his life there than anywhere: that he bicycled a lot, was much admired by the ladies, and always had a big stack of papers on his desk that were known to be an important treatise on some medical subject, almost in process of completion. He was considered to have fine manners and once made a good speech at a public health meeting on the subject of drugs; but he became entangled with a girl who worked in a grocery store, and he was also involved in a lawsuit about some medical question; so he left Lockport.
>
> After that he didn't ask for the children to be sent to America and didn't answer when Nicole wrote asking him if he needed money. In the last letter she had from him he told her that he was practicing in Geneva, New York, and she got the impression that he had settled down with some one to keep house for him. She looked up Geneva in an atlas and found it was in the heart of the Finger Lakes Section and considered a pleasant place. Perhaps, so she liked to think, his career was biding its time, again like Grant's in Galena; his latest note was post-marked from Hornell, New York, which is some distance from Geneva and a very small town; in any case he is almost certainly in that section of the country, in one town or another. (314-5)

Even as Dick moves from each small town to another, even tinier one, what Nicole keeps hearing about and transmitting to us is not his failure but his self-love's continued small successes in making others believe that he is admirable or lovable; not his fall but his apparent inability to fall into total self-doubt. Dick's self-love seems on the one hand adaptably, malleably vigorous, and incapable of settling into any single context permanently. Dick's final travels hover ambiguously between the tragic and the comic—we are made unable to discern what level of awareness or effort these feelings are supposed to measure, how much one should respect or mock Dick for so stalwartly keeping up these miniature iterations of the grandly successful life his self-love had previously fed on. The feelings of self-love he keeps expressing seems at once remarkably compelling and confusingly, anticlimactically indiscriminate; they seem at once to express something potentially profound and unique about Dick's character—a persistence that would seem to stem from some powerful personal or social forces—and to mark the point at which one can no longer tell from what general or particular aspects of these new endeavors one is to glean insights into how deep or shallow, how unique or how mechanically oversimplified a content and a form these feelings express.

Woolf and Fitzgerald thus both consider what it might mean to define and to appreciate feelings as parts of our experience that are in some ways independent both of their immediate contexts and even of the persons experiencing them. They dramatize the ways in which these portable feelings keep adding to and changing their characters' inner lives or their social spheres. They also highlight the high degree to which feelings are central to their characters' understanding of how one could conceive of individual lives and larger social histories as part of one, continuous

entity; of how one could imagine the ways in which, and the reasons why, the self-expression of these individuals could productively illuminate or add to their larger environment. But Woolf and Fitzgerald also worry that feelings' capacity for partial detachment makes them capable of shedding content one might have counted on them to preserve; that they are not able either entirely to restrict themselves to their immediate context, or to bring back the prior contexts they invoke fully and purposefully. For both writers, to realize that feelings are portable is also to realize how vulnerable and unreliable they are; how easily a serious treatment of them slides back into the comic, while also making comic things their characters might have held precious; how much of the praise one might give to feelings as forms of habitual sustenance or as carriers of memory depends on their forgetfulness or idealization. Woolf and Fitzgerald show that, paradoxically, the larger a context a feeling seems to stem from or carry over to, the more difficult it is to make any use of this feeling without continuing to erode its contexts or to flatten them; the more personal or social weight a feeling might seem to carry, the more likely it is that it will not be able reliably to bear or to convey this weight.

Within their own intellectual context, these hesitations need not necessarily be read as critiques of their contemporaneous Marxist and Freudian systems of knowledge—they seem more immediately to note Woolf's and Fitzgerald's doubts about whether the feelings they explore could (for reasons or class or individual sensitivity) live up to the full potential and ambition these systems attach to the successful exploration of individuals' inner lives. But these hesitations are of course much more pertinent to contemporary affect theory, which often treats feelings as especially rich and many-sided carriers of and links to the multitudes of personal and social contexts in which we lead our lives—offering us a hope of understanding these contexts in new and unconventional ways through what seems like precisely the kind of easy, capacious portability that Woolf and Fitzgerald seem to find at once so appealing and so inconsistently reliable. Within this current theoretical context, Woolf and Fitzgerald can help us think about what it means to consider feelings' portability not merely as a process of enriching, but also of eroding them; as a source not merely of their complexity and potential wider resonance, but potentially also of their vagueness and oversimplification, and of undercutting the means we might believe we have of testing their immediate breadth and depth.

## Immersiveness: Marcel Proust and James Baldwin

Proust and Baldwin are preoccupied with immersive feelings. The emotional states on which they focus are not exclusively relationships to objects or persons, but ways of responding to and taking in whole settings. This sort of affective immersiveness is of course distinct from, and not necessarily a window onto, sensory immersiveness of the kind described by William James or of the kind suggested by a Claude Monet painting. But it seems accurate to say that Proust and Baldwin explore what it would mean to try to do something with feelings that relate to such enveloping sensory spaces. They ask how one nurtures such immersive feelings as potentially significant outcomes of our engagement with the world or models for how we can engage with this world further. They explore how one could try to perpetuate these feelings or satisfyingly to act on them. They also highlight the sheer effort it requires emotionally to take in or react to one's entire horizon of perception.

But Proust and Baldwin also wonder how we can ever tell that any such immersive emotional experience is valuable, precise, or lasting. For both writers this preoccupation with the uncertain and unsteady relevance of immersive feelings is mediated through their simultaneous preoccupation with rooms. Both for Proust and for Baldwin rooms provide the best, perhaps even too self-flatteringly material models for how enveloping and seemingly reliable a space a feeling is able to draw us to or to discover around itself. Yet rooms also provide models for the ease with which immersive feelings are entered and exited. They showcase the constant need such feelings have for material settings to fuel and confirm themselves, the unreliability of the efforts they inspire us to apply toward the world, the paucity of such feelings' engagement with parts of the world we do not immediately sense.

I read Marcel Proust and James Baldwin alongside each other because their narrative representations of feelings share these basic premises. But I also compare Proust and Baldwin because of the important differences that separate them. Proust and Baldwin come from widely disparate socioeconomic backgrounds and are writing several decades apart from each other. Proust is a white European and Baldwin is African American. Proust is typically read through a philosophical lens, and Baldwin is more often read through a political one. By bringing them together I do not want to stress that Proust directly inspired Baldwin, or that Baldwin's novels add specifically to our understanding of Proust. I do want to emphasize that Proust and Baldwin's separate projects converge in a similarly expressed hesitation about the productivity of a particular type of emotional experiences. Together, I hope that Proust and Baldwin will help me show a wide range of political and philosophical contexts and dimensions in which these feelings' productivity can become unclear. I also hope that they will help me articulate a wide range of reasons why this lack of clarity deserves attention both in a historical sense and in our current-day studies of feeling. Proust stages these explorations of immersive feelings' unclear productivity and importance to ponder what it would mean to treat the momentary joys or sorrows his narrator experiences as potential sources of philosophy or art. Baldwin considers what it would mean for an individual to

express immersive feelings in a way that would significantly add to the world around him or that would significantly change his social or political position.

Many critics have remarked on how much insight Proust's narrator seems to draw from his material surroundings. For Georges Poulet, Proust's spaces are inscribed with truths about our existential isolation. "La distance, pour Proust, ne peut donc qu'être tragique. Elle est comme la démonstration visible, inscrite dans l'étendue, du grand principe de séparation qui affecte et afflige les hommes."[216] (61) ["For Proust, distance therefore cannot but be tragic. It shows visibly, inscribed into its expanses, the universal principle of separation by which human beings are invariably affected and distressed."] For Gilles Deleuze they are made out of "hieroglyphs" that transmit to the narrator the pathos of his attempts to make sense of himself. "The hieroglyph is everywhere; its double symbol is the accident of the encounter and the necessity of thought: 'fortuitous and inevitable.'"[217] Before these hieroglyphs' frequent opacity the narrator finds himself humbled into a realization that his senses are worth nothing at all—and into what Deleuze takes to be Proust's most enduring discovery about subjectivity:

> But what is a body without organs? The spider too sees nothing, perceives nothing, remembers nothing. She receives only the slightest vibration at the edge of her web, which propagates itself in her body as an intensive wave and sends her leaping to the necessary place. Without eyes, without nose, without mouth, she answers only to signs, the merest sign surging her body and causing her to spring upon her prey.[218]

My own reading follows Poulet's and Deleuze's insights that much more is at stake for Proust's narrator, in each room he inhabits, than just the sensory components of this room itself; that he is after not merely material comforts but affective and perhaps even philosophical ones as well. But Poulet's and Deleuze's readings carry a pathos that takes for granted the philosophical gravity that the narrator is constantly in search of, and that his narrative frequently loses right after the moments of apparent revelation on which Poulet and Deleuze tend to focus. I want to ask how we can square the novel's loftier passages and readings—which presuppose a certain amount of unself-questioning confidence about the seriousness of his project—with passages from Proust's novel, and readings of them, that show Proust's narrator in moments of vulnerability, light comedy, or mortifyingly trivial self-doubt. It will be one purpose of my reading to ask how these self-serious corners of Proust's novel coexist with its equally vast if not vaster comic expanses: to ask how the narrator who makes what Martha Nussbaum calls "general reflections on the nature of the human soul" coexists with the person Michael Sprinker calls a snob and Rebecca Comay calls a lover of kitsch, as well as with the person whom Walter Benjamin—following Maurice Barrès—calls "Un poète persan dans une loge de portière"; how the narrator who begins his great artwork in his sick-bed coexists with the narrator who marvels at the calembours of the duchess of Guermantes or delights in the speed of his rented car.[219] I want to think about the whole spectrum of more or less abstract, more or less personal

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[216] Georges Poulet, *L'Espace proustien* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), 61.
[217] Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000 [1964]), 102.
[218] Deleuze, *Proust*, 182.
[219] Martha Nussbaum, "Fictions of the Soul," *Philosophy and Literature* 7.2 (1983): 147; Michael Sprinker, *History and Ideology in Proust* (New York: Verso, 1998); Rebecca Comay, "Impressions: Proust, Photography, Trauma," *Discourse* 31.1/2 (2009): 99; Walter Benjamin, "The Image of Proust," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 209.

revelations that the narrator has or attempts to have in the course of the novel: to think of his attempts to create and to define an artwork in conjunction with his comparatively trivial fascination with yacht dining room porcelain, and also with his comparatively more moving or potentially insightful attempts to understand why he loves Albertine and how he could make her love him back. I treat all these greater or lesser moments of seeming insight or perceptiveness as aspects of the novel's general preoccupation with moments when one comes to believe that an immersive emotional experience of any scope could be true and important beyond its immediate material setting; moments when one tries to parse apart these feelings' responses to these particular settings from the broader insights into oneself, or even into humanity as such that they appear also to yield. Rather than merely highlight and celebrate the most abstract insights in which such experiences might lead one to believe, Proust focuses on the inconsistency and unreliability of their momentary appeal. He exposes the tragicomic oddity of finding that what one might take to be one's life philosophies—or one's constant attachments and loves—might always need to be sustained and managed through one's interactions with a particular, humiliatingly small room or salon.

By noting the novel's not consistently high-minded or universalizable pursuits I do not want to claim that, as Hannah Freed-Thall has suggested, Proust wants us to recognize his narrator's loftily philosophical moments as a series of conjuring tricks.[220] But I want to suggest that it is a mistake to suggest that Proust sees in these moments of apparent insight the apexes and direct conclusions of the whole of his narrative. His novel is instead preoccupied with way such feelings of apparent recognition or insight relate to and depend on their material conditions; with what it means to have a seemingly abstract realization and then experience difficulty carrying it beyond the room where it was made. Proust represents material spaces as sites of the emergence, and the constant reemergence, of any larger philosophical ambitions—but also as sites where the narrator's potentially philosophical experiences discover their inability to either remain consistently bound to their immediate material limits, or to stop depending on such material enclosures as the circumferences and supports of their incipient insights.

In focusing on Proust's use of material enclosures I also do not want to dismiss the many critics, such as Georges Poulet, who have rightly described this novel as preoccupied with time. What I describe as the feeling of total immersion rooms let him experience is of course very similar to what Bergson describes as *la durée réelle*; and one of the basic things that these rooms help the narrator appreciate and measure is the flow of the time he spends in and out of them. By following Proust's narrator as he tries to make sense of his personal history room by room and enclosure by enclosure—and as he tries with inconsistent success to keep his temporal sense of himself within such material bounds, or to carry it along with him as he travels to another setting—I stress with most of Proust's other critics how ambitious and difficult a task it seems, for Proust's narrator, to make sense of time whose passage we see only in small disconnected doses. But I do want to argue that it is impossible to speak of either time or space in Proust, or of their interplay, without invoking the narrator's uneasy oscillations between depending on material enclosures and abandoning them, between believing in a chronology of his life that makes sense in his bedroom and then one that makes sense in his lover's salon. I also want to argue that to think of the narrator's search of lost time as always confined to specific rooms—or seeking some new room in which new memories could be recalled—is in fact better to appreciate how much of the focus of the novel is not space and time itself, in an abstract geometric or philosophical sense, but the narrator's intermittent hopes that he has understood both space and time in general terms; not any clear temporal or spatial whole

[220] Hannah Freed-Thall, "'Prestige of a Momentary Diamond': Economies of Distinction in Proust," *New Literary History* 43.1 (2012): 159-178.

that we could map out and make sense of realistically, but the question of how one's feelings about time and space can possibly lead one to reliable relations to or notions of them as universals.

When Proust's novel begins the narrator is waking up inside a bedroom. In semi-darkness he tries to recall the shapes of the objects by which he is surrounded. From these shapes he begins to divine in what room—of the many rooms he has known—he has now found himself, and into what network of habits and attachments his consciousness is now returning. For a brief period—before he is quite awake, and before the sun has fully risen—it seems as if his mind and body were on the brink of many possible past and present rooms: "I had seen first one and then another of the rooms in which I had slept during my life … rooms in winter … rooms in summer … or sometimes the Louis XIV room…" (I.7-8)[221] These rooms are so various and charged with such various ambiances that he feels disappointed when he figures out where he is and the number of these possible locations is reduced to just one. As the novel ends he retreats to another bedroom. From within its confines he struggles to recall and represent to himself the whole past history that the rooms he is here on the brink of reentering first signaled.

Of course *In Search of Lost Time* does not take place only within rooms. But it does pay meticulous, almost disproportionate attention to them. Nowhere in this novel, as filled with ambiguity as it is, do we linger within a room without eventually realizing what kind of room it is, to whom it belongs, by whom else it is currently shared. In this novel that has been said to be so preoccupied with time, over two thousand pages pass before we hit upon a single date. In this novel that is so famously obsessed with aging, we hardly ever know how old the narrator or anyone around him is. But we do always know whether he has woken up in his own bedroom or in Albertine's, or in Saint-Loup's. Whenever he walks into a salon we are never left wondering whether this might be the salon of the duchess or the princess of Guermantes, that of Madame Swann or Madame Verdurin.

A great part of this diligence comes from the high degree to which these rooms are used to define his characters' shifting affections and the progress they make in satisfying them. Proust structures his narrative around characters' need and capacity to retreat to their rooms by the end of the day. He notes the triggers that can get them out of their bedroom, or that can get them to let somebody else into their salon. He focuses on the kind of objects, persons, and impressions that they are able to carry back with them into their private chambers from the wider world within which they had spent their day. The narrator's childhood love of Gilberte is thus marked by a longing to follow her into the chambers toward which she heads from the Champs-Elysees after playing with him. His love of Albertine is of course marked by an increasingly obsessive need to keep her in his bedroom. His patterns of anxiety are marked by the ease or difficulty with which he is able to fall asleep in his bedroom, by the time he takes to leave it and by the frequency with which he does so. To fear that one does not know enough about those one loves is, for both the narrator and Swann, to imagine the different rooms they occupy throughout the day without them. Thus, after Albertine has left the narrator, his anguish becomes most vivid when Saint-Loup lists the rooms she now stays in: "How I repeated to myself these words, shed, passage, drawing-room, renewing the shock at will, after Saint-Loup had left me! In a shed one girl can hide with another. And in the drawing room,

[221] "J'ai revu tantôt l'une, tantôt l'autre, des chambres que j'avais habitées dans ma vie. … chambres d'hiver, … chambres d'été … parfois la chambre Louis XIV…" (I.7). Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu* (Paris: Folio, 1992); Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Modern Library, 2003). All passages from Proust are henceforth cited in-text, with the English quoted directly and the French appended in footnotes.

who knew what Albertine did when her aunt was not there?" (V.480)[222] Persons change, and the narrator or others are able to see them afresh, when they suddenly appear in a new and unexpected salon. Confusions of role and tone are often staged on the brink of rooms—as when Charlus and the narrator ambiguously discuss the writings of Bergotte and Charlus' attraction to the narrator in the narrator's doorway. No matter where the narrator's digressions take us, each of his volumes keeps returning to, and effectively makes us reside in, one or two central rooms or salons. Thus, for example, the vast majority of *Du Côté de Guermantes* takes place in Oriane de Guermantes' salon and in the salon of the Princesse de Guermantes. It is as if these rooms' confines delimited and defined the limits and the scope of each volume itself.

More abstractly there is a way in which even the narrator's meandering sentences—which keep contextualizing in ever more detail the feeling or impression at their center—also foster an experience of dwelling or habitation more so than of linear progression. They make present to the narrator, as he elucidates his feelings, not merely a feeling's form but what it means to linger within this form until it seems to become a self-sufficient logic of its own:

> Blinking his eyes in the sunlight, he seemed almost to be smiling, and I found in his face seen thus in repose and as it were in its natural state something so affectionate, so defenseless, that I could not help thinking how angry M. de Charlus would have been could he have known that he was being watched; for what was suggested to me by the sight of this man who was so enamored of, who so prided himself on, his virility, to whom all other men seemed odiously effeminate, what he suddenly suggested to me, to such an extent had he momentarily assumed the features, the expression, the smile thereof, was a woman. (IV.5)[223]

Proust's narrator works himself up to declaring that Charlus is acting like a woman. He gets there in two long, sweeping motions. First we follow a long pan onto Charlus's current appearance, as it coalesces moment by moment and trait by trait from a set of sensations into a series of adjectives. Then in similarly sweeping fashion the narrator takes us through all he has known of Charlus's attitudes toward femininity and women. In the final phrase these observations seem to be summed up by a definitive list of the various aspects of Charlus's appearance that now so definitively single him out as female. The narrator seems to let his mind wander through what he knows of Charlus's demeanor and feelings; to settle into his final discovery of Charlus's femininity as into a discovery of a general impression or ambiance that has undergirded his way of describing Charlus from the very first word. Proust's parallel clauses keep rephrasing their exact precedents from what is just a slightly different angle, creating an aura of increasing enclosure and security. It is as if the narrator were testing each corner of the impression Charlus has been making on him, and of the syntax he uses to express it; as if he were trying to mine this impression and its verbalization not for how well other persons or settings could confirm it, but for their capacity to keep self-sufficiently sustaining and containing his sense of who Charlus is. The sentence seems to give the narrator's impressions at once a space of expression and a limit; it gives us a sense both of how widely and diversely the

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[222] Comme je les répétai, renouvelant le choc a plaisir, ces mots de hangar, de couloir, de salon, quand Saint-Loup fut parti! Dans un hangar, on peut se cacher avec une amie. Et dans ce salon, qui sait ce qu'Albertine faisait quand sa tante n'était pas là? Eh quoi? (VI.54)

[223] Clignant des yeux contre le soleil, il semblait presque sourire, je trouvai à sa figure vue ainsi au repos et comme au naturel quelque chose de si affectueux, de si désarmé, que je ne pus m'empêcher de penser combien M. de Charlus eût été fâché s'il avait pu se savoir regardé; car ce à quoi me faisait penser cet homme qui était si épris, qui se piquait si fort de virilité, à qui tout le monde semblait odieusement efféminé, ce à quoi il me faisait penser tout d'un coup, tant il en avait passagèrement les traits, l'expression, le sourire, c'était à une femme! (IV.6)

narrator's feeling about Charlus apparently ranges, and how definitively it is brought to completion with the full stop.

In *Apartment Stories*, Sharon Marcus shows that French novels from the period immediately preceding Proust's represent apartments in ways that echo the patterns I just described. For Marcus many of these earlier French novels use contrasts between the apartment and the mansion, or transitions between the rented room, the street, and the apartment staircase, to dramatize characters' attempts at defining and managing their private and their public selves.[224] The *Search* certainly seems to be inspired by the narrative strategies Marcus defines. But Proust's rooms differ from rooms depicted by Balzac or Zola because their contents do not, as they would have in these prior novels, directly unpack for us their inhabitants' personality and aspirations. In Proust rooms model and make present his characters' difficulty in securing for their feelings the adequate, enveloping outward mirrors that these prior novels take for granted. At the same time they foreground the facility with which characters let their feelings be satisfied by small, trivial enclosures. They also highlight the ease with which these characters can temporarily forget that anything matters in their world beyond the four walls that presently enclose them or by which they hope to be enclosed.

One basic way in which this unreliability of immersive feelings is made manifest is in the narrator's simultaneous preoccupation with typologies of various kinds of rooms, and in the way these typologies can never translate into consistent models of how he can function in these rooms or of what they can give to him. Throughout the novel, the narrator seeks to articulate or to act on fine distinctions—of the kind that a nineteenth-century might make—between the *chambre*, or bedroom, and the *salon*, or sitting room; between the kinds of enclosure offered by a church, by a theater, by an opera hall, by an artist's studio, by an art gallery, by a walled-in patio, by the compartment of a train, by a room in one's home as opposed to a hotel room or a room in a brothel, or even by the city park or the street arcades. Many of the novel's turning points are then staged as discoveries of new rooms whose functions and dynamics do not resemble the rooms he has been in previously. For example, in volume two, visiting Elstir's studio makes him realize how much natural beauty one can put in a single private space—and, also, what it means to perceive this natural beauty in a personal, distinctive fashion.

But these discoveries are not straightforward revelations of new ways in which his sensibility can be shaped by its outer settings. Rather than simply offer proof of how much the narrator's sensibility depends on the shapes and capacities it is given by these outward enclosures, such moments of transition and reorientation dramatize instead how difficult it is for the narrator to adjust to any such space, or to benefit from it consistently. On the one hand, the spaces the narrator inhabits often do not, when he first enters them, seem able to provide him with the kinds of revelations that they give to others. The narrator's visits to the theater, or his early visits to the Balbec church and hotel, are memorable not because of how deeply and how easily the narrator feels for the performances and beauties they enclose, but because of how numb they initially leave him, and how confused by the euphoria that others around him seem to be feeling:

> All my pleasure had ceased; in vain did I strain towards Berma eyes, ears, mind, so as not to let one morsel escape me of the reasons which she would give me for admiring her, I did not succeed in gleaning a single one. (II.26)[225]

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[224] Sharon Marcus, *Apartment Stories* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1999).

[225] Tout mon plaisir avait cessé; j'avais beau tendre vers la Berma mes yeux, mes oreilles, mon esprit, pour ne pas laisser échapper, une miette des raisons qu'elle me donnerait de l'admirer, je ne parvenais pas à en recueillir une seule. (II.20)

> The talent of Berma, which had evaded me when I sought so greedily to grasp its essence, now, after these years of oblivion, in this hour of indifference, imposed itself on my admiration with the force of self-evidence. … But this talent which I sought to discover outside the part itself was indissolubly one with it. (III. 54)[226]

In the first of these two passages, the narrator describes the sensation of seeing La Berma perform for the first time. In the second, he attends her performance once again after some years have passed, and after he has had the chance to see other plays. During the first performance, he strains his sensibility to the utmost and yet his various observations cannot coalesce into a feeling of admiration or enjoyment. It seems he can discern nothing about Berma that could stand out from the physical space of the play and the familiar rhythm of its lines; as if what he saw was nothing more than a persistently occupied stage. During the second performance—after his love of Berma has subsided—he is able not only to appreciate her talent, but also to recognize that what he is now moved by is nothing more and nothing less than what he noticed about her from the outset. The reason why he could never discern at which point her performance exceeds or transcends her assigned role is because her talent lies precisely in her ability to fold into her role entirely. What he should have appreciated was her ability to become nothing more than a seamless part of the stage and the play that unveils within it.

The theater thus seems to have enveloped him from the outset, as if against his will—so that he could not help being immersed in it as an all-enclosing, leveling space that none of his feelings seemed able to break away from or to fragment. And yet this space initially left him cold. It finally gives him an immersive feeling of enjoyment long after achieving this feeling has ceased to matter to him, so that this second performance is noted only briefly as the narrator makes his way to other rooms and interests. Describing Proust's fascination with John Ruskin, Diane R. Leonard states that, like the British critic, Proust sought to capture the "souls" of buildings and to understand people's souls as constellations of the spaces they inhabit.[227] And while this seems true of these two passages, Proust also makes us feel the disappointment of noting that it is too literally true than Leonard's phrasing might suggest. Berma folds so effortlessly into the theater that expresses her talent that she no longer seems like a particular person. She is woven into this performance so seamlessly that, in leaving the physical space of the theater that allowed him so finely to appreciate her, the narrator can easily leave her, too.

In perhaps the most memorable such moment of surprising indifference, when the narrator first sees Albertine in Elstir's studio—a studio that he takes to be a material embodiment of his desired aesthetic education—he is unable to recognize this woman whom he has sought out for so long as beautiful, or even to recall his prior attraction to her. During his first visit to Elstir's studio, the narrator's eyes fall upon a beautiful painting of a sunset that Elstir is about to finish. Immediately before describing this first visit, the narrator spent many pages recounting his love of Balbec sunsets. When he sees Elstir's painting he is astonished at how much more this painting seems to tell him about these sunsets that he believed to already appreciate so finely. He is also astonished at how many instances of natural beauty this studio seems capable of putting together and juxtaposing, into what seems to be a self-sufficient, total expression of and education in aesthetic sensitivity. During

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[226] Le talent de la Berma qui m'avait fui quand je cherchais si avidement à en saisir l'essence, maintenant, après ces années d'oubli, dans cette heure d'indifférence, s'imposait avec la force de l'évidence a mon admiration. … Mais ce talent que je cherchais à apercevoir en dehors du rôle, il ne faisait qu'un avec lui. (III.41)

[227] Diane R. Leonard, "Ruskin and the cathedral of lost souls," *The Cambridge Companion to Proust*, ed. Richard Bales (London: Cambridge UP, 2001), 45.

the second visit, as his gaze falls upon Albertine, he finds he cannot draw a similarly immediate connection between this young woman and the one whom he has been following all over Balbec:

> There was certainly a girl sitting there in a silk frock, bareheaded, but one whose marvelous hair, whose nose, whose complexion, meant nothing to me, in whom I did not recognize the human entity that I had extracted from a young cyclist in a polo-cap strolling past myself and the sea. Nevertheless it was Albertine. … But so far as pleasure was concerned, I was naturally not conscious of it until some time later, back at the hotel, and in my room alone, I had become myself again. (II.615-616)[228]

Rather than reveal itself to him in condensed, heightened form, her beauty becomes fragmented and oblique. He will only be able to experience the wave of joy he thought seeing her in such close quarters should cause him when he returns to his bedroom and is able to reminisce about this encounter in a familiar, secluded setting—the very familiar setting that had recently grown distasteful to him because he wanted always to be following Albertine and her friends wherever they went. "What I find in *A la recherche*," says Katja Haustein, "is not only holistic emotionality, but its advancing displacement by the rapid increase in what I propose be called 'emotional cavities.' These are zones where there is no longer any interaction or closeness, no emotional contact or correspondence between the narrator and the world he perceives, but rather emotional distance and difference, zones where the narrator is left alone, standing before the frame."[229] Against the echoes of existential despair Haustein finds in such moments of indifference one needs to juxtapose the comic way in which, to paraphrase Sara Danius, Elstir's studio turns out to be a sort of "camera obscura."[230] It is as if the narrator were taking a photograph of Albertine and his love of her that he does go on to develop and treasure, in a way that makes his momentary indifference and its potentially serious consequences seem to be merely a matter of his comically slow and hermetic emotional rhythms. In these dramatizations of how much time it sometimes takes for feelings to catch up to the spaces that they will later take to be their embodiments—even though, at other times, and even in the very same chambers, such revelations seem to descend upon the narrator instantaneously—Proust showcases at once these feelings' extreme dependence on the rooms in which they are triggered or nurtured, and their detachment from them. He showcases at once that these feelings and the spaces in which they are enclosed and examined are different things—that these feelings cannot be simply predicted and regulated by these spaces—and that these feelings nevertheless cannot subsist or be made intelligible except through these unpredictable experiences of what is at times effortless and at other times quite fickle immersive enclosure.

As the narrator's perception of himself and others is thus always dependent on such physical enclosures—but never quite reducible to them—the narrative turns our attention away from the particulars of these rooms themselves to the rhythms of his characters' inhabiting them. Proust dramatizes the inevitably (though unpredictably) limited timestamp of a room's capacity to comfort his narrator or to excite him. He stresses the ways in which the narrator keeps cycling through many

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[228] Il y avait bien une jeune fille assise, en robe de soie, nu-tête, mais de laquelle je ne connaissais pas la magnifique chevelure, ni le nez, ni ce teint et où je ne retrouvais pas l'entité que j'avais extraite d'une jeune cycliste se promenant coiffée d'un polo, le long de la mer. C'était pourtant Albertine. Mais même quand je le sus, je ne m'occupai pas d'elle. … Pour le plaisir je ne le connus naturellement qu'un peu plus tard, quand, rentré à l'hôtel, resté seul, je fus redevenu moi-même. (II.433-435)

[229] Katja Haustein, "Proust's Emotional Cavities," *French Studies* 63.2 (2009): 162.

[230] Sara Danius, "The Aesthetics of the Windshield: Proust and the Modernist Rhetoric of Speed," *Modernism/modernity* 8.1 (2001): 102.

spaces throughout the day, passing through some only briefly and lingering in others for much longer, finding himself drawn now to one pattern and now to another of inhabiting them. He follows both the urgency with which the narrator sometimes seeks out a particular room, and the ease with which he then abandons it in favor of other ones; both the ease with which the narrator can temporarily come to believe that his whole life is bound to returning to a particular material enclosure, and the facility with which these beliefs are soon proven wrong.

Thus, when the narrator first falls in love with Gilberte, he wants only to be in the Champs-Elysees—and afterwards, to spend all his time at Swann's house, and to return to his room as infrequently as possible. But as their love deteriorates he begins to appreciate how much his love has in fact all along depended on his capacity to retreat to his room by the end of the day, privately to recall the day's events and to build up his hopes around them—that it is in this bedroom that his love for her can keep continuing. When the narrator first leaves for Balbec, it seems to him that he will not survive without the childhood bedroom that all his self has been supported by. And when he returns to Balbec years later, he finds in the hotel room that had at first seemed so hostilely alien, or at best neutral to him—and that he had not thought of much over the years—a trove of some of his most precious and most hidden feelings. To reassure himself of his love of Albertine, the narrator arranges for other women to come to his doorstep—to almost, but not quite, enter the space he and Albertine share, giving him premonitions of what it would be like to share this space with some other woman:

> To estimate the loss that I suffered by my seclusion, that is to say the riches that the day had to offer me, I should have had to intercept in the long unwinding of the animated frieze some damsel carrying her laundry or her milk, transfer her for a moment, like the silhouette of a mobile piece of stage décor between its supports, into the frame of my door, and keep her there before my eyes. (V.177)[231]

As in his descriptions of Berma, what he appreciates is not the young woman herself but the way she is framed by his doorway—and the ease with which this framing makes her seem like a piece of furniture. These juxtapositions of women against his door and his entryways reduce them to decorative bibelots or to flat, silhouetted shadowy projections. It is as if, as he puts it at the beginning of this sentence, the purpose of these tests were not to meet a particular new person but to vary and test the patterns of his "reclusion"; to help him find a new way in which his bedroom can be used, and see whether something about these new patterns could suit him better. These tests or assertions of the bedroom's appeal seem at once to stress this room's central importance, and to announce the fragility of this attachment. They showcase both how defining this particular space are to the narrator's affection for Albertine, and how easily this affection, and the room's hold on him, might falter if he took a few steps beyond it with a particular person, or if—as will happen quite soon—Albertine decides clandestinely to leave it, making him realize with comic terror that she was not such a bibelot after all.

As the novel progresses, the narrator keeps trying to find ways of defining or going beyond this dependence on particular spaces or chambers; to find a way of describing and experiencing feelings that would allow them to become more freely abstract, more readily and portably reliable,

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[231] Pour évaluer la perte que me faisait éprouver ma réclusion, c'est-a-dire la richesse que m'offrait la journée, il eut fallu intercepter dans le long déroulement de la frise animée quelque fillette portant son linge ou son lait, la faire passer un moment, comme une silhouette d'un décor mobile, entre les portants, dans le cadre de ma porte, et la retenir sous mes yeux. (V.129)

without losing the immersive quality that makes them seem so seductive and persuasive in the first place. At the beginning of the novel, he often tries to dissociate his feelings from the spaces in which he acts on them by carrying out of these spaces objects that are intended to serve as their syntheses and mementos. These objects are striking both in how readily they spark the narrator's feelings when he is absent from the room of which they are meant to remind him, and in how easily the hold they have on him starts to seem trivially thin and paltry as soon as he returns to the material room they were supposed to capture. Thus, when he falls in love with Gilberte, the narrator tries to bring back home some proofs and expressions of her love for him: they include a marble and a series of form invitations. These paltry objects give him a surprisingly persuasive illusion of being in Gilberte's presence when she is not there—but as soon as he sees her again he is surprised that he could have confused the feeling they trigger with the feeling of being in Gilberte's room itself. The failures of these objects to serve as synechdoches of the rooms he inhabits are all the more striking when compared to the ease with which a merely accidental sensation—one which reminds him not of a room's particular content but, like the madeleine, of the mere fact of being in it—can bring back such past rooms much more readily and vividly.

Throughout the novel, the narrator's feelings also seem temporarily to free themselves of the hold that rooms have on them while he is dreaming. Proust's narrator rarely, if ever, tries to analyze his dreams—and if he does he only gives them very general explanations. But Proust does often, in recurring intervals, relate to us how completely the narrator's mind is filled and reshaped by his dream visions. These visions contract or multiply, expand or foreshorten, the kinds of spaces that the narrator inhabits in his daily life or the kinds of affections he nurtures there, appearing to construct, for the brief span of a single night, an entire alternative series of habitable chambers, and of new feelings that these chambers nurture:

> "I shall leave a note of the exact address, so that you can go there; but I don't see what good you can do, and I don't suppose the nurse will allow you to see her." "But you know quite well I shall always live close to her, stags, stags, Francis Jammes, fork." But already I had retraced the dark meanderings of the stream, had ascended to the surface where the world of the living opens, so that if I still repeated, "Francis Jammes, stags, stags, the sequence of these words no longer offered me the limpid meaning and logic which they had expressed so naturally for me only a moment before, and which I could not now recall. … I had forgotten to close the shutters, and so probably the daylight had awakened me. But I could not bear to have before my eyes those sea vistas on which my grandmother used to gaze for hours on end … So as not to see anything any more, I turned towards the wall, but alas, what was now facing me was that partition which used to serve us as a morning messenger. (IV.218-219)[232]

[232] Je te laisserai l'indication précise pour que tu puisses y aller; je ne vois pas ce que tu pourrais y faire et je ne crois pas que la garde te la laisserait voir. – Tu sais bien pourtant que je vivrai toujours près d'elle, cerfs, cerfs, Francis Jammes, fourchette." Mais déjà j'avais retraversé le fleuve aux ténébreux méandres, j'étais remonté à la surface où s'ouvre le monde des vivants; aussi je répétais encore, "Francis Jammes, cerfs, cerfs," la suite de ces mots ne m'offrait plus le sens limpide et la logique qu'ils exprimaient si naturellement pour moi il y a un instant encore et que je ne pouvais plus me rappeler. … J'avais oublie de fermer les volets et sans doute le grand jour m'avait éveillé. Mais je ne pus supporter avoir sous les yeux ces flots de la mer que ma grand-mère pouvait autrefois contempler pendant des heures. … Pour ne rien voir, je me tournai du côté du mur, mais hélas! ce qui était contre moi c'était cette cloison qui servait jadis entre nous deux de messager matinal. (IV.159)

The narrator dreams that he cannot get into the room his grandmother stays in. When he wakes up he realizes that he actually cannot get out of it; that what has woken him up, and will now start oppressing him, is not the absence of a space charged with his grandmother's presence but the material fact of this room that surrounds him with memories of her wherever he may turn.

On the one hand dreams like this one—which makes the narrator believe in the exact opposite of his daytime plight—seem to offer proof of his feelings' detachability from the spaces he inhabits, and thus to give them some aura of independence or creative potential. But these dreams also highlight the ease with which, upon waking, his feelings do fall back on these material enclosures. The fantasies they temporarily create cannot subsist within these material enclosures as a reliable competing way and scope of feeling. The series of nonsense words that the narrator hears himself repeating upon waking seems to signal the break between the dream world's logic and the logic of the world into which he wakes. But it also highlights a similarity between the real world and the world of this dream. Even though he has apparently woken up from his nightmare, the space he finds himself in is no less self-contained. It no less insistently, it seems, imposes on him what appears to be an immersively totalizing emotional experience, one that assaults him no matter where he looks. Even as the narrator emphasizes that dreams and waking are separate spheres—that the experience of a dream cannot be reduced to the experience of being in a room, or vice versa—he stresses that a dream's seductiveness and apparent insights are to a great degree hermetic to this dream itself; that it is difficult to bring them back into the real world, and even more difficult to pretend that they are ways of liberating oneself from this world or of discovering a looser or more open-ended way of feeling that one could reside in sustainably. The dreaming narrator is not, as Poulet puts it, "un être en creux" [a hollow being] who upon waking starts desperately to seek out his "essence." [essence][233] He is instead a being who keeps falling in and out of successive enclosures of which he cannot carry anything that he could keep or use in other ones. Moreover, if the limits rooms set to his feelings are comic enough—so that many of his loves can only be sustained within a tiny bedroom, as if that was all the content and variety they could handle—there is something even more humiliating about waking up from these dream experiences and finding that the vast imagined spaces he had believed them to contain had in fact all along been circumscribed merely by his bodily frame.

These explorations of alternative ways of describing or experiencing immersive feelings also continue during the times the narrator occasionally spends in the open air. Of course, as I noted at the outset of this chapter, a non-negligible part of the *Search* does take place in spaces that are not self-enclosed even by the expanded modernist definitions of what counts as a self-enclosed space (as Marcus observes, around the turn of the century a Parisian street or neighborhood takes on the self-enclosed, comforting qualities that in past centuries could only have been predicated of a room or at most a house).[234] The narrator occasionally travels with Albertine in an automobile; he takes trains and rides in carriages; he promenades by the seashore and in the parks and gardens that extend around his friends' mansions. These spaces do not enclose feelings in quite the same way that the narrator's bedroom or his friends' salons do. But, significantly, they also do not offer the narrator any open-ended, unenclosed ways of feeling. They seem instead merely to heighten and to complicate his recurrent confusions about the kinds of walls and enclosures he could entrust himself to; about the scope and the importance of what these enclosures contain.

Rather than simply be presented as spaces that are inherently larger, freer, and more unpredictable than rooms, these seemingly open spaces keep turning out to be ever smaller and

[233] Georges Poulet, "Proust," *Etudes sur le temps humain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1949), 367-369.
[234] Marcus, "Enclosing Paris, 1852-1880," *Apartment Stories*, 135-165.

more self-contained than they at first appear. Here, what had seemed to him at first to be an overwhelmingly huge landscape turns out to be easily containable within the back garden of a mansion, and perhaps even within the frames of the window from which he can look out onto this garden:

> It must also be said that the garden at La Raspelière was in a sense a compendium of all the excursions to be made in a radius of many miles. … And indeed [these resting-places] assembled round the chateau the finest views of the neighboring villages, beaches, or forests, seen greatly diminished by distance, as Hadrian collected in his villa reduced models of the most famous monuments of different regions. (IV. 541)[235]

This passage expresses awe at how much natural beauty lies beyond the Verdurins' summer salon. But the narrator also notes how easy it might nevertheless be to enclose the whole surrounding landscape first within their back garden, and then within their very salon, without any apparent sense of loss. Rather than open himself to a sublime experience of a landscape vaster than his eye can span, the narrator seems comically to suggest that he could not affectively discriminate between such a vast, sublime landscape, and a particularly large back yard; that no matter how far out he goes or pretends to go, he cannot find—or take in—any experience whose scope is not ultimately reducible to the kinds of rooms in which he spends most of his days.

The automobile, which would again ostensibly give the narrator greater freedom of mobility, turns out to have a similar foreshortening effect:

> We realized this as soon as the vehicle, starting off, covered in one bound twenty paces of an excellent horse. Distances are only the relation of space to time and vary with it. We express the difficulty that we have in getting to a place in a system of miles or kilometers which becomes false as soon as that difficulty decreases. Art is modified by it also, since a village which seemed to be in a different world from some other village becomes its neighbor in a landscape whose dimensions are altered. In any case, to learn that there may perhaps exist a universe in which two and two make five and a straight line is not the shortest distance between two points would have astonished Albertine far less than to hear the driver say that it was easy to go in a single afternoon to Saint-Jean and La Raspelière. Douville and Quetteholme, Saint-Mars-Le-Vieux and Saint-Mars-Le-Vêtu, Gourville and Balbec-le-Vieux, Tourville and Fêterne, prisoners hitherto as hermetically confined in the cells of distinct days as long ago were Méséglise and Guermantes, upon which the same eyes could not gaze in the course of a single afternoon, delivered now by the giant with the seven-league boots, clustered around our tea-time. (IV.537-538)[236]

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[235] Disons du reste que le jardin de La Raspèliere était en quelque sorte un abrégé de toutes les promenades qu'on pouvait faire à bien des kilomètres alentour. … Et en effet ils réunissaient autour du château les plus belles 'vues' des pays avoisinants, des plages ou des forêts, aperçus fort diminués par l'éloignement, comme Hadrien avait assemblé dans sa villa des réductions des monuments les plus célèbres des diverses contrées. (IV.388)

[236] Nous le comprimes dès que la voiture, s'élançant, franchit d'un seul bond vingt pas d'un excellent cheval. Les distances ne sont que le rapport de l'espace au temps et varient avec lui. Nous exprimons la difficulté que nous avons a nous rendre à un endroit, dans un système de lieues, de kilomètres, qui devient faux dès que cette difficulté diminue. L'art en est aussi modifié, puisqu'un village qui semblait dans un autre monde que tel autre, devient son voisin dans un paysage dont les dimensions sont changées. En tout cas, apprendre qu'il existe peut-être un univers où 2 et 2 font 5 et où la ligne droite n'est pas le chemin le plus court d'un point a un autre, eût beaucoup moins étonné Albertine que d'entendre le mécanicien lui dire qu'il était facile d'aller dans un même après-midi à Saint-Jean et à La Raspelière,

As Poulet puts it, "Le voyage idéal est, pour Proust, celui qui, abolissant d'un coup les distances, place côte à côte, comme s'ils étaient contigus et même communicants, deux de ces lieux dont l'originalité faisait pourtant qu'ils semblaient devoir exister pour toujours à part l'un de l'autre, sans possibilité de communication. Ainsi il est juste de dire que l'expérience du mouvement change les lois de l'univers." [For Proust the ideal voyage is one which abolishes distance all at once, placing side by side, as if they were contiguous and even in communication with each other, two of those places that had seemed distinctive precisely because they had always seemed to exist apart from each other, without any possibility of such communication. It is in this sense right to say that the experience of movement changes the laws of the universe.][237] The narrator's greater mobility does not make him feel freer within the world he used to know. Instead it seems to create a new, separate world onto itself, a world as alien to his past experience as if even its most basic rules of reasoning had changed. To say that the narrator treats this 'new' landscape as a new, separate universe is of course not to assert that the narrator instantly turns these landscapes into rooms. But it is to suggest that the narrator keeps problematizing, and calling into question, the capacity of these seemingly open spaces and modes of travel to be genuinely open—in the sense of permitting mutual transparency, an easy flow of information, a broader and a looser kind of feeling.

It is of course comic, within the context of this last passage, that the narrator describes the small change in his daily habits produced by his automobile as a change in the most basic laws of the universe. But this comparison also brings to light one of the most central and most noticeable aspects of the narrator's immersive feelings. Throughout the novel, the narrator tends to describe the way each given room or each change of room affects him through generalizations and aphorisms. The narrator makes these aphorisms seem part and parcel of the immersive experiences that the rooms he inhabits foster. He rarely, if ever, returns to them beyond the moment when they were first uttered; and his phrasing often makes them sound at least potentially overblown and comic. But Proust also keeps highlighting how much stock the narrator apparently puts in being able to believe in each of these aphorisms at least for a short period—how much of his day-to-day sustenance, and his hope for spiritual growth, is built around them. He makes us wonder what it would mean for what the narrator holds to be philosophical truths to always depend on a small material enclosure if they are to appear convincing—how the narrator could ever make spiritual or philosophical progress in this fashion. Most critics have interpreted the ending of the novel as the narrator's philosophical breakthrough: as the moment when his hitherto ephemeral emotive insights transcend their immediate triggers and occasions. I argue instead that the ending marks the moment when the narrator finally becomes self-conscious about the limits of any of his seemingly abstract insights; when rather than free himself from the hold rooms have had on him he accepts this dependence as his insights' necessary, if vaguely comic or humiliating, circumscription.

Here, in a passage from *Le temps retrouvé*, Proust creates what seems to be such a step-by-step, self-conscious exposition of this necessary relationship between the room that encloses the narrator and his apparently abstract, philosophical insights. The narrator has returned to the salon of the princesse de Guermantes after the First World War. He is baffled by how much his friends have aged, and keeps trying to use these familiar settings to figure out who all these other guests are. One of the persons he meets there is M. d'Argencourt, who used to despise the narrator but has

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Douville et Quetteholme, Saint-Mars-Le-Vieux et Saint-Mars-Le-Vêtu, Gourville et Balbec-Le-Vieux, Tourville et Fêterne, prisonniers aussi hermétiquement enfermés jusque-là dans la cellule de jours distincts que jadis Méséglise et Guermantes, et sur lesquels les mêmes yeux ne pouvaient se poser dans un seul après-midi. (IV.385-386)

[237] Poulet, *Espace proustien*, 95.

apparently grown too weak to express this enmity and treats him with weary politeness. The narrator is taken aback and observes Argencourt with confused detachment. As he keeps looking at Argencourt, this now elderly man starts to seem more and more doll-like. He seems, as the narrator puts it, like a puppet in a children's morality play, one that—in this case—is meant to remind us of the passage of time. It is as if, the narrator continues, this aged frame had been projected onto Argencourt's former body the way Golo, the figure from his magic lantern, would have been projected against the walls, doors, and doorknobs of the narrator's childhood bedroom. The body he sees before him seems a revelation not of any specific person, but of Time itself. It explains not only his relationship to Argencourt, but his relationship to all the persons he has been meeting here. "As immaterial now as Golo long ago on the doorknob of my room at Combray, the new, the unrecognizable Argencourt was there before me as the revelation of time, which by his agency was rendered partially visible." (VII.342)[238]

In the next paragraphs, the narrator starts to apply this generalization to everyone in the salon. The fleeting feeling of detachment he felt toward this one man seems to have gradually expanded onto a relationship to all the human beings present here with him. Argencourt, whom he had initially seen as a separate person, is metaphorically turned first into an inanimate prop enclosed within a puppet theater, and then into a doorknob—as if he were gradually becoming nothing more than a part of some real or imagined chamber. The sense in which his body belongs to this chamber is made to seem more material than this body's physical transformations, so that old age seems to be merely a veil or a shadow imposed upon it. By recasting his feeling toward Argencourt as a feeling that stems from or reaches out to a self-enclosed space of which this man is only a part, the narrator is able to generalize this feeling as an experience not merely of Argencourt, but of Time itself; as a source of insight that might perhaps—as it presents itself to him now—be not just locally but universally true. It helps him explain why he felt so estranged from his friends when he first entered. The narrator thus arrives at what seems like a philosophical generalization by re-describing his feeling toward a person as a feeling ignited by and directed toward an entire space. The generalization momentarily seems right to him because it seems to explain his relationship to this entire horizon of sensations.

This philosophical moment is then gradually deflated. On the one hand this salon starts to seem comically too small to support the large statements the narrator formulates. And on the other hand it starts to seem that the narrator's sensibility has not yet caught up to the whole of the room it has found itself in, not even to human bodies that should have been very easy to notice. The narrator seeks to find an example of how Time can also disguise or transform human character. The largest visible surface against which he is able successfully to test this claim is a woman's cheek. He then turns to face a large-framed matron and fails to realize this woman is his childhood love Gilberte. With a comic literalness Proust presents his narrator with a bulky, imposing body and shows that this expanse of flesh still remains to be mined for the signs of Time the narrator believed himself to have wholly unearthed within this room. Proust makes us see both what a challenge it apparently is to parse out all the ways in which this room is or could be fuelling his narrator's feelings, and how easily—once we have left this room in search of other persons and other spaces—the foci onto which he latches might seem to not have been worthy of such careful scrutiny. He shows both how much the narrator depends on the room around him to model the philosophical abstraction or universality to which he aspires to raise his feelings, and how difficult it is for him to

[238] Aussi immatériel que jadis Golo sur le bouton de porte de ma chambre de Combray, ainsi le nouveau et si méconnaissable Argencourt était la comme la révélation du Temps, qu'il rendait partiellement visible. (VII.231)

turn this room's presence into a similarly abstract concept—to conceptualize what these insights might seem like in any other space.

Christopher Eagle usefully notes how often Proust's sentences fuse what he calls "the proximal and the distal forms of the demonstrative ('this' versus 'that')":

> This is in part a function of the structure of French, not always to distinguish between empathetic and non-empathetic forms, because the roots of the demonstrative (ce/cette, ces) are distance-neutral, with a bound morpheme (-ci/-là) attached to indicate relative distance from the deictic center. Still, it should be asked to what end Proust/Marcel exploits this neutrality as much as possible, creating a language which hovers somewhere between the pointing of deixis to a given, particular "this" or "that" of discourse, versus the abstract mental representation of a type.[239]

Eagle sees in these ambiguous distances Proust's attempts to articulate—through a kind of negative dialectics—what it would mean to be a 'queer' individual who falls short of or spills beyond a type. Within the context of the ephemeral aphorisms I propose, these ambiguities would seem to signal not a clear dialectical opposition, but the momentary fusions that the narrator creates between material reality and the abstractions that he temporarily believes himself able to read out of them. They signal both these fusions' power to make the rooms he inhabits seem to be sites of insights larger than themselves, and the way these apparently universal truths turn out to still so comically depend on the enclosures one might have thought they had already confidently left behind.

It is also in the context of these moments when the boundary between local sensations and universal concepts becomes blurred that I would also read what Beckett claims to be Proust's large abstract discoveries of the "shamelessness" of the persons his narrator represents:

> Flower and plant have no conscious will. They are shameless, exposing their genitals. And so in a sense are Proust's men and women, whose will is blind and hard, but never self-conscious, never abolished in the pure perception of a pure subject. They are victims of their volition, alive with a grotesque predetermined activity, within the narrow limits of an impure world. But shameless.[240]

Beckett's metaphor vividly evokes the way other persons often present themselves to the narrator; the way he is often blindsided, as in the passage above, by the way everyone around him seems to flaunt brazenly, solipsistically predetermined orders and cycles of wishes and desires. But I would argue that the leap Beckett makes from these apparent moments of revelation to what he takes to be Proust's overarching cynicism misses the way in which—like houseplants and vases of flowers—these seemingly self-revealing communities are bound to the particular rooms in which their presence and their motivations seem self-evident. The narrator is often at pains to keep the consistency and high seriousness of such apparently revelations even within a particular room, let alone take them out of this room and use them accurately to diagnose society as such.

These tensions between the way Proust represents feelings' enveloping appeal and the difficulty he stages in making them seem lastingly, portably important emerge perhaps most strikingly during the narrator's descriptions of involuntary memories. In both his initial remembrance of Combray and his later involuntary memory of Venice, the narrator's first clear

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[239] Christopher Eagle, "On 'This' and 'That' in Proust," *MLN* 121.4 (2006): 996.

[240] Samuel Beckett, *Proust and Three Dialogues* (London: Calder, 1965), 89.

mental image is that of a room or a chamber: the baptistery of St Marc's cathedral, the bedroom of his aunt Leonie, his hotel bedroom in Balbec. Out of these rooms, says the narrator, emerge further recollections of the paths he used to take toward them and out of them. "Immediately the old grey house upon the street, where her room was, rose up like a stage set to attach itself to the little pavilion opening on to the garden… and with the house the town… the Square where I used to be sent before lunch, the streets along which I used to run errands, the country roads we took when it was fine." (I.64)[241]

After both flashes of insight the narrator retreats to a single chamber, alone, and tries to lock himself within its confines as tightly as he can. "I shut out every obstacle, every extraneous idea, I stop my ears and screen my attention from the sounds of the next room." (I.61)[242] Meanwhile his mind begins to rove ever more largely and ever more abstractly. He believes he has reached a state of self-understanding based not on momentary appearances but on essences; that he has now found a way to transform his feelings into larger laws of thinking and feeling, and his life into a form of art. "This being which had been reborn in me … this being is nourished only by the essences of things, in these alone does it find its sustenance and delight." (VII.264)[243] The farther we get into this passage, and into his later description of his writing process, the more his current physical confinement starts to seem not merely a coincident feature of this revelation, but one of the preconditions of keeping faith with it. Upon leaving the social occasion where his final series of involuntary memories occur, he has a slight stroke that leaves him, as he claims, unable to feel anything very strongly or very vividly again. "Since the day of the staircase, nothing in the world, no happiness, whether it came from friendship or the progress of my book or the hope of fame, reached me except as a sunshine unclouded but so pale that it no longer had the virtue to warm me, to make me live, to instill in me any desire; and yet, faint though it was, it was still too dazzling for my eyes, I closed them and turned my face to the wall." (VII.522)[244] Within this room, to whose walls as he here says he turns for a comfort his inner self cannot furnish, his mind becomes free to roam not because it has shed its material confinements, but because it has apparently accepted them in the most literal way possible. Involuntary memories do not free him from this room, or from the past ones he inhabited, but confirm how important they are as models and supports for imagining and immersing himself in what might at first seem to be wholly internal subjective experiences.

This ending seems to be a powerful assertion of his work's totalizing ambition: no less than the whole immersive quality of the narrator's past life will be enough to satisfy him. The bedroom he has locked himself in models how difficult it will be to create, in writing, an emotional experience that he could depend on similarly to persist and to contain him. But this sense of excitement and hard labor is paradoxically not a statement about his work's permanent importance or stakes. We are implicitly reminded how little of his external life the narrator has often, in the past, been able to bring back to the room where he spent the night; and how vulnerable the fantasies he concocted in

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[241] [A]ussitôt la vieille maison grise sur la rue, où était sa chambre, vint comme un décor de théâtre s'appliquer au petit pavillon, donnant sur le jardin, … et avec la maison, la ville, … la Place où on m'envoyait avant déjeuner, les rues ou j'allais faire des courses, les chemins qu'on prenait si le temps était beau. (I.47)

[242] [J]'écarte tout obstacle, toute idée étrangère, j'abrite mes oreilles et mon attention contre les bruits de la chambre voisine. (I.44)

[243] L'être qui était rené en moi … cet être-là ne se nourrit que de l'essence des choses, en elle seulement il trouve sa subsistance, ses délices. (VII.179)

[244] Depuis le jour de l'escalier, rien du monde, aucun bonheur, qu'il vînt de l'amitié des gens, des progrès de mon œuvre, de l'espérance de la gloire, ne parvenait plus a moi que comme un si pâle grand soleil, qu'il n'avait plus la vertu de me réchauffer, de me faire vivre, de me donner un désir quelconque, et encore était-il trop brillant, si blême qu'il fût, pour mes yeux qui préféraient se fermer, et je me retournais du côté du mur. (VII.347)

his bed have been in the outside world once he tried to reapply them there. The writer's life into which he now recedes could not have been possible had this bedroom confined him straight from the outset; and even now it might not be able to preserve him until the end of his labors. We are made to appreciate both these immersive feelings' appeal and their fragility; to see them as models both for what it means to relate to a space wholly and unrelentingly, and for the ease with which our philosophies forget anything that does not lie within our most immediate horizons. This ending prepares us to understand the novel as a whole as a process not of making the transition from momentary feelings to philosophies of art or of the self, but of discovering how hard it is to square the limited conditions in which feelings come to seem important to us—and which they cannot quite abandon or help us confidently master—with the philosophies these same feelings might make us dream of. Eve Sedgwick has described Proust's novel as a path toward realizing, like Plotinus, that the outward enclosures of our world and the inward enclosures of our minds are identical to each other.[245] But perhaps the most striking thing Proust's narrator discovers in such attempts at self-recognition is how little he can learn from or carry out of any particular relationship to his outer world that might seem relevant beyond a single room's immediate confines; how difficult it to use such enveloping relationships, momentarily appealing and unquestionable as they seem, to fashion for oneself some lasting, independent sense of identity, or even a sense of the overall value of one's emotional labors. Proust makes us feel, as Benjamin puts it, like "guests who enter through a door underneath a suspended sign that sways in the breeze, behind which eternity and rapture await us."[246] But he also forces us to accept the comedy of seeking out such eternity and rapture in one particular bedroom, or it in the confines of one particular sheaf of bound paper. To the extent that this apparent emanation of the abstract out of these small material things might be something miraculous, it is a miracle that cannot prevail without these modest material means—and that is something Proust's narrator seems finally to accept at the end of the novel as his self-understanding's permanent condition.

Proust's novel thus explores why such immersive feelings might appeal to us as grounds or inspirations of philosophical thought. But it also highlights how no such feeling seems able to sustain its apparent relevance without relying on an anticlimactically contained and vulnerable expanse of matter. As I now go on to discuss Baldwin, I will show how his novels explore similar uncertainties about the relevance of such immersive feelings in the dimension of political or social action. His fiction focuses most on how one can square feelings' immersiveness, which rooms also help to model, with feelings' role as sources of actions that a particular person takes credit or responsibility for. Baldwin does not merely assert the socially transformative power of emotional states, or treat them as insights into how easily the spaces we inhabit predetermine who we are. Instead he makes us consider the difficulty of conceptualizing how a feeling could be both things in turn: what it would mean to express feelings in a similarly immersive way as one takes them in, or even clearly to relate such momentary immersive revelations to a more abstract understanding of one's world and one's patterns of activity within it.

The form and plots of Baldwin's novels tend to be seen as indissociable from Baldwin's political or ethical allegiances. But critics have long noted that even though these novels persistently engage with Baldwin's contemporary social struggles and tensions, they also refuse to articulate precisely the stakes and objects of these tensions and struggles—or to articulate what it would mean to take political action against America's civil rights abuses. For Langston Hughes, Baldwin seems wedded to a lyrical style that is inherently unable precisely to capture the social conditions he seeks

[245] Eve Sedgwick, *The Weather in Proust* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2012), 34.
[246] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 210.

to represent: "the surface excellence and poetry of his writing did not seem to me to suit the earthiness of his subject matter."[247] Eldridge Cleaver famously saw such ambiguities and stylistic discrepancies as expressions of a racial self-hatred.[248] Henry Louis Gates reinterprets Baldwin's fiction, through Franz Fanon, as acknowledging and struggling with not merely superficial racial hatred but the difficulty of imagining a society free from it, of creating ethical and social models that would not be implicitly based on the very stereotypes they are supposed to unravel: "This is not a call for 'racial understanding.' On the contrary, we understand each other all too well, for we have invented one another, derived our identities from the ghostly projections of our alter egos."[249]

Following Gates, the vast majority of Baldwin's recent critics have sought to locate and define in his fiction such a half-utopian new potential social order; a set of ethical principles that would acknowledge his society's current social inequalities but not take for granted the tensions and divisions through which this society understands itself. For Ryan Jay Friedman, Baldwin's novels thus develop an "intersubjective ethics of love".[250] Mikko Tuhkanen claims that Baldwin's characters are engaged in the process of "unbinding communities" as they seek to build toward a society freed from racial inequalities and tensions.[251] Michael L. Cobb claims that Baldwin mines religious discourse for new ways of defining and defending his characters' individuality and their irreducibility to social types.[252]

In my reading of Baldwin I want to follow Gates' suggestion that Baldwin's aim is not merely to represent his current society, but to seek within this society some local forms of order, action, or insight, that do not seem merely to repeat its prejudices and stereotypes. I also want to follow Baldwin's more recent critics in proposing that individual emotional expression, and the introspective process of feeling, are the realms of experience that Baldwin mines most persistently for alternative views and inspirations of social action. The immersive feelings his characters experience seem suddenly to overtake and reorient their entire perception; these feeling seem to give his characters new ways of understanding themselves and their environment by letting them take in their current environments with a new kind of precision and enveloping exhaustiveness. They thus make these characters notice within environments they might have thought they knew quite well new possibilities of insight and action; new ways in which they want to, express themselves; new persons they might come to appreciate or even love. But I also want to suggest that the interest and heart of Baldwin's work lies not in these novels' usefulness as sources of political empowerment—whether through local protest or through a more universalist alternative ethics—but in their exploration of what it means to for feelings to spur political insights and actions in the first place. Baldwin's novels ask how such transitions from taking in feelings to acting them out—or to giving their expression larger political meaning—can ever take place consistently and reliably. As in Proust, rooms provide him with a standard both for how solidly material his characters might want their feelings to be, and for how small a scope these feelings have moment by moment; both for how local an intervention each such feeling seeks to make, and how anticlimactically difficult it is for his characters to manage and rely on even such very self-contained forms of emotional expression.

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[247] Langston Hughes, "From Harlem to Paris," *James Baldwin: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Keneth Kinnamon (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 10.
[248] Eldridge Cleaver, "Notes on a Native Son," *James Baldwin: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Keneth Kinnamon (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 68.
[249] Henry Louis Gates, "The Fire Last Time," *James Baldwin*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea, 2007), 15.
[250] Ryan Jay Friedman, "'Enough Force to Shatter the Tale to Fragments': Ethics and Textual Analysis in James Baldwin's Film Theory," *ELH* 77.2 (2010): 385-412.
[251] Mikko Tuhkanen, "'Binding the Self: Baldwin, Freud, and the Narrative of Subjectivity," *GLQ* 7.4 (2001): 555.
[252] Michael L. Cobb, "Pulpit Publicity: James Baldwin and the Queer Uses of Religious Words," *GLQ* 7.2 (2001): 290.

I will discuss *Giovanni's Room* first, and extend my reading to Baldwin's other novels later in the chapter, because the way he uses rooms in this former novel seems to address these questions of emotional expression most explicitly and in most basic formal fashion. *Giovanni's Room* confronts its protagonist with the initial shock and humiliation that come with noting the unclear productivity of immersive feelings, however moving and exhaustive they might initially seem. Its isolated, singular protagonist and more conventionally introspective plot provide a good bridge between the lonely philosophizing of Proust's narrator and the more extensive social analyses that Baldwin's other novels have become famous for.

The plot of *Giovanni's Room* hinges with a structural persistence similar to Proust's on the rhythms with which persons inhabit rooms, claim them, are confined in or thrown out of them. Like Proust's, the novel begins and ends with the narrator waking up and reminiscing in a bedroom or a hospital room. *Giovanni's Room* is thus framed by David's stay in a motel room that he's cleaning after his fiancée Hella dramatically left him there. Baldwin's narrative paces shifts in characters' emotional states and bonds by marking changes in the kinds of rooms where they meet, in the durations for which they stay in these rooms, in the ease or difficulty with which they are able to enter or to exit self-enclosed private or public spaces. The two major such transitions occur when David, an American living in Paris, moves into the room of his lover Giovanni, and then when David moves back in with his fiancée. This second move precipitates Giovanni's act of violence against his unwanted suitor Guillaume, Giovanni's imprisonment, and Hella's flight from what was to be her and David's honeymoon hotel.

These spatial transitions are accompanied or triggered by a series of immersive feelings that provide David with apparent insights he then struggles to know what to do with. These central emotional discoveries and breakthroughs are represented as moments when a room seems suddenly to be filled with the presence of a feeling—mapping it out, unfolding, elucidating it. Like Proust, Baldwin emphasizes the involuntary aspect of such enveloping illuminations. These feelings seem to emerge from some material order that his characters themselves would not have been able to bring about or willfully imagine. Thus when he shows us Giovanni and David falling in love, Baldwin centers our attention not on their dialogue itself—which is detached and abstract in a way I will discuss later—but on the way that, as soon as David turns around after Giovanni has walked off to get him another drink, he feels that everyone in the room has decided he and Giovanni have been flirting. A moment later David is also accosted, in what seems to be Baldwin's nod to Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, by a heavily made-up older customer of this bar who treats him as a fellow gay man. David then describes his growing attraction to Giovanni by focusing not simply on Giovanni's body, but on how he finds himself unable to leave the room he and Giovanni get to at the end of the night. "I thought, if I do not open the door at once and get out of here, I am lost. But I knew I could not open the door, I knew it was too late; soon it was too late to do anything but moan."[253] At the beginning of the novel, when David is pondering his guilt, he describes his need to flee Giovanni as a presence within this room that stares back at him no matter what he tries to look at. "Of course it is somewhere before me, locked in that reflection I am watching in the window as the night comes down outside. It is trapped in the room with me." (10) At the end of the novel, David's sexuality is revealed to Hella when she enters the gay bar where he has been flirting with a sailor and he sees her reflection in the barroom mirror, juxtaposed against the sailor's face. These are all moments when a character seems suddenly to be surrounded by a feeling's outward confirmations. They seem to come not only from one thing on which his eyes may have rested, but

[253] James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* (New York: Random House, 1956), 64. All other excerpts from *Giovanni's Room* are henceforth quoted in-text.

from his whole potential sensory horizon. As Joyce and McBride put it, these moments of revelation are doubly striking because, as a white character, David would not conventionally be tied to any particular material environment as a permanent marker of his identity. Even as they seem to expand his experience of himself onto a surprisingly large immediate space, they also seem to thus bind him down to his immediate social setting in a way that forces him to reconsider even his most basic ways of describing his subjectivity and sources of self-understanding.[254]

Kathleen Drowne claims that such immersive experiences lead David to "finally [recognize] the interior, emotional side of home—a condition—as opposed to a simply external, geographical reality"; to recognize that he will carry his emotional life with him wherever he goes, and act on it in any environment that allows him to do so.[255] But to make this conceptual leap is to neglect what Joyce and McBride describe as these experiences' challenge to such a detached, seemingly transcendent sense of self. It is also to neglect the further difficulties Baldwin represents—beyond each such immersive experience—in transposing such feelings into new contexts, or even accepting them as a lasting part of oneself. Even though his characters try to take onto themselves the role of creators or enactors of such immersive experiences—and enjoy some success in doing so—Baldwin dramatizes the inconsistency and partiality of such successes; the continued gap or insufficiency between the newness, immediacy, and coherence of insights these immersive experiences seem to promise and the way these feelings are then enacted or expressed.

In *Giovanni's Room* Baldwin signals this difficulty most immediately through a series of stylistic shifts that are almost jolting when one reads the novel. "Nobody else in democratic America writes sentences like this anymore," F.W. Dupee says of Baldwin's style. "It suggests the ideal prose of an ideal literary community, some aristocratic France of one's dreams."[256] Baldwin's prose stages dramatic stylistic gaps and distances—which unlike Dupee I take to be inherent to his novel's mimetic project—between the immediate environment in which immersive emotional experiences first take place, and characters' attempts to describe these feelings or to integrate them into their own conceptual framework. When Baldwin describes feelings as something his characters discover in their surroundings, his descriptions are grounded in detailed sensory particulars. But whenever David or Giovanni describe their feelings as something that motivates them or belongs to them, they talk about these feelings in very abstract terms—the kind of willfully highbrow style that I take to be the object of Dupee's critique, and that Porter claims makes it difficult, in these descriptions, to distinguish mere flirtation from the expression of actual life philosophies.[257] For instance, David and Giovanni first flirt by exchanging aphoristic, stereotypical views on American and European notions of happiness. Whenever David tries to take stock of an encounter or a relationship, his impulse is not to dwell on physical details but to name the feeling that had inspired him in the most abstract terms possible. "Beneath the joy, of course, was anguish and beneath the amazement was fear; but they did not work themselves to the beginning until our high beginning was aloes on our tongues. By then anguish and fear had become the surface on which we slipped and slid, losing balance, dignity, and pride." (75) "I knew that what the sailor had seen in my unguarded eyes was envy and desire." (92) David expresses how much he loves Giovanni by noting not how exclusive

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[254] Justin A. Joyce and Dwight A. McBride, "James Baldwin and Sexuality: *Lieux de Memoire* and a Usable Past," *A Historical Guide to James Baldwin*, ed. Douglas Field (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), 126.
[255] Kathleen N. Drowne, "'An Irrevocable Condition': Constructions of Home and the Writing of Place in *Giovanni's Room*," *Re-Viewing James Baldwin: Things Not Seen*, ed. D. Quentin Miller (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2000), 73.
[256] F.W. Dupee, "James Baldwin and the 'Man,'" *James Baldwin: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Keneth Kinnamon (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 12.
[257] Horace A. Porter, *Stealing the Fire: The Art and Protest of James Baldwin* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1989), 139.

this love is to Giovanni's person, but how eagerly it might lead him to make love to someone else. "Yet, at that very moment, there passed between us on the pavement another boy, a stranger, and I invested him at once with Giovanni's beauty and what I felt for Giovanni I also felt for him. Giovanni saw this and saw my face and it made him laugh the more." (83) When he and Giovanni live together, he believes that Giovanni wants him to express his love not by nurturing this shared space but by destroying it. "I understood why Giovanni had wanted me and had brought me to his last retreat. I was to destroy this room and give to Giovanni a new and better life." (88) Unlike Baldwin's more immersive accounts of feeling, these fragments emphasize characters' actions and decisions and their seeming ownership over their emotional states. These kinds of passages make it seem as if these feelings were meaningful and potent even without the contexts in which they are first recognized and illuminated.

Such dramatic shifts in kind and level of detail that occur whenever Baldwin's narrator switches between describing discovered and expressed feelings would in themselves raise the question of how the two modes of emotional experience fit together. And indeed, what seems to be at the heart of Baldwin's engagement with feeling in this novel is the difficulty of representing or conceptualizing the passage one could make between these two perspectives. Baldwin represents these difficult, uncertainly successful transitions between taking in feelings and acting them out by linking moments of emotional expression with images of dust, dirt, and littering.

Most noticeably, his characters all use metaphors of dirt and littering to describe the process of emotional expression. When a friend admonishes David not to reject Giovanni, he tells David that queer love affairs are only dirty if one makes them dirty; and that if David doesn't take this chance he will be left alone in his own dirty body. "'You play it safe long enough,' he said, in a different tone, 'and you'll end up trapped in your own dirty body, forever and forever and forever—like me.'" (57) When David and Giovanni are first taking a cab to their place with two older queer men, David keeps emphasizing how dirty these two old men are compared to themselves—and that their own love does not yet create any such appalling residue. When David leaves Giovanni for Hella, Giovanni says that David seems afraid of getting himself dirty. "You want to be *clean*. You think you came here covered with soap and you think you will go out covered in soap—and you do not want to *stink*, not even for five minutes, in the meantime." (141)

This connection between emotional expression and dirt is also physical—to the extent that most of the metaphors I just quoted could, in a way, be taken very literally. It is as if these metaphors were not simply attempts to valorize the way characters' feelings get expressed, but reflections of the very immediate process by which characters try to make these feelings outwardly present. On a day-to-day level David and Giovanni show their affection, while it lasts, by letting a layer of dust and flaked paint cover all their belongings as a sign that they are still working on the room together. They show anger, fear, and joy by staining their room and littering inside or outside it: they break glasses, throw cherry pits into the street, spill wine onto the floor, tear up banknotes. These layers of dirt and pieces of trash are among the very few details of these rooms that David ever mentions—in a novel that is otherwise so bereft of detailed descriptions of furnishings and interior decors. Giovanni of course gives full expression to his despair at the loss of David by literally and metaphorically getting blood on his hands. Most centrally perhaps, David recalls and confesses his love affair with Giovanni as he is cleaning up a room he is about to leave. His acknowledgment of his love for Giovanni coincides with his gradual realization of how much of a mess he made in this room that he had thought he had done nothing in. "She has made me realize that I have much to do before morning. I decide to clean the bathroom before I allow myself

another drink. And I begin to do this, first scrubbing the tub, then running water into the pail to mop the floor." (71)

On one level one could naturally read these various stains and spills as metaphors or Freudian transpositions of ejaculation, marked by these characters' self-hatred. That is how Drowne interprets these images: "the internal struggle within both characters between the homophobe and the homosexual, the orderly and the disorderly, becomes overtly visible in the dirt and clutter that overwhelm the physical spaces they occupy."[258] But to observe this connection is not particularly revealing since sex, and gay sex in particular, is no secret in this novel—not even an open one. Each of these stains or spills also seems to have a very different significance. Rather than zero in on anything particularly fearful or hopeful about the way these characters express their feelings, they seem to mark the way their feelings in turn seem lighter or more burdensome, easier or more difficult to erase or to neglect in their many material expressions. On the one hand these metaphors seem to reflect a fear that emotional expression might only be able to take on paltry and unpredictable material forms. Perhaps the sturdiness of the surroundings from which feelings draw meaning is not something they could emulate or keep. Perhaps all they can produce—in covering these floors and walls with stains—are pathetic bad imitations of the kind of immersive, solid environment in which they first crystalize. But on the other hand, one of those stains does of course destroy the lives and bodies of not just one, but two men—and as the novel ends we are still waiting to see if David and Hella will be able to brush off their feelings as if they were so much dust. Even though David's final gestures of cleaning suggest that the residue he has been leaving can be removed, they also confront him—metaphorically and literally—with the fact that this residue did have some weight. Finally, it seems that the lighthearted littering to which Giovanni and David keep reducing their mutual love in its early stages is one of the factors that allows this love to persist for as long as it does, in spite of the way their entire environment keeps encroaching upon it.

Mae G. Henderson wants to find in David's extended confession a model of the way American society ought to start reckoning with its past: "Unlike Fitzgerald's Gatsby, who 'did not know that [the dream] was already behind him,' David is all too aware of the 'death-laden plains,' facing 'away from Europe into a darker past.' If Baldwin's fellow expatriate and literary precursor speaks to the end of American innocence, Baldwin would seem to speak here to the beginning of American guilt."[259] But to make the form of *Giovanni's Room* seem so ethically clear, and ethically optimistic, is to miss the hesitation the novel expresses not merely about how permanent any such expressions of feelings can be, but also how permanent one should want them to be. For similar reasons it does not seem right to claim, as does Cyraina Johnson-Roullier, that Baldwin depicts David's and Giovanni's relationship as a failed attempt at a purer kind of "brotherly love"—or, as George Kent suggests, that Baldwin wants to make sexual feelings seem ultimately opaque and unrepresentable, "a mystery that each person must find a way to live with."[260] Baldwin does not validate feelings' independence, or their reliability as windows onto social determinism. Instead he focuses on the difficulty of deciding when and how emotional states are giving us flickers of either kind of burden or benefit. The process of feeling as he represents it does not consist in carrying through (or failing to carry through) consistent personal or social goals, but in experiencing the ease and unpredictability with which the balance and the weight of one's momentary goals, or the scale

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[258] Drowne, 79-86.

[259] Mae G. Henderson, "James Baldwin: Expatriation, Homosexual Panic, and Man's Estate," *Callaloo* 23.1 (2000): 316.

[260] Cyraina E. Johnson-Roullier, *Reading On the Edge: Exiles, Modernities, and Cultural Transformations in Proust, Joyce, and Baldwin* (New York, NY: SUNY Press, 2000), 130. George A. Kent, "Baldwin and the Problem of Being," *James Baldwin: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Keneth Kinnamon (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 23.

on which characters respond to them, keep shifting. Rather than merely assert immersive feelings' capacity to free his characters from abstract social orders—or their capacity to create new such orders out of a more exhaustive experience of the material environments they inhabit—Baldwin shows that these feelings' sense of containment makes it easy to keep misestimating or consciously selling short their potential for productive action, this action's proper force and scope. Their immersiveness showcases not merely these characters' capacity to see their world anew, but also their comparatively much lesser and more unpredictable ability to act on this world in similarly transformative fashion.

"To accept one's past—one's history—is not the same thing as drowning in it, it is learning how to use it," says Baldwin in a passage from *The Fire Next Time* that Deak Nabers singles out as its central thesis.[261] Nabers shows that throughout Baldwin's essay this question of how African American history is to be used remains an open one. The parallel between this open-ended problem articulated by *The Fire Next Time* and the one articulated by Baldwin's novels as I describe them is very close in this particular formulation. The opposition between drowning and use maps out quite closely onto the tensions between immersion and abstraction I followed in my readings (although of course the word 'drowning' is much stronger in tone). To note such parallels begins to unravel how central such uncertainly important transitions from immersion to action are to an understanding of Baldwin's social and political attitudes—and to an understanding of his novels set in America as these attitudes' expressions. In what follows I will highlight some of the ways in which Baldwin deploys the strategies laid out in *Giovanni's Room* to represent interpersonal relationships and social structures in American society of his day.

Baldwin's American novels often address the question, expressed in *The Fire Next Time*, of how much historical awareness—or how precise a historical awareness—one needs in order to successfully act against, or even to expose, social oppression or prejudice. They represent feelings as experiences that help his characters both to gather some larger historical or social insights into themselves, and to shed some such larger insights in favor of the immediate material contexts in which they find themselves. As in *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin keeps underlining that these individual emotional experiences seem to take his characters beyond or out of some conventional understanding of their society in which they had previously believed. These emotional experiences also draw his characters away from attempts to understand their society and themselves in larger, abstract terms, and toward a more local attentiveness to particular material enclosures and the potentially promising, new feelings and relationships that could develop within them. But Baldwin also highlights how difficult it is to rely on these feelings as sources either of freedom from social history and self-awareness, or of consistent insights into them; how powerless these feelings are to represent the full weight and scope of the pressures these characters are struggling against, and at times even to locate the precise threats or problems they face even in their most immediate settings.

Baldwin's understanding of a room as an immersive space, and the language he uses to describe these experiences, seem to stem from a cluster of communal experiences that include religious rituals, theater and jazz performances, as well as political rallies.[262] His fiction asks how such

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[261] James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, in *Collected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 333. Deak Nabers, "Past Using: James Baldwin and Civil Rights Law in the 1960s," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 18.2 (2005): 221-242.

[262] For extended accounts of the influence of music and religion on Baldwin's imagery, see Sherley Anne Williams, "The Black Musician: The Black Hero as Light Bearer," *James Baldwin: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Keneth Kinnamon (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 147-154 and Clarence E. Hardy, III, "James Baldwin as Religious Writer: The Burdens and Gifts of Black Evangelicalism," *A Historical Guide to James Baldwin*, ed. Douglas Field (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), 61-82.

experiences can come about, and exactly what a particular person can contribute to them or learn from them. The immersive emotional experiences he represents are never grounded in any strong divine presence, or even any strong assertion of the value of the environment causing them, such that might make the importance of these emotional states a given. Instead these feelings are presented as momentary subjective experiences whose larger value—to a particular character, or to others—remains unreliable and inconsistent. Images of dirt play a similar role in articulating these questions of agency as they do in *Giovanni's Room*—as do scenes of performing or listening to music, or of communal prayer.

Thus, in the last section of *Go Tell it On the Mountain* Baldwin gathers within a single space—the hall of the local church—all the adults whose memories would be able, taken together, to reconstruct the complicated story of its protagonist's childhood. The previous sections of the novel gradually gave us access to each of the bodies and minds present in this hall, unveiling to the reader—but not to John himself—facts about John's provenance and upbringing that explain his stepfather's resentment toward him, his mother's passivity, the aloofness of other members of his family. As Kent puts it, "By a series of flashbacks, the author keeps us mindful that the present involves John Grimes's search for identity, the achievement of which is to be understood within the context of the lives of his elders."[263]

As all the bearers of these secrets gather within the church, it at first seems that Baldwin is setting the stage for these secrets' simultaneous, dramatic disclosure. But, as Michel Fabre also points out, the final section of the novel yields no such revelation.[264] Instead John falls onto the church floor, convulsing and—Baldwin's narrator remarks several times—raising dust onto himself and toward the bodies of those around him: "he lay on the floor, in the dusty space before the altar which he and Elisha had cleaned … Dust was in his nostrils, sharp and terrible, and the feet of the saints, shaking the floor beneath him, raised small clouds of dust that filmed his mouth;"[265] "he turned, screaming, in the dust again." (190) "dust was in his mouth" (191) There pass through John's mind abstract, near-stereotypically metaphoric descriptions of feelings similar to those David and Giovanni articulate. "And I hate you. I hate you. I don't care about your golden crown. I don't care about your long white robe. I seen you under the robe, I seen you!" (192) John tells himself he hates his father, and finds he can be joyful even within the presence and acceptance of this hatred. After the service his father admonishes him that he is too easily pleased by an abstraction. "'It comes from your mouth,' said his father then. 'I want to see you live it. It's more than a notion.'" (201) John does not find out any of the complicated family history whose adult agents he could merely cover up with dust. To the extent that the ending of the novel feels like a small victory, it is because while Gabriel cannot stop scowling at John in a corner of the church hall, John finds himself able to turn away from him, leave the church, and go find his mother. "They looked at each other a moment. His mother stood in the doorway, in the long shadows of the hall." (215)

Baldwin shows in the course of this novel how weighty are the causes of the feelings John struggles with. We also witness how great a religious or seemingly religious physical experience they can throw him into. But then John shakes off these events and heads out of the church where his emotional breakthrough has taken place, away from the persons who might be able to tell him how serious is the history of the household within which his angers and hatreds crystalize. In this

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[263] Kent, 21.

[264] Michel Fabre, "Fathers and Sons in James Baldwin's *Go Tell it On the Mountain*," *James Baldwin: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Keneth Kinnamon (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 124.

[265] James Baldwin, *Go Tell it On the Mountain*, in *Early Novels and Stories* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 187. All other excerpts from this novel are henceforth cited in-text.

potential for paltriness—this potential to reduce what seems to be an overwhelming, total spatial experience to a cloud of dust, and to take nothing from a room rife with their history—feelings as Baldwin represents them seem to find both a weakness and a power. This ending does not simply, as Horace Porter and Allen have suggested, mark John's victory.[266] As Cobb puts it, the physical convulsions he goes through seem at once to pull John back into the religious sphere in which he has felt so uneasy, and to help him acknowledge how much his body resists this community's norms.[267] Baldwin highlights both how little these feelings can create or carry, and how greatly they can lighten the burden of the scope of what needs to be carried and taken in. John's momentary sense of freedom and relief topples between productive self-assertion and a momentary forgetfulness of the house to which he will still have to return. The process of feeling as Baldwin represents it does not consist in carrying through consistent personal or social goals or insights, but in experiencing the ease and unpredictability with which the balance and the weight of these aims, or of the scale on which characters respond to them, can keep shifting. Rather than merely allow John to make some local intervention into his social sphere—or to carve out some small space of independence within it—these immersive feelings keep raising the question of what kinds of limits such emotional self-expression would need to assume, and what it would need to rely on, in order to give this character some reliable degree of self-understanding and social agency. Baldwin highlights both the potential liberating force of such emotional self-expression, and the vulnerability of how small a space it responds to, how little it seems able to take even from this limited space or change within it.

The dirt John raises and shakes off seems to embody some version of hope about this character's capacity to—potentially—create a history and an environment of his own. In other novels and short stories Baldwin uses similar images to represent the difficulty of showing other persons how deeply one is constrained by one's personal and social history, including the history of American racism. Here, in "A Previous Condition," the child protagonist comes home after the first time he has ever heard another child throw a racial slur at him:

> I asked my mother what a nigger was.
> "Who called you that?"
> "I heard somebody say it."
> "Who?"
> "Just somebody."
> "Go wash your face," she said. "You dirty as sin. Your supper's on the table."
> I went to the bathroom and splashed water on my face and wiped my face and hands on the towel.
> "You call that clean?" my mother cried. "Come here, boy!"
> She dragged me back to the bathroom and began to soap my face and neck.
> "You run around dirty like you do all the time, everybody'll call you a little nigger, you hear?" She rinsed my face and looked at my hands and dried me. "Now, go on and eat your supper."
> I didn't say anything. I went to the kitchen and sat down at the table. I remember I wanted to cry. My mother sat down across from me.

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[266] Horace A. Porter, "The South in *Go Tell it On the Mountain*: Baldwin's Personal Confrontation," *James Baldwin*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea, 2007), 66. Shirley S. Allen, "The Ironic Voice in Baldwin's *Go Tell it On the Mountain*," *James Baldwin*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea, 2007), 49.
[267] Cobb, 286-287.

"Mama," I said. She looked at me. I started to cry.[268]

The narrator's mother does not overtly invoke the systemic repression she seems here to be trying at once to acknowledge and to shield her son from. The use of dirt and washing in this interaction at once gestures toward extremely offensive forms of racism, and stops short of them. The mother apparently tries to turn this situation into a mere problem of hygiene, but the way she does so immediately shows the problem to exceed these everyday domestic bounds. It is as if the specter or contour of racism instantly started to emerge within what would otherwise have seemed a casual, unremarkable expression of annoyance. The scene takes place in a sparsely furnished room, away from the person whose insult had initially shocked the protagonist and away, for the time being, from other persons who could treat the narrator in similar fashion. Baldwin represents both the ease with which this external offense invades this domestic space, and the insufficient means the family kitchen seems to give to the protagonist's mother to either protect her child or show him the full complexity of the problem she now realizes he will need to face. In addition to protesting against the harassment his protagonist faces—which is a goal the story of course does accomplish on one of its levels—Baldwin is also raising the question of how one is to express one's feelings of protest against such harassment if the material means at one's disposal are not sufficient to convey these feelings' full complexity and scale; if they are sufficient merely to convey this problem's current pervasiveness, and the impossibility of expunging it from one's self-expression.

Baldwin also often represents such inconsistently successful emotional expression through music. Here, in *Another Country*, he depicts the helpless deterioration of Ida's and Vivaldo's love affair by showing Ida as she sits alone in their shared apartment, listening to Mahalia Jackson's performance of a song about living in a safe room with Jesus and being able to pour one's heart out to him freely:

> She put on a record by Mahalia Jackson, *In the Upper Room*, and sat at the window, her hands in her lap, looking out over the sparkling streets. (752)

Vivaldo is Italian American, and Ida is African American; throughout their relationship she tries to show him that there are parts of her experience in the society they both live in that he cannot pretend to access or to understand. Commenting on Baldwin's use of music in his novels, D. Quentin Miller observes that "The experience of listening to prerecorded music—on a phonograph, at a movie, or on radio—suggests a kind of mechanical detachment between audience and artist, but also the possibility for endless repetition, for hearing a song over and over again until it is within one's head."[269] Ida's experience of this song similarly seems to hover between self-expression and a kind of solipsism; between an expansion of her understanding of herself and environment and a momentary, forgetful foreshortening of it. "Oh it's in the upper room with Jesus / Oh in the upper room / Talking with my Lord, yes and your God," is the refrain of Jackson's song.[270] Ida fills their apartment with music that seems at express what she now wants from life and how deeply she might want to share it with someone who understands. Like Baldwin's images of dirt, this scene makes the feeling Jackson sings about, which Ida tries to identify with, seem at once expansively, materially present, and vulnerably vague and powerless compared to the immediate environment whose

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[268] James Baldwin, "A Previous Condition," in *Early Novels and Stories*, 818.
[269] D. Quentin Miller, "Using the Blues: James Baldwin and Music," *A Historical Guide to James Baldwin*, ed. Douglas Field (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), 86.
[270] Mahalia Jackson, "In the Upper Room," *In The Upper Room* (Apollo, 1957) [CD].

bounds it seems incapable of either precisely reflecting or changing. Baldwin makes the music, as a form of emotional expression, seem to envelop Ida in a desire for understanding, but not thereby to help her act on this desire toward any other person, or even to articulate exactly what parts of her experience she would need or want to convey.

Rather than merely use Mahalia Jackson's music to assert a kind of cultural essentialism, or to affirm the possibility of interracial communication, Baldwin shows how unreliable his characters' material spaces are as proofs or testing grounds of either of these perspectives: how difficult it is to tell if Ida is engaging in a moment of attempted self-enclosure or communication, or to discern how much of Ida's experience Jackson's song is helping her convey and how much of it the song is helping her shed. For Amy Reddinger, *Another Country* "renders New York as a segregated, violent, passionate city in which love, sex, race, and gender all are constituted by the city while they at the same time demand a persistent retelling of the city as a space in which borders are crossed and sexual, racial, and class boundaries are blurred."[271] But scenes like this one remind us that Baldwin's novel takes place not within the city as such but within many small enclosures of this city in which characters strive to recall or to forget its other parts; they remind us that rather than be suffused in a rich, blurriedly diverse milieu, his characters struggle time and again to sustain or to recreate some more modest limits within which they could articulate what they are angry about or hopeful for—and to decide what the proper size and content of these limits are.

*Another Country* also deepens this sense of doubt and unreliability by showing that these feelings' momentary immersiveness, and the intensity of its expression, are not reliably indicative of the depth or importance of the impulses to which they respond. A great love and a trivial affair, a life-threatening situation and a trifling scuffle, announce themselves to this novel's characters through what appear to be strikingly similar emotional experiences. They all also seem to incite strikingly similar forms of emotional expression. In this way Baldwin begins to undercut—with an insistence absent from Proust's narrative—immersive feelings' capacity to take in with any precision even the particular enclosure in which they are first triggered; to help these characters relate intimately and sustainably even to a single self-contained space. Paradoxically Baldwin thus forms what might be his most dramatic representations of his characters' social oppression not by showing how clearly these characters perceive this oppression, but by suggesting that their environment deprives them even of the most basic emotional means to take it in accurately.

*Another Country* thus represents a series of love affairs in rapid succession. Its six central characters keep switching from one new lover to another, usually within the small group of friends on whom the novel focuses. Whenever each of these new couples starts a relationship—or first notices that they might be in love with each other—Baldwin's narration falls into a breathless kind of urgency. The union these two characters are about to enter seems inevitable, revelatory, and nearly organic in how easily they instantly fall in step with each other:

> Ida was suddenly dancing as she had probably not danced since her adolescence, and Ellis was attempting to match her … Ellis's forehead turned slick with sweat, his short, curly hair seemed to darken, Cass almost heard his breathing. Ida circled around him, in her orange dress, her legs flashing like knives, and her hips cruelly grinding. … Others on the floor

[271] Amy Reddinger, "'Just Enough for the City': Limitations of Space in Baldwin's *Another Country*," *African American Review* 43.1 (2009): 117.

made way for them—for her: it must have seemed to Ellis that the music would never end.[272]

As in *Giovanni's Room*, it seems as if every detail of these characters' bodies and surroundings announced to them that they are attracted and attractive to each other. In a way that also resembles the form of *Giovanni's Room*, these representations of immersive experiences are accompanied by abstract, near-stereotypical declarations of closeness. These lovers' dialogues abound in generalities about how long they want to be together and how complex and full a life they might be able to build as a couple:

> He wanted her to remember him the longest day she lived. And, shortly, nothing could have stopped him, not the white God himself nor a lynch mob arriving on wings. (384)
>
> He took one of Ida's hands in both of his. "I want to be with you," he said. "I want you to be with me. I want that more than I've ever wanted anything in the world." (498)
>
> "It never happened to me before—not like this, never." (525)
>
> "There *are* no boys like you. Thank God." (526)
>
> "Yves, do you love me?"
> "Yes," said Yves.
> "That's good," said Eric, "because I'm crazy about you." (564)
> *Tell me you'll love me forever.*
> *Yes. Forever. Forever.* (697)
>
> He loved Eric: it was a great revelation. But it was yet more strange and made for an unprecedented steadiness and freedom, that Eric loved him. (712)
>
> "I want you to love me all my life." (721)

Trudier Harris observes that "to Baldwin, love relationships mean responsibility and, more important, exposing one's self: vulnerability. At the heart of vulnerability is a trust that the loved one will understand whatever is revealed to him or her and will not use that knowledge as a weapon."[273] But paradoxically these relationships seem vulnerable not because these characters do not want to open themselves up to each other, but because—as it seems—they believe themselves to be transparent to each other too easily and too quickly. In Scott's terms (which she herself uses to describe Baldwin's later novel *Just Above My Head*), these expressions of love are "repetitious and additive"; they seem to not be precise assessments of particular situations, but invocations of some recurrent, abstract notions of love and desire.[274]

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[272] James Baldwin, *Another Country*, in *Early Novels and Stories*, 688-689. All other excerpts from this novel are hereafter cited in-text.
[273] Trudier Harris, "The Exorcising Medium: *Another Country*," *James Baldwin*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea, 2007), 99.
[274] Lynn Orilla Scott, *James Baldwin's Later Fiction* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State UP, 2002), 137.

In *Giovanni's Room* similar combinations of intense immersive experiences and abstract romantic statements seemed suspicious if only because of the gap between the very material way in which these experiences were initially described and the near-stereotypical language they inspired. *Another Country* adds to this sense of disconnectedness and unreliability the irony of hearing such very similar experiences expressed by so many different couples, none of whom seems—in the moment—capable of engaging with any more particular qualities of their relationship, or of acknowledging its newness and fragility. Some of these relationships only last for one or two nights; others last many years, and survive even one or both partners' temporary infidelity. In this way Baldwin does not even let us dismiss all these relationships summarily as fleeting, shallow attachments. Instead he suggests that a feeling that leads two persons into a lifelong commitment can seem indistinguishable from a feeling that can only keep persons together very briefly; that the same form of emotional expression can signal just as well a sense of self-awareness as a form of solipsistic infatuation. It is not simply, as Robert Bone has suggested, that Baldwin seeks to "endow" sexuality with "mythic significance."[275] The strikingly similar ways in which these characters report these unpredictably and unevenly sustainable feelings begin to suggest not merely that these feelings are unreliably translatable into action, but also that they might not carry a very precise awareness even of the immediate environments in which they are triggered. They start to signal these characters' more basic helplessness that extends even to their ability accurately to take in the small material bounds to which their emotional experiences are always confined and on which they nevertheless seem so consistently dependent.

These blurred boundaries between important feelings and discardable ones find their most dramatic enactment in the novel's depiction of Rufus. Rufus keeps being overwhelmed by immersive emotional experiences that time and again seem to show him the final limit of his existence, the final moment when he has lost himself as an artist and even as a person. But he never seems able to gage when the despair he feels has constrained and overwhelmed him definitively; when he has finally reached a point where his intense feelings signal a real limit to his existence. Bone usefully points out that, in Rufus, Baldwin gives us access to a "black Giovanni."[276] Through Rufus Baldwin represents not merely on unreliable translations of emotional experiences into actions, which David made so prominently in *Giovanni's Room*, but also the way that immersive feelings seem partially to blind individuals, as they did Giovanni, to the very immediate material contexts within which their seemingly insightful, novel visions unfurl.

When we meet Rufus in the novel's opening pages he is about to prostitute himself to another man in exchange for food. He describes this as a moment of his ultimate fall—as a moment when he fears his whole life might collapse:

> "I'd rather have a sandwich," Rufus muttered, and thought *You've really hit the bottom now*. (402)

We seem to find this character at a time of crisis; at what might be one of the most important turning points of his life. Everything he sees seems to signal to him his imminent fall. But Rufus does not in the end let this other man have sex with him—and a few pages after this encounter he returns to his sister's. With her help he manages to sustain himself for several more months.

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[275] Robert A. Bone, "James Baldwin," *James Baldwin: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Keneth Kinnamon (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 44.
[276] Bone, 40.

Whenever the narrator describes Rufus again after this opening sequence, Rufus keeps wondering when and how he will finally reach the bottom that he believed, in these opening pages, to already have hit:

> He was thrown out of bars. The eyes of his friends told him he was falling. His own heart told him so. …
>
> Perhaps now, though, he had hit bottom. One thing about the bottom, he told himself, you can't fall any farther. He tried to take comfort from this thought. Yet there knocked in his heart the suspicion that the bottom did not really exist.
>
> "I don't want to die," he heard himself say, and he began to cry. (412)

Rufus seems to believe that this immersive sadness, every time it descends on him, corresponds to some precise material reality; that it is a diagnosis not merely of his current inner states but of the way his environment is literally closing in on him, confronting him on all sides with signs of his imminent death. And even though he constantly seems to feel as if he were hitting a solid surface whose bounds he will not be able to breach, these bounds prove, time and again, to dissipate or yield. The pathos of these misprisions lies in the fact that, of course, Rufus's despair and claustrophobia are responding to a real set of social conditions that do constrain his existence. But these feelings never seem able either to become particular enough clearly to assess his immediate sensory surroundings, or abstract enough to attach to any larger unit of his city and his society than what is always one physical space at a time. It is at once as if these feelings could never be kept from becoming general assessments of his environment and his life, and as if they could never focus even on the small units of this life and environment. As a result they keep hovering in the intermediary state between insight and confusion; between an incipient social or political self-awareness, and what appears to be a series of unreliable, chimeric generalizations. Susan Feldman argues that Baldwin's characters in *Another Country* are blinded and constrained by their refusal to face the facts and details of their social and cultural history: "Their unwillingness to explore the buried truths behind their experiences—the absence and loss which, left unexamined, renders them destined to repeat the past—makes them strangers to themselves and, consequently, to each other."[277] But the pathos of this novel, and the social commentary it performs, seem in fact to highlight the persistence with which characters such as Rufus do find themselves believing, time and again, that some such deeper social truths have been disclosed to them; the ease with which they keep mistaking momentary overwhelming emotional experiences for insights, at once, into their immediate material context and into their larger fate.

This sense of emotional claustrophobia is made perhaps most strikingly explicit in Baldwin's representation of Rufus's death. His death is famously only a brief episode within the novel; an episode that we find out about only by hearsay, not even from the perspective of his sister or of Vivaldo—who were closest to him—but in an exchange between Richard and Cass, two of Rufus's and Vivaldo's more distant friends:

> "Rufus," she said, suddenly, "you've got news about Rufus."
>
> "Yes." She watched the way a small vein in his forehead fluttered. He's dead, Cass. They found his body floating in the river. (458)

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[277] Susan Feldman, "Another Look at *Another Country*: Reconciling Baldwin's Sexual and Racial Politics," *Re-Viewing James Baldwin: Things Not Seen*, ed. D. Quentin Miller (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2000), 91.

There is a double irony to this narrative choice—and a double way in which it echoes the troubling porousness of Rufus's emotional experiences. Rufus did apparently finally find himself in an inescapable situation. But we do not know whether the feelings that beset him were any different than the ones that had announced his doom to him time and again throughout the narrative. Even though throughout the narrative he had described the feeling of impending death as a sensation of "hitting bottom," his actual death finds him not as he hits some unbreakable material surface, but as his body floats at some distance above the bottom of a river. The narrative itself seems similarly to let Rufus slip through the cracks as if, after all, there were no forces in this plot to keep him firmly in its bounds, no "bottom" or solid wall to this narrative at which its characters' histories could find a more clearly articulable end. Magdalena Zaborowska has noted that Baldwin's novels often present "writing as a way of seeing"; in this context, the narrator's and Rufus's apparent failures of vision are brought particularly close to each other.[278] Rather than give us some final, definitive sense of the limits Rufus was hitting against, Baldwin makes it seem as if these limits were ultimately not representable either to his implied narrator or to Rufus himself; as if the narrative itself were not able to catch Rufus at the moment when his feelings respond to the material enclosures they keep sensing all around him precisely and reliably.

In *Notes of a Native Son* James Baldwin describes a general realization he has about his relationship to Western culture after seeing the art collections of Paris:

> I was forced to recognize that I was a kind of bastard of the West; […] I followed the line of my past I did not find myself in Europe but in Africa. And this meant that in some subtle way, in a really profound way, I brought to Shakespeare, Bach, Rembrandt, to the stones of Paris, to the cathedral at Chartres, and to the Empire State Building, a special attitude. These were not really my creations, they did not contain my history; I might search in them in vain forever for any reflection of myself. I was an interloper; this was not my heritage. At the same time I had no other heritage which I could possibly hope to use—I had certainly been unfitted for the jungle or the tribe.[279]

The plight Baldwin describes here is not quite Rufus's plight. But the particular emotional disconnectedness Rufus experiences involves a similar lack of trust that one will be able to distinguish between the moment when one's environment resonates with one's inner states and the moment when they become oblique to each other; a similar fear that no momentary feeling of becoming immersed in a space one visits or inhabits can prove that one knows this space fully or is truly recognized by it. Passages such as these are among the reasons why Cleaver accuses Baldwin of cowardice and racial self-hatred.[280] For Porter and Feldman they exemplify what they call Baldwin's productive double vision—the way in which his incomplete sense of belonging to his environment and his self-consciousness about his own place in its history allows him to critique this environment with all the more force and insight.[281] Both such overtly negative and such overtly positive descriptions of Baldwin's attitude toward the power of the individual's self-expression—toward the role his feelings might play in changing his society—seem to oversimplify the various forms of potential and limitation Baldwin ascribes to immersive emotional states. But I also hope to have shown why rejecting both such strong assessments of the role individuals' feelings play in Baldwin

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[278] Magdalena J. Zaborowska, *James Baldwin's Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2009), 108.
[279] James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, in *Collected Essays*, 7-8.
[280] Cleaver, 68.
[281] Porter, *Stealing the Fire*, 169; Feldman, 100.

does not leave us with the weak alternative, articulated by Watkins, of suggesting that these feelings thus become dissociated from any political commentary altogether: that they are merely a theatrical form of catharsis: "Baldwin's intent is not to explicate but to dramatize. What is important about Baldwin's essays is the style and eloquence with which he evokes the torment and human devastation of American racism and his ability to make us feel, if only momentarily, that redemption is possible."[282]Statements such as the description quoted above, or Baldwin's representation of Rufus, do highlight how much America's history of slavery and racism keeps disrupting and damaging the lives of Baldwin's contemporaries. But paradoxically Baldwin makes this point not by trusting his feelings—or showing Rufus trusting his—but by suggesting that he himself, and his character, are deprived of the proper material and cultural means to test when and where these feelings are trustworthy—of understanding what kind of enclosure they are momentarily responding to, or what large or small insights they might be leading one toward at each instance.

For both Baldwin and Proust, immersive feelings are thus neither quite reducible to, nor quite detachable from, the material settings in which their characters discover them and try to act on them. They are presented not as mirrors of the external world, but as experiences in which this world seems to present itself as, all at once, a sensory and a conceptual whole; as experiences where the question of fitting these sensory details and concepts together seems to be suddenly, all-embracingly solved. Proust and Baldwin showcase both these feelings' appeal and their limitations; both the way they can help their characters break away from conventional patterns of though, and the limited degree to which they are able to provide them with sustainable or precise alternatives to these conventions, or with reliable ways of reacting against them. Proust and Baldwin do not thereby simply dismiss these feelings' potential usefulness to politics or philosophy. Instead they seem to suggest that to pay more attention to the process by which philosophy can start to emerge between the persistence of a feeling and the solidity of a small room—or the process by which socially subversive self-expression can first be recognized in a cloud of dust—can bring us closer both to the fragility of philosophical and political subversiveness, and to the conditions in which such attempts to intervene into these larger systems can temporarily become convincing. They offer models of philosophical insight and political action in which the material context in which such insights and actions first come into being can be seen not as an obstacle to be overcome but a necessary limit to a particular kind of clarity and innovativeness; a limit beyond which these local, momentary insights can only be transposed in unreliable, inconsistently successful forms. Rather than seek to transcend this condition, they ask how one can relate to one's apparent political or philosophical insights and actions if the conditions of achieving and sustaining them are thus circumscribed.

I have not spent much time in the course of this chapter discussing Baldwin and Proust as queer writers. This was in part to showcase their other, more divergent interests. But these writers' focus on the unclear importance of feelings could of course be applied within contemporary intersections of affect theory and queer theory. Baldwin and Proust are both writers who depict queer characters and who have been accused, though for different reasons, of not fully embracing their own queer sexuality. Douglas Field thus notes "Baldwin's repeated rejection of the terms 'homosexual,' and 'gay,' … second, his insistence that sexuality is a private matter; and finally, his repeated statement that race is a more important question than issues of sexuality.[283] Eve Sedgwick

[282] Mel Watkins, "The Fire Next Time This Time," *James Baldwin*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea, 2007), 182.
[283] Douglas Field, "Looking for Jimmy Baldwin: Sex, Privacy, and Black Nationalist Fervor," *Callaloo* 27.2 (2004): 459.

famously describes Proust as constructing a "closet" from within which his narrator can gesture toward his sexuality obliquely.[284]

I do not want—with Christopher Eagle, Michael Lucey, or Douglas Field himself—argue for a strong sense in which Baldwin's and Proust's apparent hesitations about their sexuality can be fully recuperated as covert, elliptical assertions of queer identity.[285] I also do not want to suggest simply, as Scott does, that Baldwin presents us with small but reliable spaces in which it is possible locally to rebel against established mores.[286] But I do want to ask how thinking of feelings as bound to, and dependent on, rooms rather than persons, changes the form in which we might want to interrogate both authors' relationship to the divide between queer and straight relationships or persons. The way their novels relate feelings to settings could help us reconsider the way Proust's narrator walks into and out of secret, 'closeted' gay hotels or bedrooms—or the way Baldwin's queer relationships are often also transposed from one room to another only with great difficulty—not as an embrace of closeted queerness but as an interrogation of what it would mean to not be closeted in the first place; of where the distinction lies between affirming one's feelings and repressing them, since at any given moment one is only able to express or affirm them in such comically small spaces—since there is no such thing, in either Baldwin or Proust, as an open-ended sphere of feeling or of thinking, and since to enter each particular room is to find the hold of other rooms loosen rather than tighten around them. It would be much too strong and positive a statement to see in some of Proust's and Baldwin's disconnected rooms precursors of what Judith Butler designates as sequestered spaces where gender performance can be fragmented, parodied, and subverted.[287] But Proust and Baldwin share with Butler a concern with managing not the whole of one's social sphere but one's relationship to a particular territory—though they are far less optimistic than Butler about our ability, in the process, to not keep forgetting about this modest size of our self-imposed limits.

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[284] Eve Sedgwick, "Proust and the Spectacle of the Closet," *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1990), 213-251.

[285] Eagle, "On 'This' and 'That'"; Michael Lucey, "Proust's Queer Metalepses," *MLN* 116.4 (2001): 795-815.

[286] Lynn Orilla Scott, "Challenging the American Conscience, Re-Imagining American Identity: James Baldwin and the Civil Rights Movement," *A Historical Guide to James Baldwin*, ed. Douglas Field (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), 170-171.

[287] Judith Butler, "Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions," *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 163-180.

## Abundance: John Ashbery

*I compare human life to a large Mansion of Many Apartments, two of which I can only describe, the doors of the rest being as yet shut upon me — The first we step into we call the infant or thoughtless Chamber, in which we remain as long as we do not think — We remain there a long while, and notwithstanding the doors of the second Chamber remain wide open, showing a bright appearance, we care not to hasten to it; but are at length imperceptibly impelled by awakening of the thinking principle — within us — we no sooner get into the second Chamber, which I shall call the Chamber of Maiden-Thought, than we become intoxicated with the light and the atmosphere, we see nothing but pleasant wonders, and think of delaying there for ever in delight: However among the effects this breathing is father of is that tremendous one of sharpening one's vision into the nature and heart of Man — of convincing one's nerves that the World is full of misery and Heartbreak, Pain, sickness and oppression — whereby This Chamber of Maiden Thought becomes gradually darken'd and at the same time on all sides of it many doors are set open - but all dark - all leading to dark passages — We see not the balance of good and evil. We are in a Mist — We are now in that state — We feel the burden of the Mystery.*[288]

In his May 3, 1818 letter to John Hamilton Reynolds, John Keats describes his past mental development as a passage though a mansion. This house seems abundantly to preexist the person who slowly makes his way through it. Keats talks about stages of human life that, as a child, he could not yet perceive, trusting they were always already there waiting for him. The shape and content of these spaces seems to have been structured in advance of the series of transitions and pauses we follow, and one is given the impression or the illusion that these spaces and what they disclose continue to persist—and have previously persisted—without their inhabitant's ongoing presence. There is always more of this house than Keats' reconstructed past self makes use of, at any moment, in order to make sense of himself. Its abundance does not seem to depend on his conscious effort, but it also cannot guarantee that any particular element of the house will ever satisfy him persistently or fully. In this sense even though these interconnected rooms are represented as spaces of discovery, they are also spaces where forgetfulness is easily acknowledged and forgiven; indeed they are spaces that Keats' speaker only appreciates by allowing himself to let go of each of each particular room or view within them as one passes them by.

These spaces seem to retroactively ascribe to Keats' walker a certain liberty and inventiveness. There is no pre-assigned time that he needed to devote to each of these rooms or perspectives and their contents; and past the room of infant thought it seems there is not even any single prescribed path or direction necessarily connecting these rooms together. But this liberty depends on the possibility of a continued detachment between the walker and this space; on the way that this space is imagined to not depend on his consciousness or on the precision with which he attends to it, or to be something this consciousness could span and connect back together all at once into a single piece of insight. In this sense, though Keats' mansion of the mind might remind us of a

[288] John Keats, Letter to John Hamilton Reynolds, May 3, 1818, *Selected Poems and Letters*, ed. Douglas Bush (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), 274.

memory palace from the classical art of mnemonics, Keats' purpose is to represent not the mind's comfortably reassembled unity, but its comfortable disconnected fragmentation.[289] Keats' mansion of the mind represents does not represent the full expanse of his speaker's current memory, but the successive past limits of how he felt toward his world and of how far his sensitivity could reach. He emphasizes not the way in which, as in mnemonics, this kind of space can help us memorize and recapture a long list of details without attending to all of them at once, but the way in which it can give his speaker a series of momentarily coherent and compelling experiences without helping him find or making him feel compelled to seek a single set of concerns, aims, or triggers, that might connect them all together. In each of its rooms the person who traverses them seems easily to disregard the stakes and limits that governed the prior one. As he steps on into each further room he cannot be certain that the insights he believed to have got in these prior rooms are what now leads him onward.

I want to use this moment in Keats as a way of illuminating a similar overwhelming abundance with which Ashbery endows his representations of emotional states. Emotional states, as Ashbery represents them, are abundant in two interrelated senses that this passage from Keats helps to bring out. They are abundant, first, in the sheer number of their ongoing expressions; in the way that these expressions seem always to be vaster and greater in number than the speaker can attend to all at once. Second, they are abundant in that—rather than present the speaker merely with concepts or merely with sensations—they offer what appears to be a sensory landscape that is already suffused with its own abstract consequences and applications. The details Ashbery's represented environments contain seem constantly and richly to open up onto potentially universal insights; his speakers keeps encountering abstractions in what appear to be robust material forms ready to be inhabited, touched, or tested. Charles Altieri rightly compares these fusions or hybrids of concepts and sensations to the effect of abstract expressionist paintings—whose power depends precisely on their ability to present themselves as simultaneously abstract and inalienably material, particular presences; as explorations, in equal part, of the texture of paint itself as of the structural relationships among particular brushstrokes.[290]

But I also want to juxtapose Ashbery's poems against this fragment from Keats to underline the non-Romantic hesitation Ashbery's poems voice about the value or the usefulness of such abundant feelings. Ashbery keeps highlighting this sense of abundance as a feature of emotional expression thanks to which it is possible to conceive of feelings as something distinct from their particular occasion—to recognize that a feeling's significance might not be identical to the immediate significance of its particular context. But he also keeps showing that, in themselves, feelings are unable to turn their abundance of expression into articulable particular or universal insights. The images and aphorisms that fill his poems seem to have no consistently articulated aims or takeaways more concrete or more abstract than subjective affect.

Ashbery rarely maps out feelings directly onto a particular, realistic physical space. The physical spaces that he does represent in his poems—which include mansions, museums, parks, farms, and forests—are rarely attended to consistently as a poem progresses. Nor does Ashbery overtly probe or consistently represent his speakers' memory or personal history. But the kinds of emotional expression and exploration he stages do seem to model themselves on the vastness and the potential richness of both these kinds of subjective or objective landscapes. They also crucially—in a way that many of his critics have remarked on—depend on the implied or overtly stated

[289] See Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1966), 1-3.
[290] Charles Altieri, "John Ashbery and the Challenge of Postmodernism in the Visual Arts," *Critical Inquiry* 14.4 (1988): 816.

presence of a lyric speaker and a particular lyric occasion by which these feelings seem to be triggered but never to be able, in their seeming mnemonic or exploratory ambles, quite to articulate or definitively to leave behind. Helen Vendler thus calls Ashbery's poetry "realistic" in the sense that unlike surrealist verse it seems always to respond to some particular occasion, and to be implicitly articulated from some specifiable site and subject position.[291] Harold Bloom similarly describes Ashbery's poems as committed to expressing both the particularity of their context and the particularity of their speakers' subjective reactions to it.[292]

These 'realistic' contexts and emotional triggers set each poem's general horizon of expectation: allowing us to describe specific poems with relative certainty as responding to a breakup, an early infatuation, a peaceful evening spent with a long-term lover, and so forth. They thus also allow us to name the kinds of feeling—love, lust, regret, mourning, nostalgia—that these poems might, in a broad sense, be taken to express. But richly abundant as his speakers' expressions of these feelings are in seemingly robust, insightful content, as well as in sheer number, they never seem to connect back to these contexts in any but the vaguest, most ephemeral ways. Rather than represent feeling as an immediate connection or reaction to his personal history or his environment, Ashbery represents his speakers' emotional states as apparent incentives or attempts to imagine and inhabit a landscape independent of these contexts; a landscape that the speaker seems at once to create and to fall into as his feelings' necessary corollary, one that seems to not represent but occlude and rival—or at the very least to frequently lose from sight—the context to which it would at first appear to be responding.

Ashbery's poetry does not take it for granted that these emotional attempts to reach beyond one's immediate context are ultimately successful. Each of Ashbery's lines exudes a seeming confidence in the self-evidence and insightfulness of its immediate content. But to go into each new line of Ashbery is on some level to accept that one has lost from sight the tone or level of detail that a prior line had just disclosed; to appreciate a new image Ashbery outlines one often needs to also let a prior portion of the poem's represented world become unfocused or blurry. The multitude of his poems' disconnected images never crystalizes into sets of clear contradictions or tensions, let alone a narrative. The implied authorial effort that goes toward elaborating these lines is set in contrast with their comically limited echoes and resonances; with the high degree to which a seeming insight's vividness is pinioned to a single line or even to a single word—deriving from these limits a sense both of momentary preciousness and of helplessness or naiveté.

Like Wallace Stevens, Ashbery thus does not free poetic language from particular contexts and subjectivities, but dramatizes forms of emotional expression that seek at once to relate to and to test their independence of their particular context. He poises us at the point of discovering that the stakes of a feeling occasioned by an event might not necessarily rise and fall with the importance of this event itself—and lets us see this potential variety of the outcomes of emotional expression as both exhilarating and deeply troubling. For both Stevens and Sylvia Plath, a lyric speaker's vacillations among particular scales, foci, and intensities of emotional expression can be at least compared among each other: it is possible to treat one moment of emotional expression as, for example, more comic than another, or as logically contradicting another. Ashbery questions even our ability to form anything but the vaguest comparisons and logical connections among various moments of emotional expression. Each such moment seems to announce—and fails consistently to sustain—an air of self-subsistence and conclusiveness, of independence from any conceptual or sensory work that might precede or follow. This is even though—or precisely because—each of

[291] Helen Vendler, "Ashbery's Aesthetic," *Harvard Review* 22 (2002): 95.
[292] Harold Bloom, "John Ashbery: The Charity of Hard Moments," *Salmagundi* 22/23 (1973): 105.

these momentary expressions of feeling seems to flaunt its inability or unwillingness to separate from each other the particular and the universal, the sensory and the abstract; each insists on presenting them as already reconciled into a single harmonious unity.

By reading Ashbery in this fashion, I thus in part rely on and confirm his prior readings by Bloom, Altieri, and Vendler. But I also want to argue against these other critics' suggestions that celebrating these emotional expressions, or asserting their value, is the goal of either Ashbery himself or of any of his implied speakers. One way to articulate my disagreement with these prior readings of Ashbery is to pursue a tension that Altieri locates in Ashbery's poetry as a form of emotional expression. In "Ashbery as a Love Poet," Altieri lists the three tasks of a poet who seeks to express love.

> The first task of the love poet is the most daunting … Love is our imaginative angel, if not our god, so the poet must be able to project idealizations of the lover's states worthy of such investments. But love also involves constraining such narcissistic states so that we remain responsive to what for most of us is our richest experience of the claims of another person upon us, and of the intimacy that comes from adapting to those claims. Thus the second task consists in preserving an intimacy and a vulnerability in which we must risk our narcissistic defenses, at the very point where that narcissism finds its deepest gratifications. … The third task then emerges from these contradictory impulses. … One cannot love another whom one treats as only a casual encounter. Instead one must confer a distinctive singularity. And that involves placing the other in relation to fears and needs shaped by past loves; it involves imagining the future as the ripening of what the lovers can plant within the lyric moments opened by responding to that singularity, and above all, it involves the risk that this future will exact the loss of both the self and the world that love composes.[293]

In this argument, Altieri builds on his prior comparisons of Ashbery's poetry to abstract expressionism. To express feelings, especially feelings of love, is to attempt to address and do justice at once to one person's radically particular presence—all the more urgently particular since the speaker loves this person—and to the way this particular person forces him to draw on all that he has previously learned about persons, sensations, and feelings—and propels him on to new insights that might permanently add to how he makes sense of his world. "The poet's act of speaking love must maintain a difficult balance between what makes the love singular and what establishes a place for it in the symbolic order."[294] For Altieri, Ashbery makes the difficulty of this balance more apparent because rather than focus merely on the moments when love begins or ends, he lingers with intervals during which love is more or less effortfully perpetuated; ones during which the speaker is making efforts to preserve this love's importance and complexity.

Altieri goes on to argue that Ashbery achieves this recurrently renewed state of universality-in-singularity that keeps love going through a careful combination of eloquence and inarticulateness. Ashbery draws our attention not to some stable set of his chosen feelings' conceptual takeaways or objective correlatives, but to the way the feelings he represents seem always to be reaching toward new constellations and fusions of universals and singularities. "One might say that [Ashbery] manages to redefine the entire process of lyric love by shifting attention from the dramatic scenes in which love is born or sworn to the kind of site where its enduring qualities can be celebrated. This is

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[293] Charles Altieri, "John Ashbery as a Love Poet," *The Tribe of John: Ashbery and Contemporary Poetry*, ed. Susan Schultz (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1995), 27.
[294] Altieri, "Love Poet," 29.

not a matter of proposing new ideas of images. It involves simply focusing on the form, the process, by which that love renews itself. … his abstraction makes lovers' time a condition of lovers' discourse and thus frees that discourse to speak of and within an entire life."[295] What Ashbery thus celebrates, for Altieri, is not any particular discovery made by love, or any particular occasion for love, but this feeling's capacity to keep opening up new avenues in which such discoveries and investigations can be pursued.

But an argument such as Altieri's essentially neglects the difficulty presented by the tension between these abundant, seemingly-self-subsistent expressions of feeling, and the contexts that they at once gesture toward and keep from view. Altieri's reading underplays the indeterminacy and helplessness of these feelings whose successive expressions never seem to lead the speaker back to the external world to whose perception and abstract comprehension these feelings at each moment promise to add. A very strong version of this worry about the solipsism of the kind of emotional expression Ashbery's poem represents is voiced by Auden—who calls these feelings' lack of discernible connection to anything beyond themselves a form of madness. As Catherine Imbriglio puts it, "Auden seems to want to caution Ashbery against an excessive subjectivity which neglects the universal, sacred, public function of poetry. He uses the subject of "Illustration," for example, to criticize indirectly the tendency toward the private that he finds in Ashbery's texts:

> Further, a modern poet who celebrates his inner mythological life cannot escape asking himself: "Do I believe in my mythology, and, if I do, ought I to believe in it?"
>
> The subject of Mr. Ashbery's poem "Illustration" is a woman who acts out her private mythology and denies the reality of anything outside herself; that is to say, she is insane."[296]

Weaker versions of Auden's argument are articulated by Thomas A. Fink—who sees the poems as always at least partially comic; by Roger Gilbert, who finds in Ashbery ongoing oscillations between genuine moments of insight and the filler of "noodling and doodling, idle playing with sounds and images"; and by Mark Silverberg, who reads Ashbery's poems as humorous, "low-key camp."[297] Critics who read Ashbery as a deconstructive poet accept a similar premise as Auden's but give it a positive spin. Christopher Schmidt describes Ashbery as a poet of ineffable, non-objectifiable "queerness."[298] Tamar Yacobi and Brian McHale treat Ashbery's poems as a way of embracing the unattainability of any takeaways in favor of the flow of unstable meanings in itself. In Yacobi's phrasing, "To realize that 'the setting would go on evolving eternally' is to discover the existential principle behind the appearances of incessant, even meaningless change. Owing to language, insight outranks and reverses sight."[299]

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[295] Altieri, "Love Poet," 34-35.

[296] Catherine Imbriglio, "'Our Days Put on Such Reticence': The Rhetoric of the Closet in John Ashbery's *Some Trees*," *Contemporary Literature* 36.2 (1995): 267. Imbriglio is quoting W. H. Auden, "Foreword," *Some Trees*, by John Ashbery (New Haven: Yale UP, 1956), 14.

[297] Thomas A. Fink, "The Comic Thrust of Ashbery's Poetry," *Contemporary Literature* 30.1 (1984): 1-3; Roger Gilbert, "Ludic Eloquence: On John Ashbery's Recent Poetry," *Contemporary Literature* 48.2 (2007): 210; Mark Silverberg, "Laughter and Uncertainty: John Ashbery's Low-Key Camp," *Contemporary Literature* 43.2 (2002): 285-316.

[298] Christopher Schmidt, "The Queer Nature of Waste in John Ashbery's Vermont Notebook," *Arizona Quarterly* 68.3 (2012): 71-102.

[299] Tamar Yacobi, "Ashbery's 'Description of a Masque': Radical Interart Transfer Across History," *Poetics Today* 20.4 (1999): 674; Brian McHale, "How (Not) To Read Postmodernist Long Poems: The Case of Ashbery's 'The Skaters,'" *Poetics Today* 21.3 (2000): 561-590.

Altieri's reading of Ashbery—especially Altieri's emphasis on how compelling and stunning Ashbery's momentary constellations of the particular and the abstract can be—does persuasively show that to treat his successive turns of phrase *en masse* as self-subverting or comic is to fail to do justice to the moments during which each such line *does* seem compelling enough that the speaker attends to it as if it were an abundantly robust, independent reality of its own. But with these other critics I want to study not merely these hybrid images' momentary appeal, but also their afterlife beyond their expiration dates. I see Ashbery's poems not merely as sites of love's renewal, but as cemeteries of its successive, more or less naïve, more or less oblique expressions. I treat them as explorations both of how vivaciously and profusely feelings seem able to sustain themselves, and how little the way they sustain themselves has to do with actually achieving the seemingly lasting insights their successive expressions announce and let the speaker temporarily believe in. In this sense I want to think about Ashbery's poems at once as implied temporal experiences of feeling, and as atemporal landscapes of what is left behind in the course of such expressive processes; at once as celebrations of feelings' constant ability to renew themselves, and as acknowledgment of their dependence on and urges toward limitedness, foreshortening, forgetfulness, easy containment.

To show these tensions at work in Ashbery's particular works, I will start by focusing on two relatively formal, playfully comic poems: "The Instruction Manual" and "Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape." Their lightness will help me outline Ashbery's mode of lyric expression in its most basic form. They will also lay the ground for the main task of this chapter, which will be to show similar moments of comedy or disconnected helplessness in what are usually taken to be Ashbery's more ambitious works. By building bridges between these seemingly minor poems—which Ashbery produces in famously copious amounts—and his major ones, I hope also to show how such forms of abundant emotional expressiveness structure the experience of reading Ashbery's poetry as a whole, from poem to poem and from volume to volume. In this sense even though my close readings in this chapter will not extend beyond *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, I hope that the argument I offer applies to the overall arc of Ashbery's work.

Ashbery's short poems project an aura of inexhaustibility. These short poems' sheer profusion in each volume, and across his many volumes, makes it seem as if his speakers were always capable of ever more emotional states, and ever more ways of expressing them. Each of these emotional states seems to create its own imagined landscapes that not only do not point us back to any particular material setting or personal event, but seem to flaunt their independence of these contexts—to flaunt how easily and vividly the hybrid clusters of sensory details and concepts they create can supplant these initial contexts as the center of the speaker's attention. Each of his poems also seems to flaunt its independence of other poems collected in each volume—rarely if ever sharing with them a set of recurrent images, let alone any narrative center of weight. But this sense of self-sufficiency does not thereby make such short poems into a series of aphorisms or universal statements. Ashbery dramatizes the constrained limits within which each of his metaphors or lines or stanzas, as well as each of his poems, can momentarily seem insightful and appealing. These lines and stanzas are apparently easily forgotten or discarded as the speaker's attention turns elsewhere, or when a poem ends without giving us any synthetic or factual takeaway. They mete out the way emotions seem able momentarily to lock the speaker in what seems like a complete insight or revelation, as well as the ease with which these apparently persuasive or reliable creations are discarded, forgotten, or reshaped. These poems offer proof both of their represented feelings' apparent vitality and of their limitedness and helplessness; both of the apparent self-sufficiency of their expression, and of the way that this expression never seems to amount to much that could be carried beyond its immediate moment, even into the bounds of an adjacent poem or stanza.

"The Instruction Manual" is one of the central poems of *Some Trees*, Ashbery's first collection. It begins with its speaker's frustration with needing to work on an instruction manual while others are enjoying the good weather. "As I sit looking out of a window of the building / I wish I did not have to write the instruction manual on the uses of a new metal."[300] He starts daydreaming about an imaginary festival in Guadalajara, Mexico, to escape the tedium of this unwanted task. "As my way is, I begin to dream, resting my elbows on the desk and leaning out of the window a little, / Of dim Guadalajara! City of rose-colored flowers! / City I most wanted to see, and most did not see, in Mexico!" (6) The poem's title refers at once to the instruction manual the speaker tries to forget about, and—more obliquely—to the imaginative course he takes us on instead of doing his work.

In a way that echoes Keats' imagined mansion of the mind, Ashbery lets us see the poem not as an exercise in creating a world, but as a sort of walk through a mental landscape that seems to always already surround the speaker from all sides. As the speaker begins to describe this festival he did not see, he zooms in and out of now a group scene and now an individual person's interior state; now a singular observer and now a group of observers; now a daylong celebration and now a set of habits that order a household across many days. At all times it seems that more has been going on around him than he could attend to at once. Before the speaker turns to the crowd, they are already marching and dancing. Before he turns to a couple, they already seem to have long been involved in amorous conversation.

> The couples are parading; everyone is in a holiday mood. (6)
>
> Here come the boys! (6)
>
> One of them, a little older, has a toothpick in his teeth.
> He is silenter than the rest, and affects not to notice the pretty young girls in white. (6)

It seems so much could still await this speaker if he could stay with each part of this festival a little longer. This abundance is highlighted by the poem's long lines that keep passing from one enthusiastic description to another. The poem dramatizes the time and space it takes to give us even this very rough, almost childlike outline of the landscape his lazy happiness apparently willed into being. The speaker describes these sights using a handful of recurrent color terms and large abstract concepts such as familial love, young love, communal love:

> Yet soon all this will cease, with the deepening of their years,
> And love bring each to the parade grounds for another reason. (6)

Like the poem's abundant episodic scenes and details, these aphorisms and sensory connections are drawn out hastily and vaguely. They seem at once to take for granted some direct connections between these abstractions and the details by which they are apparently embodied, and to only be able to draw out these connections and their potential consequences in ambiguous, as yet comically local and unclear ways. For example, the passage quoted above sounds like an aphorism but also comes true in a literal sense. Immediately after these lines are pronounced, the speaker's attention swerves toward familial love and away from the romantic love that prompted this statement about

[300] John Ashbery, *Collected Poems 1956-1987* (New York: Library of America, 2008), 5. All other excerpts from this volume are hereafter cited in-text.

love's general fragility. The line hovers uncertainly between an as-yet unsupported general statement and a vague, overblown expression of the way the speaker is presently starting to find romantic love less interesting; apparently presuming to convey both meanings at once, but achieving these ends in a way that is so un-self-questioning that the lines' double meaning sounds comic or at least half-baked.

The speaker's shifts in perspective dramatize how little the superficial, imprecise parallels that seem to bring together the persons and objects he imagines as families or groups of lovers, as collections of red objects or white objects, can as yet tell us about these different details' similarities or contrasts. Once the speaker's attention swerves away from each particular episode, there seems to be no reason why one should return to it—no way to show that it does or should have echoes beyond the speaker's momentary burst of imagination, and even in the line by which it is directly followed:

> A dark-skinned lad with pearly teeth grins out at us from the worn leather frame.
> We thank her for her hospitality, for it is getting late
> And we must catch a view of the city, before we leave, from a good high place.
> That church tower will do—the faded pink one, there against the fierce blue of the sky.
> Slowly we enter. (7)

The speaker has left the parade to speak to an old woman on her patio. This woman shows him a photo of her son. Successive lines shift from a close-up of this photograph to an immediate quick summary of the way the speaker—and his unnamed companion or companions, who have just now appeared beside him—leave the woman's house. "We must catch a view of the city," decides the speaker—and in the next line he notices that he can do so from a pink church tower. With each line, the poem's landscape turns out to be larger than we might have initially believed. There are more persons here, more history, and more buildings, than we might have known; and it must take much longer to have all these interactions, and traverse all these spaces, than the poem's own brevity might suggests. But to notice this abundance with which the poem's imagined landscape apparently responds to the speaker's immediate urges and desires is also to notice how little of a narrative or a coherent sense of space connects all these details to each other. It is also to notice how easily each of these details is superseded by another one without being elaborated on beyond an almost comic level of generality—without inflecting the speaker's vision of what comes after, or remaining in his mind as something he will still need to make sense of.

Toward the end of the poem the speaker describes his imagined landscape as "limited, but how complete withal" (8). This description can be applied to the poem as a whole just as well as to its particular scenes and elements—and for the poem as a whole, just as for these elements, this limitedness and completeness are both an asset and a vulnerability. Ashbery represents both the ease with which even small parts of his represented world can seem to stand on their own, and the rapidity with which they can be dropped in favor of another whole that the speaker might not even like better. This sense of self-enclosed limits, of a partially severed or incomplete attachment to anything beyond the immediate description at hand—a sense that his lines seem to give us over and over, through ever new constellations of hybridly abstract and particular observations—gives these lines, as well as the poem as a whole, an aura of independence or liberating creativity. It makes the poem seem an effort not merely to respond to some particular occasion, but to make of this response something that could stand and hold our interest on its own; to let these expressed feelings be seen not merely as the speaker's immediate reactions to some object, or applications of his

general habits of behavior, but modes of experience in which new ways of fusing the particular and the abstract can be imagined and tested. But the poem also keeps undercutting the very reasons why we might want to take these lines as potential paths toward new forms of knowledge or of order. Its abundance of vivid hybrid images seems produced as much by inattentiveness as by creative labor: appropriately to the poem's occasion, which proposes itself as an effort not at work but at leisure, and at forgetting about the work that this leisurely speaker should instead be attending to. Even in this more general sense, the speaker is not able to make this fantasy rival the reality of his despised instruction manual for more than a few pages. These feelings might not be able to achieve anything more than let the speaker temporarily forget about the context that first sparked them. It is unclear how any of this feeling's expressions could carry over beyond their immediate moment without being thinned out and flattened into triviality; how much better they are or could prove to be than the comically schmaltzy Romantic music which, as Mark Silverberg remarks, the poem's imagined band is playing.[301] Luke Carson has described Ashbery's poems as struggling to represent and to make sense of the speaker's own ephemerality.[302] But if that is a difficult task for poems such as "The Instruction Manual," this is not because this poem is unable to represent expiration—including the apparent expiration of its successive parts—but because this poem's lines seem to expire so readily and so frequently. They seem to have no well-articulated significance—as either particulars or universal statements—that one could seek to preserve or mourn them for.

"Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape" is one of Ashbery's many sestinas. Ashbery uses this form more often than any other major contemporary poet. This seems to be in great part because the sestina gives a way of dramatizing, on an immediate word level, the tensions that "The Instruction Manual" explores in more semantic ways. "Farm Implements" has often been read simply as a joke. I want to argue that it represents instead the comedy of trying to fit together into a joke a series of moments or phrases that seem self-evidently laden with humor but do not quite connect together. This is not because the poem has too few punch lines, but—paradoxically—because it seems to have too many; because too many corners and angles of the poems offer themselves as apparent sites of its main climax or revelation.

The governing principle of a sestina is combinatory. A sestina consists of six six-line stanzas and one final three-line stanza. Each line of a six-line stanza must end with one of a sestina's six chosen words, without repetitions. In each new stanza these final words must be reshuffled into a new combination, so that their exact order is never repeated. At the end of the poem a three-line stanza has to fit two of these words into each line. "Farm Implements" is accordingly organized around such iterated repetitions of six words: "apartment," "scratched," "spinach," "pleasant," "country," and "thunder." A traditional sestina would also require that all its lines be the same length. "Farm Implements" breaks this particular rule. In these most superficial features of the poem we thus find dramatized not only its form but what seems to be a not uniformly successful—and not consistently methodical—attempt to achieve this form. The poem's lines are generally long, but some are much longer than others. These lengths shift unexpectedly and without much warrant. A series of lines of similar length is often followed by one that comically, breathlessly exceeds them by four or five stresses before hitting on its chosen word. Here, as if flaunting this excess, Ashbery puts in italics the phrase that throws the fourth line out of balance—and which needs to be here if the word "country" is to end this line as it now has to:

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[301] Silverberg, 294.

[302] Luke Carson, "'Render Unto Caesura': Late Ashbery, Hölderlin, and the Tragic," *Contemporary Literature* 49.2 (2008): 182.

> Today, and it shall be as you wish." He scratched
> The part of his head under his hat. The apartment
> Seemed to grow smaller. "But what if no pleasant
> Inspiration plunge us now to the stars? *For this is my country.* (206)

These verbal excesses would seem to gesture toward the excess of comic content that the poem is trying to rein into its chosen bounds. But they do not themselves offer us any clear hints of what this abundant content might be. The extra stresses of these longer lines are often created by words that seem fillers or digressive flourishes: piled-on adjectives and adjectival clauses, vague quantifications and deictic phrases like "then" "so much" "that" or "perhaps."

> Wimpy was thoughtfully cutting open a number 2 can of spinach (206)

> Her long thigh. "I have news! she gasped. "Popeye, forced as you know to flee the country
> One musty gusty evening, by the schemes of his wizened, duplicate father, jealous of the apartment (207)

> Then I don't mind so much. Perhaps we could invite Alice the Goon over"—she scratched (207)

These accumulating additions to the speaker's verbs and predicates do little to clarify each particular scene or its comic potential. If anything they add loose threads to this already disconnected narrative. They also give an aura of self-congratulatory suspense to lines whose artificially deferred endings do not then seem to yield much more than one of the six words with which we knew from the outset they would need to end.

To the narrative the poem follows there is a similar sense of not fully controlled, loosely connected but self-affirming abundance. Ashbery's characters are figures from the Popeye comic strip: Popeye, Olive Oyl, Wimpy, Alice the Goon, Swee'pea, and the Sea Hag. Ashbery deviates from the original cartoon just enough to not let us use it as a clear blueprint for the narrative his own sestina obliquely tells, but not enough to let us discern within this narrative a clear set of additions or oppositions to the original strip. He echoes some of the original plotlines that bind these characters together: Popeye eats spinach, and Olive Oyl is his lover. Other plotlines are altered or attenuated, but never to the point of breaking with the original strip completely. The Sea Hag (Popeye's nemesis) complains about him but for the time being is also his houseguest. "If that's all we need fear from spinach / Then I don't mind so much" (207). The Sea Hag's butch minion Alice the Goon might also get an invitation to Popeye's, although this has not happened yet. "'Perhaps we could invite Alice the Goon over'—she scratched / One dug pensively—'but Wimpy is such a country / bumpkin, always burping like that'" (207). Popeye is as usual caught in the middle of a conflict, but this time his enemy is not Olive's other suitor Bluto but Popeye's own "wizened / duplicate father," an enigmatic figure whom we never see (207). The poem revolves around this cast of characters' as yet uncompleted attempts to start up any discernable course of action: to get up, to invite guests over, to finish eating spinach, to give each other advice or orders about what to do. At the same time the sestina keeps invoking—but never following through on—hints of secret coded messages, mysteries, tangrams, unseen chases, dramas, and doppelgangers. Thus, Olive reveals that a secret conflict has been brewing between her and Popeye, which she only describes in confusingly lofty metaphors: [Popeye] heaves bolts of loving thunder / At his own astonished becoming,

rupturing the pleasant // arpeggio of our years" (207). The poem features "undecoded messages," an enigmatic "note … pinned to [Swee'pea's] bib," and " a tangram" (206).

A richness of actions, secrets, and decisions seems to be on the brink of being revealed to us; and the rare, idiosyncratic words Ashbery uses to describe these secrets—"tangram" not least among them—give us a high standard for how surprising or unusual these revelations might turn out to be. It is as if this poem were pregnant with images and words that the poem's form can hardly contain and which are all laden with confidently asserted, though as yet undisclosed, rich significances; as if each line of the poem, and nearly every other word, were ready to yield a punch line or to build up toward one. But at the same time Ashbery makes these figures and the words used to describe them seem comically helpless in their attempts to become significant or purposeful. Their actions do not lead to anything more than the promised end word of each particular line. Ashbery makes us notice both how much more florid verbiage we seem to be given than the poem's formal ends would warrant—how insistently both these characters and the poem's style seem to treat the complex importance of their emotional dramas as self-evident—and how little the poem itself or any of its speakers instruct us as to the purposes to which this abundance of asserted complexities could be put, or even as to these abundant potential narrative strands' relationship to each other and to their original subject matter.

Popeye came to the countryside to experience pleasure, and "pleasant" is one of the sestina's six recurrent words. To the extent that this is a narrative of a mind attempting to amuse itself (Popeye's, or the implied speaker's), the poem seems to represent—as does "The Instruction Manual," a pleasure that seems to be experienced at once too often and not consistently enough. Rather than, as Martin Kevorkian would suggest, assert his poetry's trust in and dependence on the value of using them as tools of deconstructive cultural critique, Ashbery makes it opaque to any such self-serious uses.[303] He makes such assertions of his poems' value seem similarly comic and unproven as the local self-dramatizations of this sestina's borrowed characters. Nothing is given to us in this poem beyond a series of these feelings' abundant but isolated, opaque expressions: nothing like a plot, a takeaway, a cultural commentary. Ashbery makes us notice how hard it is to tell whether we should appreciate the completion of this poem—or any of its successive parts—any more than we would take pleasure in the completion of, say, a crossword puzzle; whether the feelings the poem is implicitly sparked by and attempting to express within the bounds of this sestina are anything more worthwhile than a series of disconnected momentary urges.

This effect is brought to light even more clearly when we juxtapose "Farm Implements" against one of Ashbery's collages, "The Diffusion of Knowledge." "The Diffusion of Knowledge" also involves cartoon characters—though in this case they are superheroes, Fighting American and the Guardian. Fighting American and the Guardian flex heroically in front of two images of the Smithsonian—a color outline and a grainy black-and-white photo. These superheroes and their background are two dramatically disparate expressions of what, in a trivially broad sense, seems to be a feeling of cultural pride. But the collage gives us nothing more to connect these images together—or to connect them both to some particular event or context—than this vague sense of resemblance, one that does not seem to create between these images either a particularly strong echo or a particularly elaborate opposition. In "Typical Ashbery," Jonathan Morse proposes that Ashbery's clichés are radically disconnected from anything except themselves: "Ashbery's clichés aren't representative communications from any imaginable history because they aren't capable of representing anything, but as texts they possess simulacra of meaning, and those simulacra have

[303] Martin Kevorkian, "John Ashbery's Flow Chart," *NLH* 25.2 (1994): 459-476.

given them a function: to typify. Specifically, they typify themselves."[304] But the irony of juxtapositions such as this one is that, of course, the two parts of the collage immediately suggest some historical context, as well as some kind of internal dialogue about how this context is to be best expressed. There is to the way these two images are superimposed without further explanation an air of self-sufficiency and self-evidence. It is as if this collage presented itself to us as a world that is already ordered and harmonious, one that does not require any more mental or physical effort to be strung together. But the collage also seems striking because it seems unable to resist the triviality into which the vague connections it seems to articulate inevitably plunge it. What we are witnessing seems to be an emotional impulse that rests at once too close to and too far away from the materiality of the contexts in which it seems to originate; one which does not seem able to distinguish where its conceptual work and its immediate triggers begin and end, and which is made to seem both liberating and vulnerably solipsistic because of this ambiguity.

To set these poems and this collage alongside a poem like "These Lacustrine Cities" might at first merely deepen our sense of their very different tone and ambition. The former flaunt the ephemerality and limitedness of their successive lines and phrases without giving them much reflection or resistance. If this poem seems more serious, it is because it dramatizes more self-consciously the rapid expiration of seemingly self-sufficient emotional expressions that these lighter poems merely take for granted. Even though this ephemerality seems to be the focus of the poem as a whole, by the end of "These Lacustrine Cities" the speaker does not come any closer to freeing himself from his ebbs and flows of trust in each of these feelings' limited expressions. Like "Farm Implements" and "The Instruction Manual," "These Lacustrine Cities" is structured as a series of disconnected images. In this last poem these images are overtly designated as forms of emotional expression, revealing and circumscribing the speaker's vacillating "love" and "hate." As in these prior poems, each such image tapers away before it has established some connection to any specific personal or external context, without creating any clear transitions to the images that precede or follow. These images often reach their limit before they have even touched on what was originally announced as their central or defining quality.

The poem's title promises us "These Lacustrine Cities." The speaker does then describe cities for about a stanza and a half, but never even gets to describing their titular adjacent lakes before these cities burn down entirely:

> These lacustrine cities grew out of loathing
> Into something forgetful, although angry with history …
>
> They emerged until a tower
> Controlled the sky, and with artifice dipped back
> Into the past for swans and tapering branches,
> Burning, until all that hate was transformed into useless love. (125)

The cities grow "out of loathing," but they do not seem attached to this initial feeling as its allegory or its stable point of origin. What had been "loathing" soon becomes "anger"; "hate" eventually turns into "useless love." The cities seem at different turns in these first lines to function as the catalyst or the mediator or merely the reflection or site of these changes. These connections are all the more difficult to determine because these cities' relationship to each other or their structure are

[304] Jonathan Morse, "Typical Ashbery," *The Tribe of John*, 16.

never specified. We know the cities contain a tower, and that—through some association with someone's past, presumably the speaker's, they enclose "swans and tapering branches." But we do not know what surrounds the tower, where the trees grow, or where the swans swim. Before we could zoom out of each of these foci into some larger view of this imagined city, this city burns down and the feeling to which the speaker seeks to attend changes. We keep being told about these transformations without being allowed to follow the full emotional causes or effects of these shifts of focus, or to make sense of the oblique connections the poem draws between these represented spaces and the speaker's shifting feelings. The images the speaker invokes share a vague geometric principle: the tower, the swans, and the branches, seem small points within some larger whole that they implicitly migrate or open onto. On the one hand, the poem seems to treat these small details' surroundings as self-evidently implicit: as Michael Clune puts it, "to attend to Ashbery's description of things is to note how the poems provide these things with a definite relation to an unknown context."[305] But the poem stops attending to these images before these larger wholes begin to be explored; before we could see how these images connect to each other beyond this very broad, almost naïvely geometric resemblance, and what connects them to the feelings that seem in turns to create or to inhabit or to grow out of them. Since we never get a sense of the whole of the landscape whose coalescing presence these various foci seem to imply, these cities' role as part of this speaker's emotional expression remains unmapped in anything but a very vague sense.

This continued obliqueness and sense of incomplete connectedness is all the more startling since the poem does apparently remain attached to the Romantic trope of expressing feelings through landscapes—and since the components of each of its successive landscapes: water, soil, and crowded cities, remain the same, appearing only in slightly different proportions or combinations. The speaker keeps insisting or being told, of each of such vaguely drawn reiterations of these tropes, that they are already "all-inclusive" and ready for habitation:

> We have all-inclusive plans for you.
> We had thought, for instance, of sending you to the middle of the desert,
>
> To a violent sea, or of having the closeness of others be air
> To you. (125)

Toward the end of the poem, the speaker's hitherto more precise descriptions devolve into mere placeholders: "You will be happy here"; "You have built a mountain of something." These generalities then dissolve into a "rainbow of tears." It is at once as if the speaker had stopped trying to keep exploring these landscapes in any depth, and as if even his most general deictic pronouns could not help but lead him back into the promise of a habitable sphere with water, light, and a horizon. We cannot settle into a coherent material landscape, but we apparently also cannot progress into pure abstraction, beyond the limited set of tropes that defines the scope of this poem. This is paradoxically not because this poem presents itself as incomplete or partial, but because of how much the poem as a whole, and each of its lines in turn, seem to insist on already having available all of the landscape by which they could best be expressed—and meanwhile seem at each point to be caught in easily discardable constellations of abstractions and imagined bits of sensation that they let go of one after another after having, for the space of a few lines, treated them as the landscape they inhabit, and as the proof of some momentarily self-evident relationship between this landscape and

[305] Michael Clune, "'Whatever Charms is Alien': John Ashbery's Everything," *Criticism* 50.3 (2008): 449.

the abstract emotional terms the speaker seems to be trying to make sense of. Keats' mansion of the mind seemed miraculous and comforting in its ability to persist independent of its inhabitant's conscious effort or attention. Ashbery's landscape, in which emotional expressions seem to persist and coexist after they have apparently been abandoned or discarded, gives this kind of confidence an edge of naiveté. The many sites it is made out of seem to keep outliving their momentary appeal. They linger in so vast a field even though they do not fully connect into anything discernably lasting or worth keeping.

For Bonnie Costello, "Landscape is … a fundamental, generating trope of knowledge in Ashbery's poetry—attractive … because it insistently invokes an observer and his or her environment and draws out assumptions of knowledge within our everyday accounts of what we know."[306] I agree with Costello—again drawing on my initial analogy with Keats—that Ashbery's emotional landscapes seem rife with what seem to be miraculously robust, embodied concepts, with particulars that might already be sites of universal truths. But in my reading, to assert that Ashbery's emotional landscapes present themselves as a kind of fusion or hybrid of the conceptual and the particular is not to suggest—as Costello goes on to do—that these landscapes can be read as straightforward allegories or phenomenologies of how our concepts map out onto our sensory perceptions, or vice versa. Costello seeks to translate Ashbery's own metaphoric terms into conceptual takeaways or recognizable cultural tropes. Thus, she reads another one of his 'landscape' poems as follows: "In the mental landscape, 'the outcropping of peace' is presumably a pastoral respite from cognition, a promise of 'presence' (thus an outcropping of what is otherwise submerged)—in the 'blurred' afternoon 'slope' of vision's mountain. In short, this is Eden, the travelers Adam and Eve, and their story a compressed version of human history."[307] But this kind of reading glosses over the strangeness and obliqueness of representing peace as an "outcropping" that seems eerily material but is comically lifted out of a context toward which it could open. It glosses over the counterintuitive sense of fixedness and locality that comes with describing vision as a single "mountain" with a particular "slope." It also glosses over the comedy of suggesting that such a series of oblique statements could in itself represent "Eden," "Adam and Eve," and indeed to constitute "a compressed version of human history." I do not doubt that the poem Costello takes as her example might gesture toward such broad associations But Ashbery puts at least as much emphasis on such potential connections as he does on the preposterousness of proposing that his poems as such can sustain them, or that the speakers of these poems entertain them for more than a few lines. His poems' landscapes are made as much of momentarily appealing emotional expressions, as of abandoned or expired ones. They draw attention not merely to these expressions' momentary appeal and seeming credibility, but also to their apparently useless, oblique persistence beyond each such momentary high point—to the strangeness and confusion of not knowing what to do with them after the paths they promised to lead the speaker to have come to seem blurry or unattainable or perhaps merely uninteresting.

To make sense of these images of incomplete connectivity, it helps to note their resemblance to the climax of "Some Trees." Moved by these trees and by what they seem to reveal about his relationship to the person standing beside him, the speaker states:

> You and I
> Are suddenly what the trees try

[306] Bonnie Costello, "John Ashbery's Landscapes," *The Tribe of John*, 60.
[307] Costello, "John Ashbery's Landscapes," 77.

To tell us we are:
That their merely being there
Means something; that soon
We may touch, love, explain. (26)

This is not a comic poem. But nor is it a poem of Romantic revelation. What the trees seem to transmit to the speaker is a feeling for which he suddenly finds a multitude of verbs and metaphors. They show the speaker and the implied person standing by him that "soon / [they] may touch, love, explain." But these trees' branches, which seem to intertwine as they are silhouetted against the sky but do not actually touch or weave together—and which the speaker will soon leave behind as he continues his walk—offer at once much more and much less than the euphoric revelation that a cursory reading of the poem might make us believe they give. Immediately after this assertion of how revealing they are, the trees give way to "a silence already filled with noises; / A canvas on which emerges / A chorus of smiles, a winter morning." (26) Imbriglio describes this poem as an expression of reticence.[308] But to say that these images simply shy away from their external objects to represent them more discreetly is to underplay the degree to which they seem to crowd out into and euphorically to take over the speaker's field of vision. Rather than stably bind him to this outer image or to the person beside him, the speaker's feelings keep making him invoke ever new metaphors—each of which seems to assert that it has brought him closer to what he seems to be realizing he cares about, but none of which actually conveys anything but the presence of some supposedly accessible content. Rather than turn to this implied other person the speaker keeps imagining ways in which he could now do so, listing images that keep echoing each other but never weave together into a consistent personal history or course of action, or even into a consistent appreciation and celebration of these trees. In this sense the poem is all feeling—a feeling that the speaker finds himself able to express in so many ways, without constraining it to either its original human object or its momentary arboreal correlate. But since these trees and this other person are what might have made this feeling seem significant as an epiphany or breakthrough, this sense of emotional liberation and abundance seems fragile and potentially solipsistic, proudly but also vulnerably unjustified. As Wayne Koestenbaum puts it, the poem seems not quite serious as an expression of love not because it might be ironic, but because it seems so unironically accepting of so many forms the expression of this love can apparently take.[309]

Longer poems such as "Clepsydra" or "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" address more openly and more explicitly the question of exhaustion that hovers on the margins of these shorter works. These poems test the speaker's capacity to not only discover a feeling's abundant expressions but to follow them even onto their exhaustion, to seek in this exhaustion some hope of synthesis or a more definitive containment that would counteract their constant fickleness. They also highlight more emphatically the difficulty of knowing what one is to do with each such moment of emotional expression—and how much one can hope to gain from it—after it has ceased to be the center of the speaker's attention.

"Clepsydra" follows a feeling whose object seems at once impossible to locate and span, and impossible to ignore in each small detail the speaker senses or imagines. A clepsydra is a water clock—a device that measures time based on how long it takes for water to flow from one container into another. On the one hand this image of timekeeping and flowing water seems to model a hope for catharsis or self-assessment—a hope that the poem might turn out to be a way of measuring his

[308] Imbriglio, 262.
[309] Wayne Koestenbaum, "John Ashbery's Lazy Susan," *Mississippi Review* 31.3 (2003): 174.

feelings' scope and import, or that the process of expressing these feelings might in itself constitute a form of release. But on the other hand the water clock also seems to model the way in which the poem proceeds as a kind of constant spillage within a closed system; even as it apparently always leads beyond some closely bounded space, it progresses into nothing more than another such self-enclosed container, without becoming better-ordered or more meaningful in the process. One could say this is a poem about a breakup—and that does seem to be its implied occasion—but it is not a poem about a specific person, or the specific reasons for and contexts of the breakup, or even about an attempt to work through it. This feeling's expressions seem powerless to give the speaker insight into or possession of either the implied person he lost, or a full landscape from which this person will be absent—even as they also keep creating a sense of constant focus and an apparent confidence in their momentary insights:

> Hasn't the sky? Returned from moving the other
> Authority recently dropped, wrested as much of
> That severe sunshine as you need now on the way
> You go. The reason why it happened only since
> You woke up is letting the steam disappear
> From those clouds when the landscape all around
> Is hilly sites (140)

The poem starts with a question: "Hasn't the sky?" Even though the sentence that follows ends with a period, it is not an answer to this question. It is merely an additional clause that the original question seems to have omitted, as if the question mark had ended it too abruptly. Between this broken question and the sentence that continues it, the speaker turns what might have been an open-ended inquiry into what sounds like an assertion, and an assertion not of any doubt about the sky but of the sky's full presence before him. This sky apparently contains just as much sunshine "as you need now on the way /You go." A similar movement from confusion to certainty is mirrored by the effect of this sunshine on the landscape. As the mist lifts he realizes that the hills are still there.

This opening seems hard to follow or to conceptualize—as either a general abstract statement or a piece of realist description—paradoxically not because the speaker himself presents it as opaque, but because he gives it such an air of self-evidence, as if what we were seeing was not a cluster of particulars and abstractions that would need parsing out but an already transparent condition. This landscape seems sturdier and more persistently, abundantly present than the speaker might have hoped. The abstract nouns he uses seem already to organize from within the sensations he is trying to scan. Thus, what warms these hills is not the sunshine itself but "the reason why it happened." The sky has come back from "moving an authority recently dropped." But of course even though these passages sound self-evident, they are anything but explanations of either the personal history that sparked these feelings or the immediate context that now fuels them. To get to the end of each of these lines is to confront not their growth of clarity but their increasing sense of obliqueness. This obliqueness comes not from these lines' open-endedness, but from their apparent insistence that they are not open-ended; not from the way they continue to grope for some emotional revelation, but from the way each sentence appears to assert that this revelation has already come—and is then rapidly superseded by yet another apparently self-evident assertion that discards what came before but does not give us anything less oblique in return.

There soon follow several general statements that could be taken to describe this sense of unmooring within what presents itself as self-explanatory, of an abundance of apparent revelations that seem to neither stand alone for very long nor to connect into a stable larger whole:

> All this is
> Not without small variations and surprises, yet
> An invisible fountain continually destroys and refreshes the previsions.
>
> And a feeling, again, of emptiness, but of richness in the way
> The whole thing is organized, on what a miraculous scale (142)

As in "These Lacustrine Cities," Ashbery makes it unclear whether these attempts to articulate his speaker's plight bring him closer to or further from whomever he is trying to let go of or bring back. Taken in their general contours, both phrases seem rather accurately to represent the flow of the poem: both the abundance of its possible moments of insight or resolution, and the rapid realization of how solipsistic and easily discardable these moments are. But again, as in "Lacustrine Cities," words such as "all this," "the whole thing," or "small variations and surprises" bring out not merely these aphorisms' potential for insight, but also their quick and not fully tested confidence; not merely their capacity momentarily to seem like ways of describing the speaker's plight reliably, but also their apparent incapacity precisely to perceive and capture "the whole thing" that the narrator is facing, to actually perform the act of naming that these pronouns presuppose. Anne Ferry has noted the high frequency with which Ashbery uses the words "thing" or "something." Passages such as this one show why these pronouns' persistence in Ashbery's work signals more his fascination with materiality—which is what Ferry herself attributes it to.[310] After neither of those lines is the poem's speaker able to start turning his attention to precise memories of his presumed lost person or a more transparent view of the space where he now is. The feeling that animates this speaker seems amazingly prolific and seductive in how vast an imagined landscape it is apparently able to create without definitively grounding it in any real setting or memory, and how persistently it seems able to give the speaker the impression that this imagined landscape is able to measure and to hold the weight of some implied context or personal event. But it also starts to seem as if its abundance were not merely a path toward understanding what it would take to make sense of this feeling's origins and react to them appropriately, but also an obstacle to or a refuge from any such insight or action—an obstacle or refuge that cannot be connected back to anything beyond itself but perhaps merely left behind, though it is not clear what improved self-enclosure should supersede it.

As the poem progresses its possible resolutions become ever more tantalizing, and ever more difficult to attain. To the extent that there is something liberating and hopeful about each of the poem's successive metaphoric assertions, they are also persistently forgettable and disconnected. It becomes ever harder to understand how the poem's subjective occasion and its physical setting could still remain obscure in the abundance of images and aphorisms we are given. Meanwhile the speaker's attempts to shore this abundance into some sense of retroactive order, or some sense of foresight, become at once more overt and more evidently unsuccessful:

> All kinds of things are possible in the widening angle of
> The day, as it comes to blush with pleasure and increase,

[310] Anne Ferry, "'Thing' and 'Things' in Ashbery's Poems," *Harvard Review* 22 (2002): 113-119.

So that light sinks into itself, becomes dark and heavy
Like a surface stained with ink: there was something
Not quite good or correct about the way
Things were looking recently. (144)

In this line the limits of this speaker's attention are circumscribed not spatially, by the sky, but temporally, by "the widening angle of / The day" itself. The imagined way in which this day increases and accumulates its daylight inspires a general statement about the speaker's subjective state. This statement seems to congeal from light to ink as if the day itself were becoming a surface stained with writing. "All kinds of things" and "something" again invoke a kind of deictic certainty that seems to signal not any particular qualities of the speaker's surroundings but the speaker's trust in his knowledge of what these qualities are and his confidence that these qualities will help him understand this feeling. Again this fragment seems a marvelous display of the kind of confidence and vividness the feelings the speaker expresses are capable of; of the capacity their abundance has to make the speaker temporarily forget anything could exist beyond this feeling's current expression, and to let him draw from the limited scope of these details what seem like insights. But there is an obvious gap between this fragment's final general statement and the scene from which it supposedly derives. We do not know what has not been looking good to the speaker—whether he is referring to this emotional expression itself, to his environment, or his implied failed relationship. It is not clear if his feeling has thus kept actively reshaping his entire imagined landscape or merely passed from one momentarily self-subsistent circumference of ideas and sensations to another without discriminating between them or connecting them together.

As the poem swerves away from this apparent insight into another set of metaphors, we also do not see this statement tested as part of an ongoing introspective effort or a course of action. Donald Revell stresses the productivity of such emotionally driven flights of fancy: "Ashbery's profoundest influence makes itself felt in the ways in which he discovers motives and momentums of desire in language itself, the inclination of words and phrases themselves to forsake what is merely available in favor of what might be made available by new expressions, the undetermined sponsors of new selves and new ways of perceiving."[311] But Revell's assessment of such fragments underestimates how much the apparent novelty and independence of Ashbery's phrases depends not on their openness to other words and phrases that surround them, but on their strong sense of self-sufficiency and containment. Their air of confidence depends not merely on their ability to express a feeling in ways that do not depend merely on its original context, but also on the implied possibility that these expressions of feeling foreclose the kind of self-questioning that might lead the speaker to connect these images to anything beyond themselves, or to look back on other ones he has discarded.

The ending of the poem comments on its overall movement from one limitation to another explicitly. The speaker wonders how his currently "intact / Appreciation" of his "existence" will change with the coming of the evening and with the way his feelings will become preoccupied with or inspired by evening's "faces":

moving in the shadow of
Your single and twin existence, waking in intact
Appreciation of it, while morning is still and before the body

[311] Donald Revell, "Some Meditations on Influence," *The Tribe of John*, 99.

Is changed by the faces of evening. (146)

It seems as if this speaker has understood how closely bounded his self-expressions seem to be in time and space; as if he were trying to imagine what it would be like to see himself beyond the images the current moment inspires him to. But again, even though these lines assert a pattern that might potentially apply to the poem as a whole, they seem unable or unwilling to break out of the elliptical metaphoric style that has made this poem so troublingly disconnected. Even though they can apparently predict that evening will reassemble the speaker's emotional landscape, they seem unable also to articulate exactly how this will happen or to prepare for it—to let the presumed speaker move beyond this ongoing emotional process, back into his personal history or to the parts of the world still left to him, or to the implied person he lost. In this sense the ending seems at once to cling to some hope of closure and emotional self-understanding, and also to expose how much such an appearance of self-understanding depends on foreshortening or discarding similar such moments of clarity that came before. These lines are striking both in how much they echo the tensions and difficulties with which the entire poem has struggled, and how little effort they seem to make to do justice to, or even to recall, the richness and variety of ways in which the poem has expressed these difficulties and tensions. Ashbery makes us wonder what we are to do with a feeling—and more generally, with a poem—that seem to persist by nurturing such rapidly expiring, bounded trusts; with a feeling or with a poem that do not even let us believe, in deconstructive fashion, that these passages from one such rapidly breaking perspective to another are in themselves proof of the speaker's insight and not merely of his forgetfulness or narrowness of vision.

"Clepsydra" does not have any precise site or object. In "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" both this site and this object are made very explicit. The speaker is in a museum; he is looking at Parmigianino's 1524 self-portrait painted onto a half-sphere of wood. This image of a bulging, distorted surface provides a model and a starting point for the poem as a whole. "Self-Portrait" presents itself as a kind of distorted, almost overflowing whole just barely kept in by each of its successive centers of attention: a whole rife with historical detail and critical analyses, as well as with the speaker's personal sentiments and admissions. The poem seems preoccupied with preservation and expiration in a double sense. On the one hand, it seems to ask what it would mean to try to give permanence to these feelings as rival or alternative instances of the conceptual and sensory work that this painting is made of. On the other hand, it seems to ask how the painting itself—in its rich variety of past histories and contexts, and possible interpretations—could be seen as sustained or preserved by the successive emotional reactions it provokes in this new observer.

Throughout the early parts of the poem the speaker seeks, as it were, to transpose this painting into the poem; to create within this poem a series of metaphors or juxtapositions that could put into words the effect this painting achieves visually. These attempted restatements instantly start to offer themselves up as the painting's alternate versions or possible rivals. From the outset—as Lee Edelman has observed—Ashbery makes us wonder what this bulging poem should be taken to represent: whether the "self-portrait" the poem is after is most importantly the Parmigianino painting or the self-portrait of the poem's speaker, or the portrait of this particular encounter between them.[312] This poem's center of attention is made ambiguous not merely because this speaker's monologue is digressive, but because of how final and richly self-sufficient each of his momentary foci seems in the moment when it is reached:

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312 Lee Edelman, "The Pose of Imposture: Ashbery's 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,'" *Twentieth-Century Literature* 32.1 (1986): 79.

The glass chose to reflect only what he saw
Which was enough for his purpose…
The soul establishes itself.
But how far can it swim out through the eyes
and still return safely to its nest? …
The soul has to stay where it is,
Even though restless, hearing raindrops at the pane,
The sighing of autumn leaves trashed by the wind,
Longing to be free, outside, but it must stay
Posing in this place. It must move
As little as possible. That is what the portrait says. …
The secret is too plain. The pity of it smarts,
Makes hot tears spurt: that the soul is not a soul,
Has no secret, is small, and it fits
Its hollow perfectly: its room, our moment of attention. (474-5)

The description rapidly passes from focusing on the portrait as the representation of a real-life convex mirror, of sensations reflected in this mirror in 1524, of the way these sensations represent some metaphysical human spirit, of merely the momentary attention we turn to this object, hoping to find in it something of more lasting value. We speed among many bounds within which this image might seem meaningful or insightful. These shifts are made without significant reference to the painting itself: we do not know what newly noticed details inspire the speaker to make this progression. His successive analogies, aphorisms, and metaphors do not seem compatible with each other, but nor are the perspectives they draw out contradictory or dialectically related. They redirect our attention from one possible circumference of contexts to another, making it seem in turns as if the thing that this speaker cares about in the painting is a historical reality, a person's face, a portable concept it could illustrate, this concept's inability to leave the bounds of this painting. In the lines I omitted from the above quotation, the speaker's attention also turns to entirely different subjects. He lingers with a metaphor and elaborates on it, and makes asides about the painting's historical reception.

Each of these phrases sounds conclusive even though the poem has barely begun, and even though they are successively abandoned without as much as an overt refutation. The poem never returns to any of these opening formulations. Nor does it ever attempt to synthesize them, or to examine either the speaker or the painting in a way that could let us discern which of these are most important, or most blatantly mistaken. Ashbery draws our attention both to how easily each of these perspectives seems to stand as a self-subsistent proposition—as a proposition with which the poem could effectively end, as with its final word about this painting—and how easily we discard each of them to move on to other angles and details with which these initial ones overlap only incompletely or not at all. He dramatizes the poem's inconclusiveness not by making these perspectives seem open-ended, but by always making it seem as if they enclosed a satisfying abundance of details and insights—only to then show how easily each of their bounds can be left in favor of yet another such limited sphere of attention, without quite contradicting each other or fusing together. The poem's appeal, and the appeal of the painting as a multiply redrawn center of the poem, seem to lie not in the way that they liberate the speaker from a sense of containment but in the constant hope they give for such containment, a hope that seems to persist even as successive versions of this hope are discarded. For Bonnie Costello, "Self-Portrait" is a series of tantalizing images that promise depth

but never yield it; it is a "hall of mirrors" in which all we seem ever to be getting are reflections of objects and persons and not these persons and objects themselves.[313] But to describe "Self-Portrait" in this fashion is to underplay the degree to which this poem's moments of apparent irony or disappointment always begin as moments of hopeful certainty—and no matter how many such disappointments the speaker experiences, he is apparently always ready to extend his trust to the momentarily convincing vividness and richness of each new line. It is also to underappreciate the degree to which the poem's inner tensions depend precisely on the way the feelings it expresses seem not simply to reflect the painting but to emulate and rival its self-contained, apparently self-sufficient material existence.

This sense of confused rivalry or emulation keeps intensifying until, for a moment, the speaker turns away from the painting altogether:

> The balloon pops, the attention
> turns dully away. Clouds
> In the puddle stir up into sawtoothed fragments.
> I think of the friends
> Who came to see me, of what yesterday
> was like. (476)

The popping balloon and the reflected clouds echo the painting's wooden bulge but also make it seem comically flimsy and fragile. Even as this image keeps invoking a shape that we have come to associate with this painting, it also shows how quickly and easily the speaker can swerve away from this object, with what seems to be a rapidly fading memory of its previously persistent and sturdy presence in his mind. The "dullness" mentioned in the last line quoted here seems to belong, ambiguously, both to the painting that the speaker has grown bored with, and to the speaker's attention itself, which inexplicably leads him, for a few lines, to turn to duller things—and will just as inexplicably return to the painting only a few lines later. As the speaker starts to think about himself it is startling both how vague his self-descriptions are and how easily these much shorter and vaguer lines can still keep the poem going, as if their bounds were quite as trustworthy and rich as the long, lines filled with facts and quotations that we have just left. This fragment gestures toward a new emotional landscape that is apparently easily accessible to the speaker but that this speaker has not yet begun to probe. But these lines also acknowledge the ease with which even the most striking and apparently central aspects of this speaker's emotional expression are discarded, omitted, or flattened, in favor of new sites of interest that seem neither to have refuted these past images nor even properly to have competed with them in how rich and varied a sphere of sensations they can offer. This seems to be at once a show of his feelings' constant ability to fuel themselves no matter where the speaker turns his attention—independently, it seems, from the objective interest of their momentary implied or explicit focus—and of their vague, disconnected forgetfulness.

This part of the poem begins to weave the speaker's meditations on what it would mean for the poem's successive emotional expressions—listed and abandoned line by line—to have the robustness of a material art object, with a parallel questioning of what, if anything, these moments of represented emotional expression are able to convey beyond themselves; whether their capacity to turn now to one object of interest and now to another marks their abundantly many-sided involvement with or their easy detachment from the networks of sensations and ideas from which

[313] Bonnie Costello, "John Ashbery and the Idea of the Reader," *Contemporary Literature* 23.4 (1982): 495-497.

they weave their momentary images and metaphors. As "Self-Portrait" continues, these accumulating, not fully connected perspectives begin to raise the question of what it would mean to see this abundance of metaphors, facts, sensations, and perspectives, as something that a poem or a painting can preserve or celebrate:

> The shadow of the city injects its own
> Urgency: Rome where Francesco
> was at work during the Sack: his inventions
> Amazed the soldiers who burst in on him;
> They decided to spare his life, but he left soon after;
> Vienna where the painting is today, where
> I saw it with Pierre in the summer of 1959; New York
> Where I am now, which is a logarithm
> of other cities. (480)

Ashbery does not here express—as Michael Clune has suggested—a confidence about the intelligibility of the images he presents within some total cultural context.[314] Nor does he suggest, as Perloff proposes, that we should treat the connections among these different images as merely accidental.[315] A logarithm is not a linear but an exponential function. To call New York a logarithm of these other cities is not to say it sums them up but to suggest that it uses them to square or cube its own qualities. This metaphor makes the cities seem present in the speaker's purview both conceptually and sensorially—as aspects of the city he now lives in, as well as sources of the conceptual dimensions through which he perceives it. But however varied a role these past cities might be playing in the speaker's current experience, this role seems inextricably tied to this present-day context. It does not suggest that the speaker could or does appreciate these other cities on their own—either as objects or as organizing principles of the speaker's vision. Rather than see New York as the crown and synthesis of these prior historical contexts, we are made to wonder how much of these cities' presence persists in this last city in which the speaker sees this painting; whether to see this painting here is to be given access to these past contexts, or to realize how easily and inevitably they have been altered, eroded, and partially discarded within this individual person's emotional expression; how easily this person's feelings shed and rearrange any particular hold that these prior settings may have had on their tightly circumscribed object.

The ending turns this question of accumulation or forgetfulness back onto the poem itself. The last lines' "cold pockets / Of remembrance, whispers out of time," point at once to the persistence of the successive foci of the speaker's attention—a persistence which the poem's sheer materiality gives them beyond the very brief lifespan they seem to be accorded by the speaker's shifting attentiveness—and to the way this prolonged existence reveals them to grow "cold" and be reduced from voices to "whispers," from convex spheres to mere "pockets" that might still hold their content but do so much more flaccidly (487). In this last image of what seems at once to be another convex whole, and a whole whose expiration date has apparently passed, Ashbery makes his poem seem at once a celebration and a cemetery—or to put it less dramatically, a scattering of leftovers—of the abundant expressions of his speakers' feelings (as well as of the painting's own capacity to move us beyond its historical moment). Once the speaker's momentary confidence in their relevance and accessibility has faded, these details wither without stable support or justification.

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[314] Clune, 457-458.

[315] Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1981), 248-287.

Like the popping balloon that begins one of the previously quoted sections, this ending calls into question readings such as Laurence Lieberman's, who sees in Ashbery's poem a progressive "hardening" of what are mere perceptions into stable conceptual worldviews.[316] To end the poem in this fashion is to confront us with what seems at once a conclusion, and a refusal to let us think that we have carried out of the poem the vividness that it presented to us line by line. It makes the self-enclosure of this poem's successive images seem a mark both of their potential force to preserve what they single out and fuse together, and of the ease with which they nevertheless make themselves—and the emotional expressions they convey along with them—vulnerable to being forgotten, disconnected, and lost.

Thus to call Ashbery a poet of emotional abundance is thus not merely to claim that he celebrates feelings for their own sake. Nor is it to claim that, in the midst of this abundance, he traces out a deconstructive path toward an open-ended, liberated experience of the self. Ashbery explores how difficult it is to try to express feelings in a way that would make them do more than merely mirror the contexts we already know—or to rein them back toward these contexts and make them focus on these contexts reliably. The feelings he represents are emphatically non-narrative—expressive neither of a stable known outer world nor of a coherent sense of self. This is not because they refuse to be contained, but because they apparently contain themselves too quickly, and lead the speaker too quickly to believe in their potential independent import; not because of how much and how precisely they can help the speaker recall and notice, but because of how effortlessly they lead him to forget, in a moment of limited attention, that anything lies beyond the constellation of particulars and universals to which he is now attending. Of course to say that feelings are capable of such transformations is to claim that they are able to draw us away from any momentary center of our attention: that, as Altieri has suggested, they lead us toward metaphors or aphorisms we might never have conceived of before, or help us abandon or foreshorten qualities and details of our lives that we might have thought were essential.[317] But it is also to notice how immovably grounded these feelings are in the self-enclosed landscapes of their successive expressions; how difficult it is to expand or transpose them beyond their momentary sliver of attention. In making his poems into sites of such abundant but limited feelings, Ashbery celebrates poetry's own capacity to put us in relation to feelings as experiences of more than just the contexts and concepts that spark them. But he also discloses poetry's incapacity to make this persistence and richness in themselves a sign of feelings' insightfulness, or even into a guarantee of their expressions' vivid longevity.

316 Laurence Lieberman, "Unassigned Frequencies: Whispers Out of Time: A Reading of John Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," *The American Poetry Review* 6.2 (1977): 9.
317 Altieri, "Love Poet," 29.

# Conclusion: Eyebread

> For a time I had visions of gigantic cakes, larger than life, cakes so huge that it was like standing in front of a mountain and being able to see only part of it. I went into detailed descriptions of how these cakes were so perfect that it wasn't necessary to eat them, because the mere sight of them was enough to quench all desire for them. And I called that "eyebread."[318]

This fragment comes from a section of Benjamin's hashish journals entitled "Hashish, Beginning of March 1930." It is one of the sillier and more vivid of the visions and urges into which hashish drove Benjamin; others of which include sumptuous real-life dinners followed by double or triple desserts. One can see in this particular hallucination an eerie trace or echo of Benjamin's more famous intellectual gestures. It is as if the thinker were awkwardly trying to ascribe to this imaginary pastry some of the qualities of overwhelmingly total, self-sufficient revelation that he will later apply to film, and on a grander and more despairing scale to history as seen by Klee's angel. To call the gesture we follow here a trace or echo of these more famous ones is not to claim a genealogical relationship between them. Nor is it to claim that this trivial product of Benjamin's mind contradicts or invalidates those that seem more useful and convincing. If anything, the fragment prompts one to wonder what one is to make of a philosopher who writes something like this down, and preserves it, just as he also wrote down and preserved his more famous reflections; what one is to make of a philosopher who apparently cannot shed his characteristic intellectual gestures in this lesser context, but also cannot consistently make this lesser context seem significant through these gestures alone—and chooses, all the same, to record the merely momentary persuasiveness of this imaginative effort. One way to summarize the aims of my argument is to say that it showcases the difficulty of responding to such questions. It also proposes that affect theory is especially well equipped to explore why such questions should be more central to the humanities, as well as how we could begin to answer them.

Scholars of modernism tend to assume that modernists value and attend to feelings only insofar as feelings help them further some predetermined philosophical, scientific, or political ends. To the way my chosen writers study feelings there is a much greater vulnerability and open-endedness. My chosen novels and poems represent feelings as states that are expressed by particular persons, but are not reducible to a person's particular personal history or immediate material context. The view of feelings that my chosen authors seem to share gives feelings an emphatic and striking sense of independence. They are not simply immediate reactions to particular events, or applications of predetermined systems of values. To thus detach feelings from their physical contexts and their potential psychological or psychoanalytic origins allows these novelists and poets

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[318] Walter Benjamin, "Hashish, Beginning of March 1930," *Selected Writings Volume 2, Part 1, 1927-1930*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999), 329.

to notice ways in which feelings can in themselves inspire one to what appear to be incipient actions or insights. It makes it possible for these writers to ask what it would mean to see feelings as productive or important in their own right. These writers seem to notice and take seriously the crucial role emotional experiences seem to play, in so many of the philosophical and political theories that surround them, as not merely mediators of political or philosophical knowledge but a new source from which modernist thinkers try to derive knowledge about society and the self. They draw attention to the high degree to which feelings implicitly become central to their society's self-understanding—to how much therefore hinges, philosophically and politically, on one's ability to discern and express which of one's feelings are most important to attend to, or to what ends these feelings should be put. By representing feelings in this fashion, the novelists and poets I study go against much of what we might believe to be the aims and scope of late modernist literature. They could thus be seen to represent an unnoticed strand of modernist poetry and fiction, inspiring one to look for similar approaches to affect among other modernist writers.

In a larger theoretical sense these poets and novelists could thus be seen as precursors of what later twentieth-century theory will describe as the turn to affect—a turn away from valuing and defining emotional states through their attachment to some predetermined subjects or objects, and toward emphasizing that their philosophical and political importance needs to be described and tested in their own right. Indeed, although I do not draw out these comparisons explicitly throughout my argument, one could easily find resonances between the qualities my chosen writers ascribe to emotional states and many of the principal qualities that contemporary affect theorists implicitly or explicitly ascribe to them. Sylvia Plath's and Wallace Stevens' representations of how a feeling might indecisively oscillate among many drastically different scopes and intensities of focus recall Sianne Ngai's contrasts among anxiety, animatedness, zaniness, and mere interest as shifting registers of how late twentieth-century Western societies are affected by their rapidly modernizing environment.[319] They also resonate with Heather Love's defense of melancholy feelings that make us think back on lost aspects of our past without focusing or making sense of them quite consistently or precisely.[320] F. Scott Fitzgerald's and Virginia Woolf's representations of feelings' portability—and their odd combination of resistance and malleability to such transpositions—recall Lauren Berlant's account of cruel optimism, or of Sianne Ngai's preoccupation with ambivalent or negative reactions such as disgust, envy, or cuteness.[321] Like Woolf and Fitzgerald, Ngai and Berlant both represent experiences in which an affective exchange with another person—or some affective attachment to this person—involve attempts to constrain or control the content of this exchange or attachment without the other person's consent or knowledge. Marcel Proust's and James Baldwin's representations of the way immersive feelings depend on and attach themselves to rooms resonate with work done by Philip Fisher as well as by historians of emotion such as Svetlana Boym, who see many of our social institutions and architectural conventions as attempts to at once acknowledge certain particularly unruly or troubling emotional states and to restrain them into some stable sense of proportion and order.[322] John Ashbery's representations of feelings as abundant wholes that seem rife with meaning despite—and indeed precisely because—of their dissociation from his speakers' immediate sensory contexts and personal histories, echo Brian Massumi's and Charles Altieri's

[319] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* and *Our Aesthetic Categories*.
[320] Love, *Feeling Backward*.
[321] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*; Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, *Our Aesthetic Categories*.
[322] Fisher, *Vehement Passions*; Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

insistence that affects open up new ways of putting together or parsing apart concepts and sensations.[323]

But unlike contemporary affect theorists, the poets and novelists I study doubt whether merely to assert these feelings' irreducibility to concepts or external environments is enough to make them also seem significant or productive in their own right. They explore qualities of feelings that make them seem promising as sources of insight or action, but also show how these very qualities constrain and blur these feelings' potential for relevance or productivity. Feelings appeal to their represented characters and speakers not because they open up a larger, richer sphere of experience, but because of their forgetfulness, blurriness, and foreshortenings. They appeal to these represented persons because they are able momentarily to make it seem as if some local and temporally bound sphere of real or imagined experience could potentially satisfy these persons as a complete, lived philosophy and world; because they make it seem as if these persons could convey their whole inner lives to others, or receive such an offering, through a trivial gesture; because they make it seem as if an insight such a represented person has about lunch should also be able instantly explain her relationship to their father and help her reinterpret Greek mythology. The poets and novelists I study represent not merely peaks of faith that their characters and speakers can have in their feelings, but also moments when these feelings' appeal erodes, expires, or overextends itself; moments when these characters are puzzled that a feeling could have held their attention, or forget about this feeling altogether. They study not merely moments when the insights produced by feelings do seem significant, but also the difficulty that their characters and speakers have even in telling such potentially important intervals of feeling apart from trivial ones.

Thus, while Ngai or Love see feelings' vacillations among different spans and scopes of attention a sign of their usefulness as sources of political subversion—and, also, as illuminating symptoms of the confusing nature of our contemporary systems of value—Plath and Stevens underline how difficult it is ever to find a standard by which these feelings could be described as precise, insightful, or accurate. While Ngai and Berlant perceive inconsistently empathic emotional reactions as representative symptoms of social antagonisms, Woolf and Fitzgerald wonder how one could tell what each such eroding, awkward feeling would have been supposed to convey in the first place—how one could tell if this feeling would deserve to be more deeply probed or understood, and how much harm is done if it is not. While Fisher and Boym imply that immersive feelings inspire us toward expanding and enriching the environment we live in, Proust and Baldwin emphasize that these feelings' inconsistent, local attachments to material spaces keep exposing how unruly and anticlimactically limited their philosophical or political aspirations are. While Massumi and Altieri claim that our abundant, if disconnected, affective states carry lasting insights about ourselves we would be wrong to discard, Ashbery focuses instead on the ease with which these feelings are discarded and forgotten after their brief, self-contained momentary appeal; on the difficulty of deciding to what use any of them could be productively put.

One way to frame the theoretical intervention my argument thus seeks to make is as follows: I want to highlight a contradiction between what I take to be these theorists' insights into the disconnectedness and unclear significance of affects and the rhetoric with which they frame these insights and interpret them. On the one hand, my argument highlights how much of current affect theory's fascination with affects, emotions, and feelings, already is a fascination with their inconsistency and unreliability. Affect theorists show that the affective states to which we devote daily attention are often comic, petty and minor; that they tend to be directed toward incongruent,

[323] Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*; Altieri, *Particulars of Rapture.*

paltry objects, and take them in only partially and without much self-consciousness; that they obscure or overdramatize common elements of our environments. I hope that on one level my work shows all the more why it is necessary to acknowledge—as do virtually all affect theorists, whatever their particular allegiances—that these are precisely the aspects of emotional experiences that need to be acknowledged and probed. But on the other hand, I want to suggest that the step these theorists take to then elevate such minor, imbalanced, or inarticulate feelings or affects to the status of aesthetic categories (in Ngai's terms), or of revealing and subversive symptoms of how our current socioeconomic conditions or our conscious conceptual frameworks constrain us, is contradictory. Such interpretative moves express a persistent hope for reliable affect-driven action or understanding that these theorists' very critical insights concurrently, repeatedly shatter. Affect theorists' emphases on the minorness, distortedness, shallowness, or incomplete articulacy or articulability of affects not only do not justify but positively undo the affirmations of feelings' inherent importance and insightfulness that these theorists claim to derive from their study of feeling.

Such strong affirmations of affects' inherent importance and productivity thus hinder continued developments in the very field they seem intended to stake out and to defend. The novelists and poets I examine show that the study of feeling can find a strong foothold in examining what happens to affects, and to the persons expressing them, when this expression is discovered to not always be consistently or predictably productive or insightful: what it means to try to define feelings' relationship to the political and the philosophical from a position in which it is never certain whether, and in what limited time and space, these feelings' scopes and intensity will find apparent confirmation in large truths about personal or social history or about social power structures, or in some interventions into them. These novelists and poets can help us think about disjointed echoes between important and trivial, productive and futile expressions of feelings—such as the echoes between Benjamin's eyebread and his larger philosophical claims—as paths toward defining what it is like to be a person whose sense of self hinges on the ongoing effects of one's self-expression and on one's inconsistent capacity to make this self-expression relevant to more than just one's own immediate subjective state; what kinds of philosophical or political insights and capacities such a person can aspire to or reach. Their writings show how limited a vocabulary we currently have, in our studies both of feeling and of politics and philosophy, for describing these disconnected affective echoes and resonances as part of what a philosophy and politics committed to individuals' self-expression needs to grapple with. They also showcase the intellectual price we pay if we skip over those questions through overgeneralizations or foreshortenings of what emotional experiences are like and what they lead us to think or to do; the way in which, in particular, avoiding these questions might obscure the role feelings and their expression can play in setting bounds for more or less local, more or less lasting, philosophical or political interventions—or in perpetuating these interventions beyond their seeming expiration point. These writers finally also make one wonder what it means to think of literary representations of emotional expression as, again, echoes but not direct reflections of or intervention into the way emotional states are made present in other realms and contexts of expression; as touchstones in our understanding of feelings not because they are accurate in representing our real emotional lives and their philosophical or political stakes, but because they showcase the ease with which emotions' lived contexts and stakes can be reimagined and reshaped in a way that can entirely change their apparent philosophical or political import.

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