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Spontaneous Form: Four Studies in Consciousness and Philosophical Fiction

By

Maya Kronfeld

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Doctor in  
Philosophy

in

Comparative Literature

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in Charge:

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Abstract

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by

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Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Judith Butler, Chair

“Spontaneous Form: Four Studies in Consciousness and Philosophical Fiction” rethinks modernist stream of consciousness narration and its precursors in light of a critical epistemology informed by David Hume, Immanuel Kant and William James. I trace an experimental literary counter-tradition from Victor Hugo and Edgar Allan Poe to Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison that parodies philosophical empiricism by foregrounding what Kant called the “spontaneity” of the mind – that dimension by which we actively construct our knowledge. Drawing my notion of spontaneity not from Kantian aesthetics but rather from an anti-psychologistic reading of Kant’s First Critique, I propose that formal structures of the mind are embedded in literary form. Against current trends in cognitive science-inspired treatments of the literary that regard full knowledge of “other minds” as an intellectual achievement for which fiction is a laboratory, “Spontaneous Form” argues that verbal art articulates an alternative imperative: that the presumption of exhaustive knowledge is something to be *unlearned*. Rather than seeing literature as merely a vehicle for the circulation of independently specifiable philosophical themes, I explore ways in which new categories for the mind can be theorized on the basis of imaginative discourse. Beyond literature, I pursue the ramifications of Kantian spontaneity for critical approaches to jazz improvisation.

The dissertation is divided into two philosophical moments. The first half describes first-person narrative strategies by Hugo and Poe in light of Hume’s critique of personal identity. The second half transitions from a Humean framework to a Kantian one, while drawing on Woolf’s *The Waves* and Morrison’s *Jazz* to move beyond extant philosophical accounts of spontaneous synthesis in the mind.

In the **Introduction**, “**William James, Sensation and the Precursors to the Stream of Thought**,” I recover the philosophical debates that motivated James to theorize the “stream of consciousness” as an explanatory construct later to be adapted for use by literary studies. I draw parallels between the “sensation tale” as a literary genre and its corresponding conceit of mental record-keeping to argue that the technique of stream of consciousness evolved out of a parodic engagement with untenable empiricist premises. The experimental, transnational countertradition that I recover for stream of consciousness literature is politically as well as philosophically significant: it begins with Hugo’s anti-death penalty tract, which is simultaneously a radically experimental work of narrative form. I argue in **Chapter 1**, “**The Parody of Introspection: Victor Hugo’s *Le dernier jour d’un condamné***” that the truth content of Hugo’s novella lies

precisely in its ironic failure to meet the documentarian criteria that it parodically marshals for itself through the conceit of the condemned man's recovered journal. While Hugo ironically models his narrative on an "intellectual autopsy" (*autopsie intellectuelle*) that cannot be completed, Edgar Allan Poe – in a transnational dialogue with Hugo for which I adduce new archival evidence – parodies philosophical discourse in a way that sheds light on reductive models of mind. I identify Henry Thomson's "Le Revenant," published in *Blackwood's Magazine*, as the Anglophone source text for Hugo's *Condamné*.

In **Chapter 2, "Poe's Minds and the Indispensability of Form,"** I read Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue" and the lesser-known "The Man That Was Used Up" as deadpan spoofs of empiricism, which very much like Hume, expose the impasses we arrive at by trying to dissect the mind into its component parts. Through extended readings of Hume on personal identity, I suggest that his mitigated skepticism is more difficult to grapple with, and potentially more devastating for Western Reason, than the associationist paradigms that have more comfortably entered the English canon. Tracing this tradition into twentieth-century modernism, I argue in **Chapter 3, "Woolf's Bundles: Hume and Literary Impressionism"** that Virginia Woolf exposes in Humean fashion the gaps that the atomistic picture of the mind is dotted with. Her fiction problematizes both the mind's descriptive continuity (the sequential course of thought) and its reflexive unity (the cohesion of the self at any given moment). Through readings of *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and *A Room of One's Own*, I show that Woolf's texts disclose productive gaps in experience which are filled in by subjectivity in ways that Hume had not envisioned. In fact, I suggest that Woolf's literary intervention into the philosophical problem of consciousness and its coherences produces something quite antithetical to the Humean notion of "fiction."

In **Chapter 4, "The Shapes My Brain Holds": Kantian Spontaneity and Woolf's *The Waves*,** I propose that Woolf's ambivalence about the sensory "atom" as a unit of mind makes her a "constructivist" impressionist, which is why this moment in modernism actually clarifies, in practice, some of the crucial questions at issue in the transition from Hume to Kant. But it is her later, most formally experimental work, *The Waves*, where she moves beyond what I call the "empiricist conceit" of naturalistic narration; and it is here that I take Woolf's work to be most Kantian (or at least working in the impasse between Hume and Kant). This chapter offers an extended stylistic analysis of *The Waves*, but also proposes a method for reading literature and philosophy together, through a Kantian notion of spontaneous cognitive form that is at once flexible and linked with the underpinnings of objective knowledge.

The **Interlude: "Jazz, Kant and the 'Spontaneous Compositions' of the Mind"** uses notions of spontaneity elaborated by James Baldwin, Gary Bartz, and others to propose provisional intersections of critical theory, analytic Kantianism and jazz studies. In **Chapter 5, Spontaneous Form: Toni Morrison's *Jazz* as a Theory of Knowledge** I position Morrison's novel *Jazz* as a rejoinder to critical quandaries about spontaneity through an examination of spontaneity's cognate term, improvisation. For Morrison in *Jazz*, drumming serves as the paradigm case for a cognitive act of synthesis that is gestured toward but never fully realized. Drumming in Morrison's novel – associated with the spontaneous action of a protest march – leads to new theorizations where rhythm figures neither as intellectualized activity nor as something unthinking or unthought. Her novel's "spontaneous compositions" upend clichéd, often racist reductions of spontaneity in popular culture, showing how jazz music undoes the binary opposition between having structure and being in the moment. Morrison's novel therefore

can be positioned as a key intervention both in the afterlife of Kantian spontaneity and in the problematic field of jazz criticism.

The **Epilogue** is a series of three short codas which take up the meta-theoretical implications of thinking philosophy, music and literature together, through readings of Horkheimer and Adorno, James Baldwin and René Wellek. Rather than conclusions, these are intended as indices for future research.

*“The mind is not complex enough to understand how complex it is.”*

For Amichai Kronfeld (1947-2005)

לעמיחי קרונפלד (ז"ל)

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## INTRODUCTION: WILLIAM JAMES, SENSATION AND THE PRECURSORS TO THE STREAM OF THOUGHT

*The horror of it for me is that I understand it all!*

--- Fyodor Dostoevsky, "A Gentle Creature"

Why not begin with sensation, as William James does in his landmark "Stream of Thought" chapter in the 1890 edition of his *Principles of Psychology*: "We now begin our study of the Mind from within. Most books start with sensations, as the simplest mental facts, and proceed synthetically, constructing each higher stage from those below it."<sup>1</sup> In beginning with sensation, however, James calls into question the very notion of a beginning. For to begin with sensation, as standard empiricist accounts ("most books") had done, is ironically already to have "abandoned the empirical method of investigation. No one ever had a simple sensation by itself."<sup>2</sup> Why does James think that the "simple sensation by itself" is contrary to observation? His criticism is not that there is no such phenomenon as simplicity. Rather, he argues, the experience of simplicity is itself a layered cognitive achievement: "Consciousness from our natal day is of a multiplicity of objects and relations, and what we call simple sensations are results of discriminative attention pushed often to a very high degree" (224). For James, the idea that the discriminative attention must be "pushed" in order to land on the experience of bare sense data already undermines the notion of simplicity. James responds to the "sensationalist" picture of complex experience "built up" out of simple units with an alternative developmental trajectory that begins not with complexity but with multiplicity – a primary state of affairs that can subsequently be arrested by a single-minded focus and resolved into what is simple (but not thereby fundamental).

Right at the outset of James' account of the "Stream of Thought," then, the primacy of sensation is usurped by a discussion of the "discriminative attention" that produces sensation as a unit of analysis in the first place. By suggesting that attention precedes sensation, James' critique disrupts the course of stepwise explanation. For James, the order of argumentation has been thrown into disarray by the order of experience, and what is basic from the point of view of apparent simplicity turns out not to be so fundamental after all. While these disjunctions and reversals in themselves may not undermine the aptness of sensation as a theoretical construction, the fact that discrimination sets conditions on the appearance of sensation is enough to cast doubt on the whole premise that one can understand consciousness by first understanding its constituent parts.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the process that James in a chapter on "Discrimination and Comparison" will characterize as the mental habit of "break[ing]" objects "asunder and reunite[ing] them" is itself situated within conscious life, yet analysis of this sort is not taken for

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<sup>1</sup> William James, "The Stream of Thought," in Vol. 1 of *Principles of Psychology* (New York: Dover, [1890] 1950), 224. The chapter was published two years later under the revised title, "The Stream of Consciousness" in *Psychology: The Briefer Course* (New York: Harper & Row, [1892] 1961).

<sup>2</sup> For an illuminating evaluation of the atomism of "simple impressions" underlying even the most self-critical forms of empiricism, see Barry Stroud, *Hume* (London, England: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), 9, 17-26, 236.

<sup>3</sup> James uses "discrimination" to mean roughly "analysis" but in so doing he also brings analysis qua theoretical tendency down to the level of everyday perception.

granted by him as the defining form that inquiry takes (487). Thus, it may be that what looks like a constituent “part” of consciousness is not part of consciousness at all. James’ emphasis on attention, discrimination and their roles in producing what may *ex post facto* appear as salient components of the stream means that there may be no one single or authoritative way to begin to give a theoretical account of that stream.

For William James in his chapter on the “Stream of Thought,” whatever it is that confounds the effort to determine hierarchical priorities of simple as opposed to complex mental structure also makes it difficult to know where to begin. At least for James, writing in a scientific medium that seems to be bending at the seams, the break with epistemological conventions is also simultaneously a break with rhetorical conventions. In the chapter on “Discrimination and Comparison,” which comes later in the *Principles*, James reiterates the problem of making a beginning and associates it with the failure of atomistic thinking to account for itself: “...since the elements with which the traditional associationism performs its constructions – ‘simple sensations,’ namely – are all products of discrimination carried to a high pitch, it seems as if we ought to discuss the subject of analytic attention and discrimination first” (487). The “high pitch” of analysis gets thematized – or we might go further and say parodied – by assuming a role *within* the stream of thought, rather than as an attitude of detachment assumed in order to represent or model it from a distance. The atomistic picture of consciousness as aggregate built up from smaller units itself seems to be falling apart.

One could very well ask, why is it a problem if a “high pitch of discrimination” is required in order to arrive at what is fundamental to the phenomenon at hand? It is problematic, we can answer with James, only if one presupposes that units of analysis are in fact fundamental. This problematic presupposition, it turns out, deeply pervades American thought. Yet despite the fame of James’ *Principles of Psychology* and his “stream of consciousness” in particular, his critique of fundamental units remains to be fully acknowledged even in contemporary discourse.<sup>4</sup>

To be sure, it is a commonplace of scientific explanation that it requires a great deal of effort to arrive at what is considered fundamental to a given phenomenon. Within that explanatory framework, it may very well be the case that what is fundamental to consciousness is not immediately accessible to consciousness. I do not take up here the question of whether James puts forward valid arguments against sensationalism. Rather, I emphasize the workings of irony in James’ text resulting from his emphasis on experience; or, to put it differently, the overturning of fixed relations between center and periphery that takes place in his philosophical explications of experience. There are times when James’ account of the “Stream of Thought” feels as if it is caught between the dual aims of being answerable to the qualitative character of experience and describing it objectively. Later in the chapter, James will lament the difficulty of investigating the more fleeting aspects of thought: “Let anyone try to cut a thought across in the middle and get a look at its section...” In another passage, James likens introspection to “trying to turn up

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<sup>4</sup> In her recent historical study of the United States, Jill Lepore deftly characterizes a tacit epistemology that by the 1920s had become firmly entrenched in the United States, yet remained traceable back to the “deep empiricism” of the founding fathers: it was “as if knowledge could be reduced to units, like parts on an assembly line.” But Lepore herself, commenting in a recent lecture on her own methodology, leaves this very same “deep empiricism” unchallenged, stating at the outset of her own historical exposition, “my claim is that knowledge is reducible to fundamental units, but the unit changes over time.” Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States* (New York: Norton, 2018), 412; Jill Lepore, “The End of Knowledge: From Facts to Data.” Avenali Lecture, UC Berkeley, February 19, 2020.

the gas quickly enough to see how the darkness looks” (244). Whether thought is construed as illumination or dissection, both of these very different metaphors imagine thought as modifying itself in the course of self-investigation. How to describe experience in objective terms without violating its qualitative character? To meet these new requirements of what it could possibly mean to understand how thought works, objective knowledge must exceed its usual form: In pursuing epistemic objectivity, the scientist of the mind gets further away from description; in pursuing descriptions, he gets further and further away from objectivity.

In the following two chapters, I explore how this central irony of scientific description was exploited and elaborated in the medium of fiction, one half-century before the notion of the stream of consciousness was consolidated either as philosophical notion or as a modernist literary practice. What does this suggest about the fictional forms that philosophical ideas can take? How does fiction arrive as philosophy? What about the mind does fiction know? Interestingly, William James’ notion of the stream of consciousness, unlike the fictional experiments that I address in this study, may be accused of harboring an implicit notion of transparency, since he does not problematize the question of what is or is not taken up by the stream. This suggests that the philosophical metaphor of consciousness as “stream” that is routinely credited as driving the literary innovation may be ultimately inadequate to the notions of mental form that the experiments by Victor Hugo, Edgar Allan Poe, Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison can help us to theorize.

## 1. THE SENSATION TALE AND THE STATEMENT OF EXPERIENCE

What if the technique of stream of consciousness evolved out of its opposite, a nightmarish and farcical presentation of consciousness in atomistic terms? A tradition that associates, like Dostoevsky’s speaker in the epigraph to this chapter, “horror” not with mystery but rather with the capacity to “understand” completely? In what follows, I examine precursors to the *monologue intérieur* that are simultaneously occupied with terror and parody. These first-person fictional experiments privilege the workings of consciousness while at the same time producing haunting parodies of empirical record-keeping. Before moving on to readings of Victor Hugo and Edgar Allan Poe, I begin with a discussion of the *Blackwood’s Magazine’s* “Sensation Tale,” the transnational commercial genre whose philosophical premises both Hugo and Poe pushed to even more extreme parodic ends.

Founded in 1817, Scotland’s *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* became famous for the genre of terror fiction, or burlesque, depending on whom you ask. Either way, it “laid the groundwork for the emergence of the modern short story as an internationally significant form.”<sup>5</sup> According to another critic, *Blackwood’s* “became a shorthand for a type of story which concentrated on the state of consciousness of a suffering individual in a death-bed, death-cell or similarly *in extremis*.”<sup>6</sup> This thematic preoccupation makes the genre’s relevance for what will become modernist stream of consciousness quite clear: ironically, the limit-experience becomes

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<sup>5</sup> See *Romanticism and Blackwood’s Magazine: “An Unprecedented Phenomenon,”* eds. Robert Morrison and Daniel S. Roberts (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). Morrison and Roberts cite “Nikolai Gogol, Aleksandr Pushkin, Honoré de Balzac, Prosper Mérimée, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and of course Edgar Allan Poe, who emulated, parodied, and reworked *Blackwood’s* tales throughout his career” (6).

<sup>6</sup> Peter Denman, *Samuel Ferguson: The Literary Achievement*. Irish Literary Studies (Gerrards Cross, UK: Smythe, 1990), 51.

an experimental ground for the investigation of consciousness proper. What has received less critical attention, however, is the way the *Blackwood's* tale intensifies philosophical premises leftover from the seventeenth century – and in particular, the fact that the genre emerges out of an uncritical empiricist conceit: that experience is built up out of discrete units or “sensations” whose existence is made indubitable by first-person report.<sup>7</sup> It seems that philosophy has arrived as fiction in these early, problematic experiments. From a literary point of view, this atomism has its stylistic correlate in the conceit of a diary or record (often medical) which logs the discrete times at which different sensations occur. The correlation of these fictional sensations with time markings helps to produce out of subjective experience the semblance of quantifiable knowledge, but also, I argue, to produce this distortion of the first-person point of view as a self-conscious absurdity. The sensation tale purports to identify the moment of experience with the moment of narration, feigning a simultaneity between the two. In this way the genre points up the incommensurability between the building blocks of sensation and the forms of thought by which they become articulate.

Indeed, in a problematic that endures quite far into the twentieth century, the “sensationalist” program names a philosophical school that “turns experience into statement” without, however, staging the problem of translation or mediation that this might involve.<sup>8</sup> If one is “merely recording,” then one doesn’t have to think about the way that the form of narration organizes or shapes the material. As “basic facts,” simple sensations and their descriptions do not depend on the hierarchical relations of center and periphery, high relevance and low relevance, to be reconsidered – and yet the fictional texts that I examine here display precisely such considerations. I aim to show, indeed, that the sensation tale pulls the rug out from under its own empiricist premises: *it thinks beyond sensation*, and in this way foregrounds on its surface precisely the problem of form that it purports to dismiss. The empiricist conceit of transparency is thus transformed or called into question by its own textual elaboration. What follows, then, is not just a reading of these particular works of fiction but a proposal for how aesthetic forms lay bare the mind as a form – to which no atomic or combinatorial model of prior elements will be adequate.

## 2. THE INDISPENSABILITY OF FORM AND THE CRITIQUE OF VERISIMILITUDE

In his recent book, *Empiricism and the Early Theory of the Novel*, Roger Maioli points out that much of what came to be known as British empiricism resists the idea that knowledge claims can be made on behalf of imaginative fiction. From Bacon onward, many in this tradition were skeptical that “narratives can be suitable replacements...for the observation of nature.”<sup>9</sup> In an important article exposing the dissonance between empiricist methods and the knowledge

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<sup>7</sup> For a cogent critique of empiricist presuppositions as they continued to influence scientific explanation in the twentieth century, see Peter Alexander’s 1964 monograph *Sensationalism and Scientific Explanation* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964). Alexander writes: “The sensationalist hope is that statements which *merely record* those experiences about whose character we cannot be mistaken will be incorrigible, and ‘incorrigible’ must mean, at least, that no one can be in a position to correct them” (40).

<sup>8</sup> Alexander, *Sensationalism*, 42.

<sup>9</sup> Roger Maioli, *Empiricism and the Early Theory of the Novel: Fielding to Austen*. Palgrave Studies in the Enlightenment, Romanticism and Cultures of Print (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), x.

claims of literature, Maioli points out that “the history of empiricism has been marked by frequent resistance to the idea that literature can speak the language of truth.”<sup>10</sup> Shedding light on a lesser-celebrated aspect of David Hume’s corpus, Maioli importantly emphasizes “Hume’s reservations regarding the novel’s cognitive value” (626). According to Maioli, there was a tendency among novelists during the heyday of British Empiricism to accept empiricist philosophy as authoritative. Furthermore, he argues, this tendency ran counter to trends in Romantic poetry: “The Romantic poets denied empiricism’s authority to decide on matters of knowledge, whereas novelists who accepted that authority either professed to be mere entertainers or tried to bring the novel into alignment with the epistemology of the day.”<sup>11</sup> But, I would venture to suggest, there is more than a little associationist empiricism in Romantic poetry (Coleridge), and there is plenty of parodically lampooned empiricism to be found in the eighteenth-century novel (Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* anticipates virtually all of the formal problems and ironies that I sketch out here in the context of the nineteenth century).<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Catherine Gallagher’s analysis of what she terms the “Rise of Fictionality” gives reason to question the assumption that the early novel was totally straitjacketed by the philosophical constraints of empiricism. She correlates the advent of novelistic fiction in the modern sense with a change in the eighteenth-century novel from “credible prose narratives” to a new form of discourse where the “global suspension of truth claims... would make lying impossible.”<sup>13</sup> Gallagher does not take up the problematics of empiricism explicitly, but her analysis does challenge the assumption that early novels were merely made to compete with contemporary epistemic paradigms. Calling into question Ian Watt’s and others’ emphasis on the cultural ideologies (including empiricism) that shaped the eighteenth-century novel into a new mode of “fiction,” Gallagher writes: “We have just been observing, though, that early novels stressed their departure from plausible narratives with referential assumptions, not from improbable fantasies” (345). What concerns me here most of all is the possibility that novels can have epistemological value while simultaneously “doing” knowledge *differently* from the way that empiricist models prescribe. But this possibility is not even entertained by most recent studies of empiricism and the novel that claim the philosophy of mind as their focus. Current trends in cognitive science-inspired treatments of the literary are mostly restricted by their own exclusive focus on mental *content*, without engaging the underlying philosophical assumptions from which such a picture of mental life emerges. That picture, as I will go on to show, neglects equally literary form and what Kant called the “form of the mind,” and does so for interrelated reasons. For Jonathan Kramnick and others working in this scholarly idiom, the characteristic way that novels participate in the philosophy of mind is through their shared object of inquiry: “Mental content (of one’s own and others) was an intense concern for the period that developed both the representational theory of mind and the literary genre in which the theory is most fully explored.”<sup>14</sup> While I don’t dispute that the mind was an intense concern for many eighteenth-century thinkers and novelists, I am concerned with the metonymic elision by which, on the

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<sup>10</sup> Roger Maioli, “David Hume, Literary Cognitivism and the Truth of the Novel,” *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 54, no. 3 (Summer 2014), 624.

<sup>11</sup> Maioli, *Empiricism*, 1.

<sup>12</sup> I thank C.D. Blanton for elucidating the continuity with Sterne.

<sup>13</sup> Catherine Gallagher, “The Rise of Fictionality,” in *The Novel: History, Geography and Culture*, ed. Franco Moretti, Vol.1 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 336-63.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Kramnick, “Empiricism, Cognitive Science and the Novel,” *The Eighteenth Century* 48, no. 3 (Fall 2007), 274.



empiricist account, “mental content” comes to stand for the mental as such. Concomitantly, exclusive focus on mental content tends to emphasize thematic readings of fiction.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, Kramnick’s study, with its references to “empiricism’s attention to the cognitive” (274) could lead a reader to believe that empiricism was the only philosophical program to make consciousness its object of study:

Among other things, eighteenth-century fiction is so much writing about the mind: about how thoughts represent things, cause other thoughts to happen, or lead to actions. The same might be said for empiricism. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophy paid unusual attention to the content of minds and the nature of ideas, to ‘human understanding’ as Locke and Hume put it. (263)

It goes without saying that non-empiricist or anti-empiricist philosophy from the same period (Descartes to Kant) is also interested in the mind. What *is* true is that our contemporary notion of the “cognitive” (unlike Hume’s) tends to uncritically accept the premises of empiricism wholesale – most notably, by foregrounding “mental content” (like James’ “simple sensations”) without attention to the processes by which these “contents” are shaped, organized and synthesized by the mind. Even when Kramnick launches compelling critiques of contemporary “theory of mind,” the question of whether the central premises of empiricism are correct is never posed (275-76).

For Maioli, writing also in a cognitive science-inspired vein, the analogy between philosophy and literature works as follows: “Like empiricism, the novel sought to collect, organize, and make sense of the data of sensory experience.” But the mind’s capacity to “collect, organize, and make sense of the data of sensory experience,” which, following Kant, I will refer to in later chapters as “spontaneity,” is exactly what a strictly empiricist picture denies. Thus, while I agree with Maioli’s treatment of novelistic knowing as akin to philosophical knowledge production, I think that by acknowledging that the production of knowledge involves collection, organization, and “making sense,” Maioli’s analysis quite perspicaciously shows that the very operation of empiricism cannot be accounted for on a strictly empiricist picture.

Those moments where fiction misaligns with the premises of empiricism are best noticed through reading methods other than the ones that empiricism prescribes. If fiction working within an intellectual climate of empiricism “fails” the criterion of information-gathering that Maioli and other critics bring into view so clearly, it may be because those works force us to reconsider the premises of verisimilitude to begin with. The picture of inner life as mere copy or “impression” of the outer world, then, may be linked with the disqualification of artistic representation. Yet, to quote the modernist adage which Nelson Goodman uses as an epigraph to *Languages of Art*, art should not be “a copy of the real world; one of the damn things is quite enough.”<sup>16</sup> Goodman states that this adage is “reported as occurring in an essay on Virginia Woolf,” but adds that “I have been unable to locate the source.” Goodman is one of the only

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<sup>15</sup> See Kramnick’s reading of Catherine Trotter’s *The Adventures of a Young Lady*, a work of fiction by one of Locke’s earliest philosophical interlocutors. Trotter is an underread woman philosopher and novelist whose fiction Kramnick reads alongside Locke’s philosophical work. Kramnick’s work here combats not only false hierarchies of gender, but also hierarchies that position literature as secondary in epistemological value to philosophy. Kramnick, “Empiricism,” 272.

<sup>16</sup> Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1968), 3.

scholars to have recruited Woolf for a critique of empiricist methods which I believe Woolf really does deserve credit for; but, ironically, he got the quotation wrong. The author is the British novelist and essayist Rebecca West, and it is an essay about Joyce, not Woolf.<sup>17</sup> Here's what she actually wrote: "A copy of the universe is not what is required of art; one of the damned things is ample."<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps one reason why West's original observation was forgotten is that it complicates the linear trajectory from nineteenth-century realism and naturalism to its modernist rebellions. In her 1928 essay "The Strange Necessity," West criticizes the realist motivation for naturalistic fullness that persists into the modernist depictions of interiority by flipping it from outside to inside, while still maintaining the pretense of full report – for example, a full record of every minute of the day and night in the protagonist's life. In West's provocative essay, *Ulysses* continues the Victorian obsession with realistic detail: "Mr. Joyce's admirers lay stress on the fact that *Ulysses* tells the whole story of twenty-four hours in the life of Leopold Bloom...but this is not a new aesthetic" (30). West's criticism of a verisimilitude that is merely turned inward suggests that modernist aesthetics continues to require this kind of reckoning with what I am calling the empiricist conceit of transparent transcription. However, contra West, I argue that not only does textual mediation postdate and contest the immediacy of sensation, but consciousness itself emerges as a site of mediation. In its resistance to this atomistic moment in intellectual history, consciousness itself functions as something analogous to an aesthetic rejoinder to empirical data. This is true even in the nineteenth-century precursors to stream of consciousness fiction.

Indeed, if knowledge is an interaction of two structures —the knowing consciousness with its material — then the narrator of the sensation tale ironically negates his own experience in the very process of narrating it, by purporting to add nothing to what he senses.<sup>19</sup> The empirical conceit of sense-data is belied by the consciousness that organizes and translates it, sometimes to comic effect. At the same time, the narration of consciousness as "autonomous" pushes back against the scientific pretension to know exhaustively both other minds and one's own.

The next two chapters examine experimental fiction by Victor Hugo and Edgar Allan Poe. I regard Hugo's *Le dernier jour d'un condamné* and Poe's tales of ratiocination and sensation as linked formally by the problems of consciousness that they work out, but also as linked intertextually through a transnational network of circulation that deserves more attention. Hugo and Poe's first-person narrative strategies submit a variety of philosophical accounts of consciousness to satirical treatment. These are fictional attempts to think through what it means to take propositional modes of knowing too far, by dramatizing moments when logic encroaches on the domain of subjectivity.

My sense is that Hugo and Poe, precisely because they do *not* conform to the later high modernist models of stream of consciousness per se, preemptively engage the central philosophical dilemmas that would motivate William James fifty years later to reintroduce into Anglophone philosophy the "stream" as a dominant metaphor for consciousness, as we've seen. I read Hugo's and Poe's fiction, as precursors to and even proleptic critiques of the notion of

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<sup>17</sup> C.D. Blanton helped me locate this reference, enabling me to break with this tradition of misquotation.

<sup>18</sup> Rebecca West, "The Strange Necessity," in *The Strange Necessity: Essays and Reviews* (London: J. Cape, 1931), 131.

<sup>19</sup> See Wallace Stevens' modernist gloss on the romantic imagination: "Like light, it adds nothing, except itself." Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel* (New York: Random House, 1951), 61.

“stream of consciousness” that James would elaborate. Hugo’s and Poe’s ironic, fictional reappraisals of what it means to provide a “record of consciousness” are particularly suited to the problematic interplay of narration and introspection that James later on re-inscribes both explicitly and implicitly into a philosophical, “assertive” tradition. It may be possible to sketch an alternative literary history by foregrounding fiction’s engagement with the philosophical issues that would motivate James to theorize the stream in the first place. As governing metaphor, the “stream of consciousness” may be most salient philosophically in terms of the models of the mind that it was meant to refute.

## CHAPTER 1: THE PARODY OF INTROSPECTION: VICTOR HUGO'S *LE DERNIER JOUR D'UN CONDAMNÉ*

A case study in the mutual implications of abolitionist politics and aesthetic experimentation, Victor Hugo's 1829 anti-death penalty novella *Le dernier jour d'un condamné* (*The Last Day of a Condemned Man*) inaugurates the genre of *journal intime*, the pseudo-diary, as a literary form. The novella interrogates anew the traditional relation between mind and body – a relation whose precariousness the technology of the guillotine lays bare by literally separating *esprit* from *corps*.<sup>20</sup> With its “intellectual autopsy” (*autopsie intellectuelle*) of a condemned man, the novella simultaneously fictionalizes and politicizes a longstanding philosophical tradition of first-person introspection that exceeds the conventional terms of the morbidly popular “record of sensation” genre with which both Hugo – and, as we shall see in Chapter 2, Edgar Allan Poe – were in dialogue. Alone with his thoughts, the condemned man's total isolation and his confrontation with death occasion a serialized first-person meditation that explores the *a priori* limits of “pure” consciousness, while simultaneously bringing to the fore the contingent (and yet no less final) limits of political reality and the material conditions of the prison system. The narrator's tortured first-person account reveals that consciousness is necessarily distorted by the very pretension of its empirically faithful rendering. It also suggests that the perceived “autonomy” of the mind as fact and as literary form is itself deeply contextual, and linked with violence. Hugo's abolitionist agenda is constituted by a formal structure that identifies the limits of narration with the limits of sensation – in short, by that which cannot be merely paraphrased as philosophical or political argument.

Hugo's anti-death penalty novella and radical experiment in first-person narration sets a precedent for twentieth-century stream of consciousness writing – but does so as a parodic critique of the unattainable criterion of direct experience. While the canonicity of this work has been recognized internationally as were its key innovations in the writing of consciousness, it is now lesser known in English.<sup>21</sup> But in the nineteenth century, the crucial importance of *Le dernier jour* for transnational traditions of “consciousness fiction” was evident. Take, for example, Fyodor Dostoevsky's critical assessment of the work. He cites Hugo's then-innovative use of the *journal intime* as a precedent for his own narrative practices. In Dostoevsky's estimation of Hugo, the “illusion of inner discourse without narratorial mediation” is proven to be “fantastic.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> I am deeply indebted to Suzanne Guerlac for her critical perspectives on Victor Hugo and *Le dernier jour* in particular, developed in a series of seminars as well as in her “Phantom Rights: Conversations Across the Abyss (Hugo, Blanchot),” *Diacritics* 30, no.2 (2000): 73-89.

<sup>21</sup> The two most recent English-language editions have been framed paratextually by contemporary anti-death penalty activists. The 2009 Dover Edition has a foreword by activist David Dow, and the 2002 Hesperus edition has an afterword by the Director of Amnesty International UK. *The Last Day of a Condemned Man*, trans. Geoff Woollen (London:Hesperus Classics, 2002); *The Last Day of a Condemned Man*, trans. Arabella Ward, with a new Foreword by David Dow (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> Vladamir Turmanov, *Mind Reading: Unframed Interior Monologue in European Fiction* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1997), 32.

## 1. FANTASTICAL TRANSCRIPTIONS: DOSTOEVSKY ON HUGO

Dostoevsky's 1876 preface to his "A Gentle Creature: A Fantastic Story" became later on an important document in the transnational history and theory of *monologue intérieur* as experimental form. Despite the story's subtitle, the plot of "A Gentle Creature" is quite realistic: the character-narrator is standing over the body of his wife who has just committed suicide, and he is trying to make sense of what has happened. The story begins not only *in medias res*, but with an ellipsis:

...So as long as she's here, everything's still all right: I can go over and look at her any time; but tomorrow they'll be taking her away and how on earth will I manage on my own? At the moment she's in the room on a table, two card-tables put together, but tomorrow the coffin arrives, white, white *gros de Naples*, still, where was I...I keep pacing about trying to make sense of all this.<sup>23</sup>

Given the narrator's state, the fragmentary syntax is realistically motivated, in Viktor Shklovsky's terms.<sup>24</sup> So why the subtitle "A Fantastic Story," if nothing fantastic happens? In his preface, Dostoevsky explains:

Now as to the story itself. I have entitled it "fantastic," though I personally regard it as being extremely realistic. Nevertheless, there is an element of the fantastic here, embodied in the form of the narrative itself, which I feel it necessary to explain in advance. (59)

Dostoevsky goes on to use a striking image to lay bare the unreal pretension of displaying inner thought with perfect, up-to-the-minute legibility:

If a stenographer could have overheard him and taken notes as he spoke, the result might have been somewhat rougher and less polished than I have here presented it, but I do believe that the psychological sequence would remain one and the same. It is this notion of a supposed stenographer noting everything down (to be subsequently polished by me), that I term fantastic in this tale. (60)

Thus, the story itself is not fantastical; its mode of presentation is. Furthermore, what is fantastical for Dostoevsky in the context of his tragic story is the pretense to understand or control the vertiginous psychological sequences of grief as fully legible. The character-narrator comments on his own storytelling: "The thing is, I keep pacing about...This is how it was. I will simply tell it in order. (Order!)" (61). Calling his own feelings to order, the narrator's parenthetical aside both calls attention to and ironically enacts the gulf between the chaotic simultaneity of experience and its sequential narrativization. Dostoevsky's imaginary stenographer exposes the elaborate scaffolding out of which writers construct the semblance of

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<sup>23</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *A Gentle Creature and Other Stories*, trans. Alan Meyers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 61.

<sup>24</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, "The Novel as Parody: Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*," in *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Elmwood, IL: Dalkey Archive, 1991), 147-70.

(what would come to be known as) a “stream” of consciousness. The artifice lies in the notion that writing could take place at the speed of thought, an idea whose inner contradictions Stendhal was already exploring at the turn of the nineteenth century.<sup>25</sup> The metaphor of stenography allows Dostoevsky to expose the incommensurability that first-person narration *fantastically* holds together in the service of realism: between experience and objective record, between absorption and detachment.<sup>26</sup>

It might, of course, be argued that, in keeping with the most radical and self-critical modes of scientific empiricism, observation is still everything – that it is only a matter of getting the right instruments. Interesting to note that when Dostoevsky wrote the preface to “A Gentle Creature,” he was married to a professional stenographer, Anna Dostoevsky (née Snitkina), with whose collaboration he had been able to complete *The Gambler* at a time when he was in desperate straits.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, a “high-tech radical innovation” that had only recently become

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<sup>25</sup> Stendhal, in his juvenilia, entertains virtually the same metaphor for realism, seventy years before Dostoevsky: “On pense beaucoup plus vite qu’on ne parle” (One thinks much faster than one speaks). For Stendhal, satisfying our interest in “le naturel” or in the “comédie naturelle” would require not just one hypothetical stenographer but a whole concatenation of hypotheticals. His fantasy of describing exhaustively his characters’ inner states begins to come apart as it would for Dostoevsky, for to create a naturalism of thought and feeling requires three fantastical “suppositions”: a) an impossibly accelerated form of speech, b) “a stenographer” who works twenty four hours a day without interruption, shadowing the character, and is spoken to quietly so as not to be overheard, c) an editor who can translate from the stenographer’s notes to an “écriture vulgaire”:

Supposons qu’un homme pût parler aussi vite qu’il pense et sent, que cet homme une journée entière prononçât de manière à n’être entendu que d’un seul homme tout ce qu’il pense et sent, qu’il y eût, cette même journée, toujours à côté de lui un sténographe invisible qui pût écrire aussi que le premier penserait et parlerait. Supposons que le sténographe, après avoir noté toutes les pensées et sentiments de notre homme, nous les traduisît le lendemain en écriture vulgaire, nous aurions un caractère peint pendant un jour aussi ressemblant que possible.

Stendhal concludes: “Donc un caractère ne peut être représenté exactement comme il est.” Stendhal, Vol. 1 of *Pensées: Filosofia Nova* (Paris: Le Divan), 124.

<sup>26</sup> Though I cannot enter into it here, my thinking draws on Akeel Bilgrami’s distinction between two different perspectives or stances that the self can take up in relation to itself. The distinction has roots in Spinoza. See Akeel Bilgrami, *Self-Knowledge and Resentment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>27</sup> The story of how Dostoevsky was saved from dire financial straits by the professional stenographer who became his wife, is well known. Describing the writer’s financial desperation and effort to meet an unrealistic deadline for *The Gambler*, Hugh Aplin writes:

His friend, the writer Alexander Milyukov, on hearing the sad story, suggested that a few of his fellow writers should pool their efforts and write a chapter or so each...Dostoevsky declined, saying that he wouldn’t put his name under anything he hadn’t written himself. Milyukov then came up with the idea of using a stenographer. It was thus that the twenty-year-old Anna Grigoryevna Snitkina, who by chance had just recently completed a course in the new-fangled (for Russia, at all events) skill of stenography, came on the scene. They started work on 4<sup>th</sup> October 1866, and on 30<sup>th</sup> October the manuscript was ready for delivery, the deadline being midnight.

popular in the 1860s in Russia, stenography “allowed the written word to keep pace with speech and accurately record it.”<sup>28</sup> But the literary tradition that I am tracing here suggests, even with the stenographic conceit, that the technological appendage does not suffice to resolve the quandary of a complete narrative account of the mind’s workings. For Dostoevsky identifies first-person narration *itself* not merely with technological mediation but also with the *fantastic*—as opposed to the realist—mode in fiction. Finally, it is not just a matter of imagining the right instruments for rendering consciousness; rather, the tools need to be imaginary in order to work at all.

Dostoevsky continues his account of the stenographic conceit as a “fantastic” mode by citing Hugo:

But something of the sort has been permitted in art more than once before now: Victor Hugo for example, in his masterpiece *Le dernier jour d’un condamné*, employed virtually the same device, and although he did not use a stenographer to be sure, he allowed himself a still greater implausibility in assuming that a condemned man would be able (and have the time) to make notes, not only on his last day, but even during his last hour, and quite literally his final moment. Still, on the other hand, had he not allowed himself this flight of fancy, the work itself—the most realistic and truthful of any that he wrote—would not now exist.<sup>29</sup>

Dostoevsky captures an insight that may not have been fully internalized in Hugo’s Anglophone reception, where the “implausibility” of the narrative scheme is typically interpreted as a tear in the fabric of verisimilitude, instead of an interrogation of empiricist criteria.<sup>30</sup> Rather than presenting the narration of consciousness as naturalistic verisimilitude turned inward, an experimental literary countertradition that begins with Dostoevsky’s Hugo would thus parody the illusion of complete knowledge of the mind. The rupture in the fabric of verisimilitude perpetrated by the “improbable” conceit of the *journal intime* is perhaps a source of irony that ought to be taken a bit more seriously. Indeed, first-person verbal reports shape the experiences that they describe. To narrate thought is also to create it.

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Hugh Aplin, “Dostoevsky’s Life,” in Dostoevsky, *The Gambler* (London: Alma Classics, 2006), 186.

<sup>28</sup> Lovell Stephen, “Stenography and the Public Sphere in Modern Russia,” *Cahiers du monde russe* 56, no. 2 (2015): 291.

<sup>29</sup> Dostoevsky, *A Gentle Creature*, 60.

<sup>30</sup> In *Transparent Minds*, Dorrit Cohn traces a complicated literary historiography that moves from the personal diary or *journal intime* to the interior monologue, with Dostoevsky’s “A Gentle Creature” as a point of transition from the semblance of a written record to the semblance of pure thought. Tracing a tradition of poetics (going back to Richardson and others) that valorizes “instantaneous descriptions and reflections,” “immediate impression of every circumstance,” and “writing to the minute,” Cohn focuses on the “improbability” proper to Hugo’s and Poe’s devices of “fictional diaries with closely spaced entries.” In both Hugo’s *Le dernier jour* and Poe’s “MS in a Bottle,” she identifies a “serious...but inadvertently comic attempt to synchronize narration and experience.” Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), 209-11.

## 2. *LE DERNIER JOUR*: THE SEMBLANCE OF CONTEMPORANEITY

With its self-analysis and its in-the-now empirical enumeration of physiological symptoms that are tied to a particular time mark, section 38 of *Le dernier jour* opens in a manner which certainly seems to confirm empirical models of self-observation, verisimilitude turned inward:

XXXVIII.

Il est une heure et quart.

Voici ce que j'éprouve maintenant :

Une violente douleur de tête. Les reins froids, le front brûlant. Chaque fois que je me lève ou que je me penche, il me semble qu'il y a un liquide qui flotte dans mon cerveau, et qui fait battre ma cervelle contre les parois du crâne.

J'ai des tressaillements convulsifs, et de temps en temps la plume tombe de mes mains comme par une secousse galvanique.<sup>31</sup>

XXXVIII.

It is a quarter past one.

The following are my sensations at present:

A violent pain in my head, my frame chilled, my forehead burning.

Every time that I rise, or bend forward, it seems to me that there is a fluid floating in my head, which makes my brain beat violently against the bone.

I have convulsive tremblings, and from time to time my pen falls from my hand as if by a galvanic shock.<sup>32</sup>

Passages like these, so the novella's fictional conceit goes, were written by the condemned man on yellowed pages but later assembled by a fictional "editor," a figure that anticipates Dostoevsky's "stenographer" but also goes much further back in literary history. It is a fantasy of writing that is "of" the moment which it describes. Earlier in the novella, the condemned man self-consciously calls his own writing project an "autopsie intellectuelle d'un condamné," a fictionalized epistemic project of self-dissection which seems on the surface to achieve the same kind of precision as the time markings that occasionally frame the condemned man's journal, as they do in this passage. And yet Hugo's metaphor of an "intellectual autopsy" already suggests that the type of analysis employed is linked with the imposed death sentence; as if the mode of narration itself, while first-person and present-tense, nevertheless anticipates the narrator's death. But what sort of situation produces this guise of objectivity? What would it mean to retrospectively retheorize stream of consciousness writing from the standpoint of an auto-post-mortem of an incarcerated man?

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<sup>31</sup> Victor Hugo, *Le dernier jour d'un condamné*, Claude Gueux (Paris: Larousse, 2002), 193.

<sup>32</sup> Victor Hugo, *The Last Day of a Condemned Man*; Claude Gueux, trans. Eugenia de B., vol. 28 of *The Novels Complete and Unabridged of Victor Hugo* (New York: George and Richmond, 1894), 61.



Göran Blix studies Hugo's novella in the context of other nineteenth century French prison fiction by Michelet and Dumas, highlighting in all three cases the discursive conceit of the meticulous written record and its political connotations. "The necessity of preserving an impeccable but secret record," he writes, is a function of the "close but polar relation between power and prisoner." Indeed, the "faithful recording device" paradoxically, and with bitter hypocrisy, exempts sovereign power from having to acknowledge its coercive use of the prison as an institutionalized mechanism of relegating people to oblivion. The prison as a "mechanism of forgetting" is sharply ironized by the counterposed device of exhaustive report.<sup>33</sup>

Hugo's radical experimental form of moment-to-moment narration suggests multiple analogies between the narratological and the political dimensions of the novella. Indeed, for Hugo, the seeming autonomy of the mind on the page emerges from a deeply context-saturated scenario. In a letter dated 3 January 1829, Hugo wrote to his editor, "il importe de mettre vite *le Condamné* sous presse, si vous voulez qu'il paraisse avant la Chambre, ce qui est de la plus haute importance."<sup>34</sup> (It's imperative to publish *The Condemned Man* right away, if you want it to appear before the Parliament meets [to discuss the matter of the death penalty]). Hugo conceived the novella as having an up-to-the-minute contemporaneity with respect to political debates in Paris about the death penalty.<sup>35</sup> Hugo's *journal intime* is not a psychologically insulated form but on the contrary, one that conveniently refracts his urgent emphasis on the political "now," on writing that is tethered indexically to the moment that produces it. Hugo emphasizes as much in his 1832 preface:

L'auteur a pris l'idée du *Dernier Jour d'un condamné*, non dans un livre, il n'a pas l'habitude d'aller chercher ses idées si loin, mais là où vous pouviez tous la prendre, ou vous l'avez prise peut-être (car qui n'a fait ou rêvé dans son esprit *le Dernier Jour d'un condamné* ?), tout bonnement sur la place publique, sur la place de Grève. C'est là qu'un jour en passant il a ramassé cette idée fatale, gigantesque dans une mare de sang sous les rouges moignons de la guillotine.<sup>36</sup>

The author found the idea of *The Last Day of a Condemned Man*, not in a book, for he is not accustomed to seek his ideas so far afield, but where you all might find it, where perhaps you may all have found it (for who is there that has not reflected and had reveries of *The Last Day of a Condemned Man*) there, on the

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<sup>33</sup> Göran Blix, "The Prison-House of Revolutionary Memory: The Politics of Oblivion in Michelet, Hugo, and Dumas," *French Forum* 32, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 39-64.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Frank Paul Bowman, "The Intertextuality of Victor Hugo's *Le Dernier jour d'un condamné*," in *Alteratives*, eds. Warren Motte and Gerald Prince (Lexington, Kentucky: French Forum, 1993), 37.

<sup>35</sup> In his 1832 preface to *Le dernier jour*, Hugo framed the novel's political urgency in terms of the death penalty debate (whose scope he found insufficient) that had just been stirred up in relation to the trial of Charles X's four ministers. In doing so Hugo drew criticism for tacking on the novel's abolitionist purpose only belatedly. However, the historical moment in which the novel was conceived just a few years earlier also provides its own political and aesthetic contexts. Indeed, as Sonja Hamilton confirms, "en fevrier 1829...la question de la peine de mort à l'égard des faux-monnayeurs est sur le point d'être discutée à la chambre des Pairs." One year earlier, in 1828, the fantastic story of a "faux-monnayeur" who had been condemned to death appeared in the French press and was linked to the immediate cultural context surrounding Hugo's novel. See Sonja Hamilton "Fantôme littéraire de Hugo: les lendemains du Dernier jour d'un condamné," *Paroles gelée* 19, no.2 (2001): 76.

<sup>36</sup>Hugo, *Le dernier jour*, 51.

public walk, on the *Place de Grève*. It is there while passing one day that he picked up this fatal idea, lying recumbent in a pool of blood under the red stumps of the guillotine.<sup>37</sup>

Consciousness and its panoply of modalities (ideas, reflections, reveries) are not vehicles of abstraction here, nor merely surrogates for proximity. Rather, the *idea* of the condemned man itself is something to be collected from the scene of social terror, so directly recuperable by metonymic links to the actual bloodied and dismembered corpses that thoughts and reflections take on the properties of their represented content (the *idée* itself lies recumbent in the pool of blood). The physical site of execution carries its bloody history, both immediate and more remote, as a fresh trace. Hugo alludes to the beheadings that are everyday punitive practices in the Paris of his day, but he also uses the Place de Grève to evoke a sedimented history of public execution going back to the middle ages.<sup>38</sup> He describes the “idea of the book” that he finds on the Place de Grève as a literally bloody or bleeding idea. It is as if the “*idée fatale*” (which Hugo recuperates and situates at the center of his condemned man’s consciousness) issues from the place of violence itself. It may seem uncharacteristic to find Hugo referring to the truths that are circulated by means of the printing press as being “*si loin*,” and for the most beloved French author of his time to defend one of his ideas by claiming that it was found “not in a book.” But the preface sets up a relationship between ideas and their occasion that is both answerable to the empiricist sensibilities of the day and marshals them in defense of a literary strategy – towards a vindication of ideas and their source in experience. Hugo’s notion of *idée* here is unequivocally social, and he is interested in the personal causal and perceptual networks by which ideas become possible. Interestingly, though, his *idée fatale* does not merely “originate” in bodily experience, but rather partakes of an empiricist paradigm in which the sensation literally *becomes* idea.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, the *idea* of the condemned man is itself bloody, itself dismembered, and equally available to public view, impinging on the passerby who sees no option but to gather it up (*rammasser*).<sup>40</sup> This intimate relationship between thoughts and their occasion makes the *idée*

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<sup>37</sup> My translation.

<sup>38</sup> The executions during the reign of terror moved from the Place de Grève to the Place de la Concorde, but public executions at the Place de Grève date back to 1104. The “Place de Grève” chapter in *Notre Dame de Paris* explores the sedimented site of “cette maladie de la terreur de l’échafaud, la plus monstreuse de toutes les maladies” from the standpoint of a nineteenth century author-narrator looking back on the fifteenth century: “Il ne reste aujourd’hui qu’un bien imperceptible vestige de la place de Grève telle qu’elle existait alors” (130, 132). *Notre Dame de Paris*, which Hugo began writing in 1830, in the year immediately following the publication of *Le dernier jour*, explores formal dynamics that are completely different from *Le dernier jour*, while sharing common thematics. Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris*. 1482, ed. Benedikte Andersson (Paris: Gallimard, 2009).

<sup>39</sup> This recalls Condillac’s particular variety of empiricism, with which Hugo was familiar, see note 51 below.

<sup>40</sup> See also Hugo’s revolutionary poem, “Réponse à un acte d’accusation,” which breaks up the rhythm of the alexandrine, and in which words themselves take to the streets:

Les syllabes pas plus que Paris et que Londre  
Ne se mêlaient ; ainsi marchent sans se confondre  
Piétons et cavaliers traversant le pont Neuf  
La langue était l’état avant quatrevingt-neuf.

not private, not part of any subjective mental idiolect but rather available to anyone who will put his or her body “there on the public walk.” Hugo’s poetic defense of ideas, then, performs variations and possibly even hastens toward some illicit intensifications of the empiricist scheme: The reality impinging on the perceiver – the passerby – is already embedded sensorially in the social history of the public square. Hugo’s preface offers a clue as to how empiricist epistemologies of sensation were marshaled to give mental contents a perceptual grounding and thereby politicize them.

And yet, the indexicality and responsivity to the sociopolitical moment Hugo claims for his novella is nothing if not hard won; there is a striking tension between Hugo’s call for immediacy on the one hand, and his ironic, self-conscious dismissal of literary mediation on the other: “I didn’t get it from a book.” I am proposing that the tension between the immediacy of sensation and textual mediation is something that the novella itself foregrounds as irresolvable, as this work lays bare and ironizes its own documentary conceit. Indeed, this may be Hugo’s way of busting a myth of “private experience” that could fetishize the condemned man’s suffering while simultaneously divorcing it from public concern.

Turning now to the very first page of Hugo’s novella, the oppressive fixed idea of certain death is described as radically preempting the dynamic workings of sensory perception. Hugo’s text depicts the condition of the condemned man’s consciousness as quite literally one of arrest – an interruption of the very moment-to-moment flux of experience that would seem to authorize the *journal intime* as a genre:

I.

Bicêtre

Condamné à mort!

Voilà cinq semaines que j’habite avec cette pensée, toujours seul avec elle, toujours glacé de sa présence, toujours courbé sous son poids !

Autrefois, car il me semble qu’il y a plutôt des années que des semaines, j’étais un homme comme un autre homme. Chaque jour, chaque heure, chaque minute avait son idée. Mon esprit, jeune et riche, était plein de fantaisies. Il s’amusait à me les dérouler les unes après les autres, sans ordre et sans fin, brodant d’inépuisables arabesques cette rude et mince étoffe de la vie

....

Maintenant je suis captif. Mon corps est aux fers dans un cachot, mon esprit est en prison dans une idée. Une horrible, une sanglante, une implacable idée ! Je n’ai plus qu’une pensée, qu’une conviction, qu’une certitude : condamné à mort!<sup>41</sup>

I.

Bicêtre

Condemned to death !

These five weeks have I dwelt with this idea : always alone with it, always frozen by its presence ; always bent under its weight.

Formerly – for it seems to me rather years than weeks since I was a being like any other : each day, each hour, each minute had its idea. My mind, youthful and

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Victor Hugo, *Les contemplations* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 2002), 47-58.

<sup>41</sup> Hugo, *Le dernier jour*, 111.

rich, was full of fancies, which it developed successfully, without order or aim, but weaving inexhaustible arabesques on the poor and coarse web of life

....

But now, I am a captive ! Bodily in irons in a dungeon, and mentally imprisoned in one idea. One horrible, one hideous, one unconquerable idea ! I have only one thought, one conviction, one certitude : Condemned to death !<sup>42</sup>

The novella's opening passage begins and ends with "condamné à mort" – a framing *inclusio* identified with the "idée fatale" that has taken hold of the condemned man's mind.<sup>43</sup> Rather than something lodged within his consciousness, the idea of being condemned to die seems to frame and enclose *him* inside of *it*, functioning for the condemned man as a prison that reduplicates the boundaries of the physical cell: "Mon corps est aux fers dans un cachot, mon esprit est en prison dans une idée." From the very beginning of his first-person meditation, the content of the condemned man's thought emerges as a constraining form – for it is the monolithic thought of his own death, no less than the physical cell, which divorces him from the world of experience – indeed, from the capacity of having experience as such. Whereas prior to his death sentence, each unit of time had its own corresponding and varying ideas ("chaque jour, chaque heure, chaque minute avait son idée"), the death sentence that freezes him in time, by the same token, constrains his mind to one thought only : "je n'ai qu'une pensée." The *idée* takes over the agency that was once accorded to time itself. In this way, the condemned man's self-narration already inverts the primacy of the sense impression that Hugo's preface credits with the novella's origin. It is the possibility of proceeding directly from time and place (La Place de Grève, the evoked moments of execution) to a corresponding "idée," grounded in historical and geographic reality, that the condemned man's narration obviates. The transition from world to idea is no longer possible. The reiteration of the *inclusio* "condamné à mort" thus thematizes the freezing of time, and the distortion that disrupts the clear boundaries between past recollection (hearing his death sentence uttered in the courtroom) and a continuous, unyielding present moment (the idea of being condemned that now imprisons his mind). The mental foreground which takes over the surface of the text appears as if an imposition of the death sentence itself, wresting him from the world of experience. As Suzanne Guerlac has demonstrated, Hugo invalidates the "clean" separation of mind from body which belongs to the logic of the guillotine at the same time that his novelistic form encodes precisely that separation.<sup>44</sup> Just as the novella earnestly plunges into first-person narration as a form of political persuasion, the text simultaneously suggests a form of horror unique to the primacy of thought.

"C'est presque une pure intelligence observant paisiblement," writes an 1829 reviewer for *Le Globe*.<sup>45</sup> And yet, while *Le dernier jour* may indeed be a narrative of "pure intelligence," at the same time the project on the whole is intensely ambivalent about the dualist – harrowingly literalized – separation and the "clean break" of mind from body represented by the guillotine. As a first-person record of consciousness, the opening passage is in many ways a parodic

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<sup>42</sup> Victor Hugo, *Novels Complete*, 51.

<sup>43</sup> *Inclusio*, also known as "envelope structure," is a "repeated phrase or whole line that stands at the beginning and end of a poetic unit." See *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom Poetry & Writings*, eds. Mark J. Boda and J.G. McConville (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2012), 323.

<sup>44</sup> Guerlac, "Phantom Rights," 76.

<sup>45</sup> "Le Dernier jour d'un condamné, roman; par M. Victor Hugo," *Le Globe*, February 4, 1829 (Microfiche). Accessed at Doe Library, UC Berkeley.

treatment of a Cartesian scene— parodic because Hugo substitutes the condemned man’s coerced imprisonment for Descartes’ elective isolation. Aside from the familiar Cartesian themes of “clear and distinct ideas” in opposition to passion, we have a radical revaluation of the kind of certainty that from Descartes onward is the special mark of consciousness when it observes itself. Unlike Descartes, there is no element of epistemic triumph in *this* form of self-intimating mental certainty. On the contrary, the retreat inward, into the workings of consciousness itself is, for Hugo’s condemned man, literally a matter of last resort. After all, the condemned man is reduced to an existential pure consciousness not in order to produce a new philosophical language but rather as the result of institutionalized violence.

In a climactic journal entry, the condemned man is counterfactually transported into a more living modality by the very act of reading. He discovers writing on the wall of his cell that documents the sedimented history of other condemned men that came before him, each indexically tethered to a date and name: “Dautun, 1815; Paulain, 1818; Jean Martin, 1821; Castaing, 1823.”<sup>46</sup>

Je me suis levé et j’ai promené ma lampe sur les quatre murs de ma cellule. Ils sont couverts d’écritures, de dessins, de figures bizarres, de noms qui se mêlent et s’effacent les uns les autres. Il semble que chaque condamné ait voulu laisser trace, ici du moins. C’est du crayon, de la craie, du charbon, des lettres noires, blanches, grises, souvent de profondes entailles dans la pierre, ça et là des caractères rouillés qu’on dirait écrits avec du sang. Certes, si j’avais l’esprit plus libre, je prendrais intérêt à ce livre étrange qui se développe page à page à mes yeux sur chaque pierre de ce cachot. J’aimerais à recomposer un tout de ces fragments de pensée, épars sur la dalle...à rendre le sens et la vie à ces inscriptions mutilées, à ces phrases démembrées, à ces mots tronqués, corps sans tête, comme ceux qui les ont écrits. (128-29)

An idea occurred to me. I would arise and examine, by my lamp, the walls of my cell. They are covered with writings, with drawings, fantastic figures, and names which mix with and efface each other. It would appear that each prisoner had wished to leave behind him some trace here at least. Pencil, chalk, charcoal – black, white, gray letters. Sometimes deep carvings upon the stone. If my mind were at ease, I could take an interest in this strange book, which is developed, page by page, to my eyes, on each stone of this dungeon. I should like to recompose these fragments of thought...to give sense and life to these mutilated inscriptions, to these dismembered phrases.<sup>47</sup>

The condemned man notes that if he himself were possessed of a “free mind,” he might take an interest in this “strange book” developing page after page before his eyes, suggesting a momentary meta-textual identification with the readers of Hugo’s own “strange book.” The writing on the wall of the cell literalizes the novella’s opening metaphor of the condemned man’s imprisonment inside an “idea,” elaborating further the blend between the cell’s walls and his own mental architecture.

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<sup>46</sup> Hugo, *Le dernier jour*, 130.

<sup>47</sup> Hugo, *Novels Complete*, 76.

Moving from the archive of the walls to his own *journal intime*, the condemned man begins to document his own physiological reactions to his reading as medical symptoms:

Il est probable que ces idées me donnaient un accès de fièvre ; mais, pendant que je rêvais ainsi, il m'a semblé tout à coup que ces noms fatals étaient écrits avec du feu sur le mur noir ; un tintement de plus en plus précipité a éclaté dans mes oreilles ; une lueur rousse a rempli mes yeux ; et puis il m'a paru que le cachot était plein d'hommes, d'hommes étranges qui portaient leur tête dans leur main gauche, et la portaient par la bouche, parce qu'il n'y avait pas de chevelure.<sup>48</sup>

It is probable these ideas caused in my brain a feverish excitement: for, whilst I thus wandered, all at once these five fatal names appeared as though written in flames on the dark wall; noises, louder and louder, burst on my ears: a dull, red light, filled my eyes and it seemed to me that my cell became full of men – strangers to me; each bore his severed head in his left hand; and carried it by the mouth, for the hair had been removed.<sup>49</sup>

Anticipating Poe, and, as we've seen, Dostoevsky, it is precisely the moment of meticulous notation that opens up onto a fantastic modality – the mystical and surreal scene of words written in fire, and decapitated men holding their own severed heads. Further, the eschatological vision occasioned by the “writing on the wall” suggests an analogy between the words on the page and Daniel's encoded prophecy of doom.<sup>50</sup>

The ringing in the condemned man's ears marks a liminal layer of sensation that leads to full-blown hallucination. These are sensations derived from ideas and not ideas derived from sensation – a nightmarish testament to the deformed sensorium of the condemned man. But herein lies a classic critique of sensation as such, through its indistinguishability from hallucination. As internally generated sound, it can no longer be referred outward. From a philosophical point of view, the epistemically degraded status of sensation consists in this: sensation has no propositional content, does not speak articulately; in fact, it is the “fatale pensée” which takes hold of the sensorium, directing its contents toward a pre-given certainty.<sup>51</sup> In this passage, then, the sensation coming to the fore as immediate fact suggests an injured consciousness.

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<sup>48</sup> Hugo, *Le dernier jour*, 131.

<sup>49</sup> Hugo, *Novels Complete*, 79.

<sup>50</sup> Book of Daniel, Chapter 5.

<sup>51</sup> Hugo writes in *Littérature et philosophie mêlées* [Literature and Philosophy Mixed]:  
Toute passion est éloquente; tout homme persuadé persuade; pour arracher des pleurs, il faut pleurer; l'enthousiasme est contagieux, a-t-on dit... Et en effet, il est un langage qui ne trompe point, que tous les hommes entendent, et qui a été donné à tous les hommes... Et ce que nous venons de dire de l'éloquence, nous le disons de tous les arts, car tous les arts ne sont que la même langue différemment parlée. Et en effet, qu'est-ce que nos idées? Des sensations, et des sensations comparées. Qu'est-ce que les arts, sinon les diverses manières d'exprimer nos idées? Victor Hugo, *Oeuvres, Vol. 1* (Paris: Laffont, 1985), 338-39.

This passage, with its rhetoric of stepwise ontological reduction (from *art* to *idées* to *sensations*), draws on a philosophical language that would have been current at the time. Indeed, by defining “idées” in terms of “sensations” and “sensations comparées,” Hugo implicitly invokes Condillac, who joined Locke's empiricist project but took it farther in his “Traité des sensations” by reducing even the Lockean term “reflection” to the category of the sensation.

Hugo's novella, as Dostoevsky recognized, and as we have seen, brings out the ways in which the first-person record of consciousness is most fantastic when it purports to be documentarian. These readings suggest that there is something dehumanizing about reducing mental life to brute sensation. But Hugo's intellectual autopsy of the condemned man also lays bare the horror of a living person reduced to a single, all-too certain idea (the arresting idea of death). Hugo hints at the living spontaneity of subjectivity – at precisely what exceeds objectification – but he also points out the violence of so-called rational ideas. Indeed, thought itself is both agent and patient of violence in this novella.

The work demands to be read simultaneously as experiment in consciousness and abolitionist tract. Yet this has posed a real quandary for its reception. By 1883, Edmond Biré established a line of argument in relation to *Le dernier jour* that Victor Brombert would later pursue and nuance: “Je ne sais si j’ai tort,” Biré writes of the novel’s abolitionist *engagement*, “mais j’imagine que Victor Hugo ne s’est avisé de toutes ces belles choses qu’après coup et que, en 1828, en écrivant son livre, il se proposait uniquement de faire oeuvre d’art et de fantaisie.” If *Le dernier jour* is susceptible, by virtue of its generic hybridity, to gestures of recontextualization that are often in contradiction with one another, then this quandary of reception was perhaps instigated by Hugo's own paratextual work in a series of prefaces. In 1829 and then 1832, he successively framed the novella first in terms of a literary topos, and later as a polemical tract against the death penalty.<sup>52</sup> And, in a yet later preface to the same text, Hugo suggested that the novella can be read in two ways: either as empirical fact-gathering or as wild invention. Hugo is fully aware of and plays on *Le dernier jour*'s unlikely manner of foregrounding what goes on in the mind in the context of its institutional critique; and he anticipates and pokes fun at this perceived incongruity. In “Une Comédie à propos d’une tragédie,” a satirical play that Hugo quickly wrote in response to early criticisms of *Le dernier jour*, he has a dramatis persona called “Le Gros Monsieur” raise the following objection: “Il y a à peine deux pages sur ce texte de la peine de mort. Tout le reste, ce sont des sensations.” (Two pages at most on the death penalty – the rest is sensations). The problem that Hugo's own fictionalized critic poses is relevant to the reception of empiricism: How do we know when sensations index the real? The apparent incongruity between the first-person form of the novella and its pretension to institutional critique is not easily dismissed. Hugo himself was keenly aware (or maybe even wanted to propound the idea) that a radical incommensurability would be perceived between the novella's form and its “argument.”

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<sup>52</sup> One contemporary reader on Amazon.com echoes this centuries-long polarization between the enjoyable literary experiment and the polemical tract:

"The Last Day of a Condemned Man" is no more "a plea for the abolishment of capital punishment" only than *Les Misérables* is a study of the Parisian sewers only. Do not skip it simply because the chorus of reviewers are more focused on macabre capital punishment than Victor Hugo. Ignore David Dow's "Forward" (sic) being a treatise on capital punishment and ignore the heavy "Preface" written three years later in 1832. If Victor Hugo wrote the Preface why is it in the third person?"

### 3. HUGO AND THE SENSATION TALE

The quip about “sensations” made by “Le Gros Monsieur” indicates something important about the context of Hugo’s writing. Though the attention to the sufferings of the psychological *subject* of punishment was mobilized for abolitionist ends, it figured equally in a popular idiom which commodified sensations and exhibited a morbid fascination with its details that was clearly linked with commercial success. The extent to which the term “sensation” has been linked to the “sensationnel,” and to “ce qui fait sensation” is a subject for further exploration. A link is certainly felt in Hugo’s text between the emerging, somewhat negative concept of the literary and journalistic *sensationnel* and the “other” *sensationalism*, namely, the influential philosophical doctrines emerging out of eighteenth-century France in parallel to British Empiricism (for example, in Condillac), doctrines which actually affirm sensation as the source of all experience and all intellectual reflection. Indeed, Hugo’s teacher was Jean-Baptiste Maugras, a disciple of Condillac. It has even been reported of Hugo that “‘Sensation’ est le premier mot écrit sur son cahier de philosophique.”<sup>53</sup>

But when Hugo says “L’auteur a pris l’idée du *Dernier jour d’un condamné*, non dans un livre,” his remark about the “sources” of the condemned man’s consciousness are both generic – claiming a ground in real experience – and acerbically specific. For after the novella’s first appearance in 1829, Hugo was accused of plagiarism by the editors of *Le Globe*, an anti-death penalty literary, philosophical and political journal that had run a piece called “Dernières sensations d’un homme condamné à mort.” More pertinent than the question of plagiarism is the cultural ubiquity of the sensation as genre, and of the échafaud (guillotine) as social reality and as literary imaginary, and specifically as something written wildly about in newspapers during this historical moment. In fact, this very ubiquity is something which Hugo’s text and its mysterious intertext both lay bare as part of their fictional content. As his body is being physically prepared for execution, Hugo’s fictional condemned man notes: “J’ai compris que cela serait demain dans le journal.” The condemned man’s experience is, problematically, not always self-contained, nor is it always clear that the level of the individual is the right level at which to understand his experience. During the trial scene (section II), he describes feeling that he has been literally hooked up to the crowd of spectators: “il me semblait que j’étais le centre auquel se rattachaient les fils qui faisaient mouvoir toutes ces faces béantes et penchées.”<sup>54</sup> Precisely because the condemned man’s understanding of his social role is self-consciously mediated by the spectacle of other condemned men and what he has read about them, it is not always clear whose sensations are in play. Setting aside, then, the question of direct “influence” vis-à-vis Hugo’s text, one can still try out on *Le dernier jour* the ethical, theological and philosophical framework that the editors of *Le Globe* call upon to situate their tales of sensation within an abolitionist discourse:

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<sup>53</sup> See Géraud Venzac, *Les premiers maîtres de Victor Hugo* (Paris: Bloud et Gay, 1955), 304, quoted in Françoise Chenet, “Victor Hugo: vocabulaire de l’esthétique.” Groupe Hugo [groupugo.div.jussieu.fr/groupugo/doc/99-12-11Chenet.pdf](http://groupugo.div.jussieu.fr/groupugo/doc/99-12-11Chenet.pdf)

<sup>54</sup> Hugo, *Le dernier jour*, 115.



L'extinction graduelle de toute pensée morale, *les perceptions des sens devenant plus claires et plus distinctes à mesure que les facultés de l'âme s'affaiblissent* [emphasis added], l'impossibilité presque absolue de s'élever à des idées religieuses, voilà ce qui nous frappe surtout dans ce récit. Les écrivains qui ont examiné récemment la question de l'abolition de la peine de mort ont profité d'un grand nombre de faits consignés dans *La Gazette* et dans le *Courrier des tribunaux* pour montre que cette peine est loin d'avoir, sous le rapport de la répression, l'avantage qu'on lui attribue, et *Le Globe* partage tout à fait cette opinion.<sup>55</sup>

Hugo does seem to follow suit with the editors of *Le Globe* in reclaiming the susceptibility to violence of *la tête* and *la pensée*, along with the body's susceptibility. But "sensation" when it came to abolition was not just an object of representation; to appeal to the sensations of the public was a mode of persuasion where other rhetorical strategies had failed. Bowman contextualizes *Le dernier jour* within a new movement in abolitionist writings away from the dominant forms of the empirical or philosophical tract, and towards "descriptions...centered on the condemned."<sup>56</sup> In *Le dernier jour*, writes Bowman, "Hugo's text presents man in his humble, mortal form; faced with the guillotine, there are no palliatives, there is no quibbling, only what our sensations tell us about society's putting a human being to death."<sup>57</sup> But is sensation functioning *as* argument, or in place of argument? Is sensation primarily a rhetorical strategy, or a working model of what subjectivity is like? And, furthermore, is there a necessary connection between the working model of the condemned man's subjectivity, and the modes of argument that are deemed appropriate for this cause?<sup>58</sup>

*Le Globe's* particular way of adapting to political purposes a narrative that bills itself simultaneously as a fantasy and as personal history fits into an emerging abolitionist rhetorical tactic that has been identified with the period: Reforms in the penal system in France (initiated in 1791 by Louis-Michel Le Peletier, interrupted by the Terror, and taken up again in the 1820s) now began to reconfigure the image of the penal subject. As Myriam Roman writes in her book-length commentary on *Le dernier jour*, "La nouvelle pénalité idéale n'envisage plus le condamné comme un corps qu'on incarcère, blesse, mutile, mais comme un sujet doué de raison et

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<sup>55</sup> "Angleterre: Dernières sensations d'un homme condamné à mort," *Le Globe*, January 3, 1828 (Microfiche). Accessed at Doe Library, UC Berkeley. (The gradual extinction of all moral thought, *sense perception becoming clearer and more distinct as the faculties of the soul are diminished* [emphasis added], the near absolute impossibility of ascending to the level of religious ideas – we find all these to be especially striking features of this narrative. Writers who have recently examined the question of the abolition of the death penalty have drawn on a great number of facts recorded in *La Gazette* and in the *Courrier des Tribunaux* in order to show that the death penalty is far from possessing the advantages others attribute to it, and *Le Globe* shares this opinion entirely). My translation.

<sup>56</sup> Bowman, "Intertextuality," 35.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>58</sup> Hugo's own extensive and varied writing on the death penalty itself challenges, however, the idea that there is any single mode of representation or aesthetic principle which is "adequate" to the political problem of abolition. Nowhere does it follow from the deployment of specific stylistic strategies (and certainly not for Hugo, whose works are famous for their internal cross-register polyphony) that the author is making a claim for the necessity of those strategies. In fact, the rejection of any necessary relation between content and a particular form is perhaps itself one of the principles of the rebellion against neo-classicism.

perfectible.”<sup>59</sup> The technological innovation of the guillotine was associated with this movement to “rationalize” the penal system (based on a calculus which would attend to the measure of physical agony). But according to the abolitionist arguments that the editors of *Le Globe* are drawing on, the man condemned to die is in an “*état irraisonnable*” which actually deprives him of the possibility of redemption within a Christian theological framework. In this mental economy between the sensible and the spiritual, the heightening of “*dernières sensations*” is correlate with the waning of subjectivity; sensation comes to the fore precisely at the moment that the human condition has been distorted or destroyed. The new subject “*doué de raison*,” as a corollary, must be capable of being in the future otherwise than he now is; the prison has become a “*lieu de regeneration*.” Hugo’s condemned man communicates a similar view, in relation to his own condition: “*Je voudrais me repentir davantage encore. J’avais plus de remords avant ma condamnation; depuis, il semble qu’il n’y ait plus de place que pour les pensées de mort.*”<sup>60</sup> “*Les pensées de mort*” supersedes the mental energy that could have been devoted to repentance. The inability to think anything but one’s death sentence expresses spiritual torment in terms of a kind of mental fixity.

Frank Bowman calls attention to the “curious” piece that was published in *Le Globe* in June of 1828, and which Hugo was accused of plagiarizing. The piece, titled under the heading “*Dernières sensations d’un homme condamné à mort*,” is a first-person testimony, given in retrospect, by a London man convicted of forgery in 1826 who claims to have survived his own hanging. We are not given to know whether the condemned man survives the execution by supernatural means, or by the kind of gruesome mishap that Hugo would later describe in relation to the guillotine – here again the fantastic and realist modes are grotesquely combined, in an ambiguity authorized by the genre of the *récit*: No further information is provided regarding the story or its author; the editors simply claim that it was adapted into French from an unnamed “*journal américain*”: “*Un journal américain donne, comme authentique, le récit des dernières sensations d’un homme condamné à mort, pendu en Angleterre.*”<sup>61</sup> Bowman writes that this *récit*, based on an Anglophone source, “may well have served as a model for *Le dernier jour*” and adds that he has “not tried to find the original.”<sup>62</sup> Yet the similarities with Hugo’s work were considered so striking that in February 1829, immediately after the anonymous rushed publication of *Le dernier jour* (following apparently Hugo’s request to hasten the publication), the editors of *Le Globe* accused Hugo of plagiarizing their own “*Dernières sensations*” from the previous year, in their otherwise favorable review of the novella, despite their shared abolitionist project.

Using an electronic resource called *America’s Historical Newspapers, 1690-1876*, and through a lucky set of search strings (“condemned man” and “Old Bailey, the London courthouse where the narrator claims to have been convicted”), I have been able to locate a newspaper piece which is undoubtedly the original text re-worked by the editors of *Le Globe*. Although I don’t believe this English text has ever been connected to the article in *Le Globe* which translated it as “*Dernières Sensations...*,” the English story itself seems to have acquired a great deal of significance in the Anglophone context. Oddly enough, the original is titled “*Le Revenant: A Singular Narrative.*” The French term “*Le Revenant*” would have conjured up for the paper’s readership the image of a walking dead. It is interesting to note, then, that Hugo’s Anglophone

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<sup>59</sup> Myriam Roman, *Le dernier jour d’un condamné de Victor Hugo* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), 37.

<sup>60</sup> Hugo, *Le dernier jour*, 190.

<sup>61</sup> *Le Globe*, January 3, 1828 (Microfiche). Accessed at Doe Library, UC Berkeley.

<sup>62</sup> Bowman, “Intertextuality,” 36.

“source” is already establishing itself through recourse to what it takes to be a “French” imaginary. “Le Revenant: A Singular Narrative” was printed on June 18, 1827 in the *Eastern Argus*, a newspaper in Portland, Maine. It was also serialized in two parts for the *Salem Gazette* on September 17 and 21 1830.<sup>63</sup> These American reprintings (which may only be the tip of the iceberg) explain why the editors of *Le Globe* refer to a “journal américain,” whereas the two American versions refer to the story as being “from *Blackwood’s Magazine*,” and indeed “Le Revenant” first appeared as an anonymous contribution to the April 1827 issue of *Blackwood’s*. The story appears in that volume flanked by miscellaneous poetry, an article titled “The Surplus Population of the United Kingdom,” and a Letter to the Editor on “steam navigation.” It is indeed quite funny that the only French phrase in “Le Revenant” – its title – was ignored by the editors of *Le Globe*, who, riding a literary trend, chose to replace the title “Le Revenant” with “Dernières sensations...” for no such title appears in any of the English versions. Indeed, in spite of the imagery that its title would have evoked in the Anglophone imaginary, “Le Revenant” is as Stephen Thomas Knight observes “not the ghost story it sounds like...rather it is about a man who has been hanged, and survived. His viewpoint is central, the story is in the first person, and so we are able to shudder at the experience, watching the morning dawn, hearing the scaffold being erected, waiting for the end.”<sup>64</sup>

The narrator of “Le Revenant” explicitly describes such morbid fascination with “dernières sensations” as something that is shared between writer and reader:

There are few men, perhaps, who have not a hundred times in the course of life, felt a curiosity to know what their sensations would be if they were compelled to lay life down. The very impossibility, in all ordinary cases, of obtaining any approach to this knowledge, is an incessant spur pressing on the fancy in its endeavours to arrive at it...Now I am in a situation to speak, from experience, upon that very interesting question -- the sensations attendant upon a passage from life to death. I have been HANGED, and am ALIVE...<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> As I indicated above, at the time of Hugo’s writing, a debate about the death penalty in connection with forgery was stirring in France- but this was true not only of France but also of England. In 1832, both countries independently abolished the death penalty for cases of forgery. The same American newspapers that I consulted, which reprinted *Le Revenant* between 1827 and 1830, chattered unceasingly about a forger and condemned man named Henry Fauntleroy: his trial, incarceration, pathos-laden accounts of visitations by his loved ones, the execution itself and its aftermath. According to Douglas R. Moore, Fauntleroy became a linchpin in the movement for abolition; his fame was immense and his legacy in English *fiction* continued through the 20th century. An astonishing 100,000 people witnessed Fauntleroy’s execution in London -- a testament to the cultural power of this figure of the “condemned man.” In fact, after his hanging a rumor began to circulate that Fauntleroy had miraculously survived and was living abroad, post-execution -- much like the narrator of “Le Revenant”]. With further research I would look more closely into the comparative history of death penalty debates in England and France (and their respective relations to literary production). See Moore, *Appropriating Justice: Victorian Literature and Nineteenth-century Law Reform*, PhD Dissertation (Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 2007), 12.

<sup>64</sup> Stephen Thomas Knight, *Crime Fiction Since 1800: Detection, Death, Diversity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 17.

<sup>65</sup> *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* 23, no. 124 (1827): 409.

The story's tantalizing hook tells us much about the universe of discourse and in particular about the governing epistemologies in which Hugo and the Blackwood Writers -- among them, Poe -- were writing. While the narrator acknowledges such a testimony as an "impossibility," there is still an intense desire to know sensation precisely at its limit, or to claim to know it there.

Like the intertexts that Bowman highlights, Hugo's novella adopts the posture of a true testimony, inviting us to imagine the condemned man as author and not merely as narrator. A similar strategy is employed by the author of "Le Revenant." The particular way that this is carried out, in Hugo's case, is to turn the text into a physical artifact (the pages yellowing) of someone who is in the process of being lost to history. The greatest textual lacuna in the novella constitutes the ending of *Le dernier jour*. Interestingly, the ways in which *Le dernier jour* and "Le Revenant" end are radically different from one another. While the very sight of the gallows does disrupt the narrator's memory in "Le Revenant" and even momentarily interrupts the possibility of narrative, the narrator does then find himself again; he continues to sense, as well as to speak beyond the grave. The dramatic crux of the journalistic story lies in this impossible possibility. Hugo's text, of course, makes precisely the opposite gesture: While the fantastic narrative of "Le Revenant" extends magically beyond the execution, Hugo's ends abruptly as the first-person point of view can no longer encompass the scene. We are left, perhaps, only with the tolling of the bells ("QUATRE HEURES") -- in any case, an implied third person observer who knows very well what will happen, and to whom the first-person point of view has ceded its place. Why does Hugo's "tale of sensation" end where it does, rather than "extending over the bar line" (to use a musical metaphor), as the Blackwood-style tale frequently allowed? In this sense the novella's intertextual play with "Le Revenant" brings into relief precisely the sensationalist boundary that Hugo refuses to cross. In *Le dernier jour*, the limits of narration follow and respect the limits of sensation -- which is to say, its limit in the body. There is a frenetic rapprochement of narrated time and time of narration (which gets pushed to a limit, or a vanishing point) as the actual execution approaches and the writing subject must disappear from the page. Hugo ends only with the time mark to which sensations may previously (and perhaps within a slightly different genre) have been assignable.

The ending of the novella crystallizes what I have called Dostoevsky's paradox of the stenographic transcription of thought. Perhaps more precisely, the formal tension that Dostoevsky brings attention to is rendered paradoxical only by taking too literally the empirical conceit of a complete record. *Il me semble qu'on monte l'escalier* -- QUATRE HEURES: In this proto-Brechtian disruption of verisimilitude, the narrative "scaffolding" of the text is laid bare in a manner that, as Dostoevsky observed, makes "the work itself...the most realistic and truthful of any that [Hugo] wrote." The first-person record makes the condemned man's death realistically available through the violation of its own form.

## CHAPTER 2: POE'S MINDS AND THE INDISPENSABILITY OF FORM

### 1. THE SENSATION TALE AND THE SPOOF OF MENTAL CONTENT

The “tale of sensation,” a genre from which Edgar Allen Poe drew much literary energy, had become so closely associated with *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* that in November 1838 Poe wrote a brilliant parodic work titled “How to Write a Blackwood Article.” In this story, a fictionalized Mr. Blackwood gives advice to an aspiring young woman writer who wants to know “the exact method of composition” for “a genuine article of the Blackwood sensation stamp.”<sup>66</sup> Mr. Blackwood then advises the writer that “sensations are the great things, after all. Should you ever be drowned or hung, be sure and make a note of your sensations – they will be worth to you ten guineas a sheet. If you wish to write forcibly, Miss Zenobia, pay minute attention to the sensations (177).” As discrete atomic units, sensations apparently lend themselves to be monetized.<sup>67</sup> Among the exemplary models that Mr. Blackwood cites is the “history of a young person who goes to sleep under the clapper of a church bell and is awakened by its tolling for a funeral. The sound drives him mad, and, accordingly, pulling out his tablets, he gives a record of his sensations.” Clearly, the term “sensations,” repeated nine times in this short tale of a few pages, is one at the expense of which Poe has a great deal of fun. Nothing seems to get in the way of cool introspection; the tablets are at hand. Nothing disturbs the cool scientific powers of self-observation, no matter how mangled or dismembered the subject (and object) of observation!<sup>68</sup>

Another “real-life” sensation tale cited by Poe’s fictional Mr. Blackwood for the benefit of the aspiring writer is Samuel Ferguson’s “The Involuntary Experimentalist.” Appearing in *Blackwood's* in 1837, one year before Poe’s parody, it is a first-person tale told from the point of

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<sup>66</sup> G.R. Thompson, ed. *The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 175 (hereafter cited in text as *SW*).

<sup>67</sup> Perhaps the coin functions as the unit of the unit. This may be one way to think about a link between the somewhat negative, emerging concept of journalistic “sensationalism” with that “other” *sensationalism* – the philosophical doctrines *affirming* sensation as the source of all experience and all intellectual reflection

<sup>68</sup> Interestingly, though, at least one critic has rightly questioned the assumption that the targets of Poe’s parody is itself necessarily un-parodic. Bruce Weiner points out that many of the *Blackwood's* tales that Poe parodies were themselves parodies in their own right: “Actually,” he writes, “I count only nine ‘straight’ tales of sensation in *Blackwood's* from its inception in 1817 to 1845 and eleven others that combine the sensational formula with literary burlesque.” I would go further and suggest that perhaps the very opposition between “straight...sensation” as opposed to “burlesque” is undone by the genre in question. See Bruce Weiner, “Poe and the *Blackwood's* Tale of Sensation” in *Poe and His Times*, ed. Benjamin Franklin Fisher (Baltimore: Edgar Allan Poe Society, 1990), 46-65.

In his recent study of Poe, Robert Tally emphasizes the distorting lenses that Poe’s reception in the United States as a horror writer has placed on his corpus, by distorting his parodic modalities: “Poe’s popular notoriety as a writer of Gothic horror, complex mystery, or Romantic poetry not only requires one to ignore over half of all his tales, not to mention over 80 percent of his total corpus, but also necessitates a certain tortured reading of even those few writings that do get anthologized as tales of terror.” Robert Tally, *Poe and the Subversion of American Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 24.

view of a medical doctor whose inquisitiveness gets him caught in a refinery fire.<sup>69</sup> The catastrophe becomes an opportunity for the doctor-narrator to advance some scientific principles on the subject of heat, as he is burning up.<sup>70</sup> Not only does the experiment annihilate the experimenter, but the act of stopping to narrate the dangerous developments of course only increases the danger: it takes time and some degree of sitting still, after all, to write; so that spatiotemporally speaking the act of writing looks very much like submitting to conditions as they are – no matter the toll on the body. The empirical reality of the world takes precedence over the material well-being of the body, and yet the latter is a precondition for sensing at all. In this parodically conservative view of first-person narration, writing as empirical observation means not only reproducing a faithful rendering of the world, but actively submitting to its most dangerous predicaments without intervention.

The basic premise, following the real-life scientific experimentalism of figures like Humphry Davy, is a good one -- that states of mind are part of the world and therefore deserving of scientific attention. However, this inward turn is immediately paradoxical in a way that Poe will pick up on in his reworking of this genre. First, the tale calls into question the presumption of obtaining precise knowledge of mental content. Second, related to the spoof of what is “simple,” it parodies the very modes of logical and grammatical subordination that it draws upon. Third, it lays bare the mediations of the intellect – that is, what the subject *makes* of his or her sensations is part of the mental content that he or she represents. The process of making something of one’s sensations is a constitutive feature of the experience to be described. The interpretation of experience is part of what makes it experience in the first place. Can it be that the empiricist sensation tale signals the organizing power of the intellect, through negation, as the violation of its own form? Here is the Involuntary Experimentalist:

I next endeavoured to form some estimate of the heat the metal must acquire before the contained air would rise to a temperature of 250°, which I supposed it possible I might be able to bear; but, what with anxiety and confusion, I could make no approximation to an answer. These various processes of thought had, however, restored a certain degree of presence of mind, as may be judged from the fact that, dreadful as the prospect was which I had before me, I was calm enough to make several memoranda on my tablets, with the purpose of attaching them to a weight to be tied to the end of my handkerchief, and flung out in the hope of letting it be known where I was. These tablets I have now before me; I have preserved them ever since, as a memorial of moments such as I trust have fallen to the lot of no other human being I transfer the memoranda verbatim. It will be seen that many of the words are but half-written, and that in some places entire words have been omitted: but if any one would try the experiment of

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<sup>69</sup> For more on Ferguson’s contributions to the Celtic Renaissance via *Blackwood’s Magazine*, see Denman, 52.

<sup>70</sup> The groundbreaking scientific experiments of chemist Humphry Davy “on himself” at the turn of the eighteenth century while consuming laughing gas provide a useful context for the “Involuntary Experimentalist.” I am grateful to Professor Zellman Warhaft for pointing out this connection. See Richard Holmes, *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of science* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2008).

writing in such a situation, I daresay his composition would be scarcely more correct. I began thus:<sup>71</sup>

In this fantasy of directly reported experience, the scientist's tablets are impressed by – that is, they literally bear the mark of -- the experiments that they describe. But just by dint of this desired conflation between experience and report, the medium of representation is beginning to fall apart: “it will be seen that many of the words are but half-written” (490). In this spoof of the *tabula rasa* as a metaphor for mind, precisely the illegibility of the report makes it a reliable memorandum. When he writes, “these tablets I have now before me,” he employs indexical reference that purports to collapse the distance between the scientist's text and the text before the reader's eyes. It also collapses the distance between time of narration and narrated time, suggesting that we are in the “now.” The slapstick comedy of the tablets attached “to a weight to be tied to the end of my handkerchief” suggests that this “here and now” is achieved through grotesque mechanical mediation. In a trope which will be comically exploited by Poe, the pretension of singularity and individuation (“a memorial of moments such as I trust have fallen to the lot of no other human being”) is seized upon by the helpless scientist-narrator in an effort to guarantee the empirical validity of his account. But pointing at these tablets sets into comic relief the ways in which the text we read *does not align* with the knowledge-gathering conventional “memoranda.”

The conceit of a disinterested or scientific record of mental states begins to fall apart. In fact, the text disintegrates and exceeds the form of discourse and the generic conventions that the narrator himself would like to take up in the act of writing. The calculations are directed toward the ends of science, even to the point of self-sacrifice. But it is also apparent that an ulterior motive is being served: “These various processes of thought, had... restored a certain degree of presence of mind” (490). The “presence of mind” that the doctor restores for himself is linked to his capacity to make a “memorial of moments,” suggesting that as the mind waxes, the moment wanes. Indeed, the idiom “presence of mind” itself becomes comically literalized – since neither brain nor mind will for very long be able to last under such extreme physical conditions. The narrator seems to want to think that he is more than the sensations that he is noting down; but he proves his “presence of mind” over and above sensation by being able to put his sensations in order such that they will be susceptible to scrutiny.

Given the doctor's universe of discourse, the sensations of heat and suffocation are not sufficient to demonstrate the presence of mind; but the thought processes that order and render them intelligible are. Still, the experimentalist's reliance on his “presence of mind” embeds a sardonic suggestion that the “various processes of thought” now foregrounded, even while leading to no “answer,” serve an emotionally self-soothing purpose. The scientific procedures themselves restore to the helpless doctor a sense of rational control that is of course, deluded. He makes dutiful empirical notes of the changes in his own conditions:

‘I am Doctor \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_ St. If any one finds this, come to the copper in the new building, where I am burning to death for want of a ladder. Half-past 12 o'clock. Haste! haste!

It is now 26 minutes to 1 o'clock. The air is suffocatingly hot: I am drenched in perspiration. I will note all I can. 15m. To 1o'c. Therm. 137.

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<sup>71</sup>Samuel Ferguson, “The Involuntary Experimentalist,” *Blackwoods Magazine* 5 (October, 1837), 490.

Eventually, not only temperature markings but time markings appear in shorthand. It is a comic conflation between the forms of abbreviation conventional to empirical notation on the one hand, and the haste required by life-and-death duress on the other:

8 m. past 1 o'clock. Therm. 177°. My watch burning-hot. Have taken it out of my fob. The pencilcase begins to feel hot in my fingers. Strange to say, my body is still cool. \_\_\_\_\_'s theory about the radi[ation] of heat must be erroneous.

The experimentalist's notes begin with abbreviated, even stenographic precision. Then as the notation of objective conditions (time, temperature) turns to the narrating subject and his implements ("my watch burning-hot"), things begin to unravel. In this perverse spoof of a distress signal, the doctor cannot help but note that an extant theory of heat radiation has been refuted. However, the written record of that refutation is disfigured by the very conditions it describes. Reiterating the meticulous notation of conditions but transferring them into the reproduction of the tablet, the narrator now as fictional editor returns painstakingly to indicate where words have gone missing ("radi" must surely have been short for "radiation," only I was about to burn to death and could not spell it out). But for what? While the narrator is driven by a compulsion toward verisimilitude, the tale itself seems to be seeking a different end: it suggests that the fire is disturbing; but so is the epistemological detachment.<sup>72</sup> The more one reads these tales of sensation, the more one gets the impression that the "predicaments" that they famously stage do not occur at the level of plot but rather stage the compulsion to narrate and to notate as one alternative in a comically condensed dilemma between life and thought. The fiction begins, then, where the pseudo-transcription fails, in such a way that the sensation tale says exactly what it isn't. And yet the narrative practices that the subject engages in *within* the fictional world are not covalent with the narrative practices of the tale itself. The sensation tale gives us a *semblance* of narration that exposes the contradictions proper to the form. So what is the difference between what the involuntary experimentalist does as narrator and what the story itself does, comprising him?

Unaware of the direct intertextual connection between them via Hugo, Harvey Peter Sucksmith in a 1971 article discusses the effect of the Sensation Tale on Poe in the context of what Sucksmith terms "the secret of immediacy."<sup>73</sup> This method, praised for its arresting effects on the reader, is valuable for "the intensity with which the sense impressions are presented." Interestingly Sucksmith contrasts the method of immediacy with the "Gothic *frisson* which is itself aroused through suggestion...the *Blackwood's tale*, however, creates a realistic terror through precision of descriptive detail." Poe's fiction again is cited as the virtuosic illustration of the "difference in method" between prior Gothic fiction and what was now being elaborated in *Blackwood's*. The new style is characterized by

a certain matter-of-factness...objects which arouse horror are described with a meticulously scientific accuracy and the sensations of horror are analyzed with an almost medical thoroughness. The powerful impression of terror produced by a

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<sup>72</sup> In an American century so famous for deadly systems of classification in tandem with the social production of "others" it is instructive to see how the pretension of *self*-directed knowledge on the part of scientific authority is given such parodic treatment.

<sup>73</sup> Harvey Peter Sucksmith, "The Secret of Immediacy: Dickens' Debt to the Tale of Terror in *Blackwood's*." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* Vol. 26, no. 2 (Sep., 1971), 146.



certain kind of medical report had been noted in Blackwood's as early as 1823, and storywriters in the same journal were not to slow to act on the hint.<sup>74</sup>

What seems to escape notice in these important stylistic characterizations of Poe's prose is the terror that springs from the interaction between such "meticulous scientific accuracy" and the first-person form.<sup>75</sup> In other words, I am arguing that the material may not be horrific but precisely the "method"; not the sensations themselves, but rather the precision.

The discrete sensations of the *Blackwood's* tale dazzle with the allure of empirical data, an allure that I argue becomes inevitably satirical due to the tension between the sensations themselves and the narrative forms by means of which they are rendered articulate. Hence my larger argument that a certain model of analysis of mind is spoofed not only by these particular texts but by the literary form of the first-person tale whose narrators' minds spill out beyond the boundaries that they impose. Another way to put this is that the Sensation Tale does not necessarily re-entrench those explanatory models of the mind which pervade it. This should not be surprising, given that for a literary text to be shot through with a philosophical idiom does not imply that it endorses that idiom.<sup>76</sup> And in this case, the sensation tale is not only not an endorsement of sensation as the basic unit of mind – on the contrary I argue that it calls into question the view of mind as empirical datum per se.<sup>77</sup>

## 2. THE ANALYTIC CUT: "A PREDICAMENT"

Poe's "How to Write a Blackwood's Article" (1838) does not just spoof the "method" of composing a sensation tale: it also supplies readers with its own sensation-tale-within-a-tale: a story called "A Predicament," submitted for publication by the fictional journalist Psyche

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<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 146-147.

<sup>75</sup> Margaret Alderton in her early study of Poe's critical theory rightly observes: "In Poe, especially in his early work, one meets again the solitary figure in some horrible situation; the growing terror; and the same method of analyzing and detailing with precision the flood of sensations that overwhelm the unhappy sufferer...He gives the text, too, the form of a systematic record" Margaret Alderton, *Poe's Critical Theory* (43). The accurate report of sensations is taken for granted by some philosophically-attuned critics as a mode of narration in Poe; less research has been done on the Blackwood's tale and its critical distance – or lack thereof – from the primary unit of philosophical analysis that it undoubtedly helped to popularize.

<sup>76</sup> On the contrary, a much closer identification of "sensation fiction" with the dogma of "sensationalism" is generally ascribed to the later, Victorian literary idioms that would emerge in the 1860s, and perhaps rightly. See Andrew Mangham, 's Introduction to *The Cambridge Guide to Sensation Fiction* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press), 2017.

<sup>77</sup> Sadly, even today the critique by literary means of "sense data" has not been internalized; as evidenced by the contemporary focus on "Big Data" and the persistently wrong framing of the issue as quantitative. Suffice it to say that in these nineteenth century experiments, anticipating later twentieth century critiques such as Wilfred Sellar's "Myth of the Given," the problem with "sense data" as a unit of mind is emphatically not the ways to handle the large quantity of data. For a contemporary Kantian critique of the persisting "Data" age (and one which also emphasizes the importance of the *critical* side of Hume's empiricism), see Ermanno Bencivenga, "Big Data and Transcendental Philosophy" (*The Philosophical Forum* 48.2 (2017)). See also Wilfred Sellars' *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), 1997.

Zenobia.<sup>78</sup> While searching for her next scoop, the aspiring sensationalist reporter is drawn suddenly to the sight of a “Gothic cathedral.” Instead of beholding this gothic structure from afar, she becomes physically enmeshed in its structure: “We looked about the room for an aperture through which to survey the city of Edina. Windows there were none. The sole light admitted into the gloomy chamber proceeded from a square opening, about a foot in diameter, at a height of about seven feet from the floor. Yet what will the energy of true genius not effect?” The aperture which Zenobia seeks out as a vantage point for her fact-finding mission turns out to be an “opening in the dial-plate of a gigantic clock.” In a scene that anticipates the iconic image of Harold Lloyd hanging from a skyscraper’s clock in the film *Safety Last!* (1923), Zenobia ends up physically decapitated by the hands of the cathedral clock. This physical gag itself subjects to scrutiny the Gothic genre that supposedly has been pre-determining Zenobia’s discourse – and suggests a morbid and comic twist on the idea of “becoming one” with the material one investigates. In Hugo’s novella, *The Last Day of the Condemned Man*, the tolling of the great clock tower was both index and symbol for the condemned man’s looming execution. Not so in Poe’s tale, where the clock neither tells time nor symbolizes finitude. Instead, the clock is the actual instrument of Psyche Zenobia’s demise; as mechanism, the clock is involved in an empirical set of relations that supersedes abstract signification:

The bar was now four inches and a half deep in my neck, and there was only a little bit of skin to cut through. My sensations were those of entire happiness, for I felt that in a few minutes, at farthest, I should be relieved from my disagreeable situation. And in this expectation I was not at all deceived. At twenty-five minutes past five in the afternoon precisely, the huge minute-hand had proceeded sufficiently far on its terrible revolution to sever the small remainder of my neck.<sup>79</sup>

The narrator continues to tell very good time while reporting on the now annihilating movements of the clock upon her person, suggesting a relationship between violence and precision. It is as if the time-markings (“twenty-five minutes past five in the afternoon precisely”), which function as the formal signature of the sensation tale, have produced the clock itself not only as measurement but as material, suggesting a disturbingly mimetic relationship between the mode of writing and its represented content.

There is a “predicament,” the sensation tale seems to suggest, in the tension between experience and report: Like the scientist in the “Involuntary Experimentalist”, Poe’s narrator-journalist operates within a genre of writing that expects one both to have the experience and report on it at one and the same time. But the conflict between experience and report also indicates just what the genre of “sensation” tries to conceal; namely, that reporting is part of experience, not some later operation on it. Indeed, the reports by which we make something of sensation are also part of what is named by “experience.” Psyche Zenobia’s experience is actually *produced* by her seemingly immediate reporting; at the same time, the experience itself undermines the veracity of the report:

This predicament may be ordinary to the point of banality: we will encounter it whenever we construe human thought as a stream of ongoing narration or whenever we model narration on the workings of thought. Nevertheless, Poe’s story shows us what happens when the narrator’s

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<sup>78</sup> Alternate title: “The Scythe of Time.”

<sup>79</sup> *SW*, 188.

self gets reified as subject in one direction, while the narrated self gets reified as object. Not for nothing is the protagonist of the sensation tale constantly getting him or herself dissected into parts: “I was not sorry to see the head which had occasioned me so much embarrassment at length make a final separation from my body. It first rolled down the side of the steeple...and then made its way, with a plunge, into the middle of the street” (189). Whatever is referred to using the pronoun “I” is evidently the owner of a body (“my body”); yet is reducible neither to the body nor to the head from which she gladly parts. What are we to make of this impossible parting of ways between our narrator and her body? Either the report has become fantastical precisely by meeting the conditions of verisimilitude; or the report is to be read literally, and the “I” is exactly the fantastical invention that it appears to be here, hovering as a ghost over and above the exhaustive dissection of the body into parts. What I am suggesting, however, is that the recurring image of dismemberment that can be found in these sensation tales is a figural answer to the analytic frame of mind that produces explanation via separation. That is, the dismemberment responds to the call of analysis.

There was a radical revolt against such deadening analysis in the pages of *Blackwood's*, but one that tended to reify the notion of self-determining mental life. The Scottish philosopher James Frederick Ferrier published his essay “An Introduction to the Philosophy of Consciousness” in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1838, the same year that Poe's *Blackwood's* spoof appeared. Going on to bring the term “epistemology” into philosophical usage in English for the first time, Ferrier offers through a serialized essay in *Blackwood's* his fierce criticism of contemporary psychology and its associationist emphasis.<sup>80</sup> Ferrier uses the following metaphor to express the conventional understanding of analysis in terms of dissection:

The human mind...is like the goose that laid golden eggs. The metaphysician resembles the analytic poulterer who slew it to get at them in lump, and found *nothing* for his pains...Cut into it metaphysically with a view of grasping the embryo truth...and every trace of ‘what has been’ vanishes beneath the knife; -- the breathing realities are dead, and lifeless abstractions are in their place.<sup>81</sup>

The “life of consciousness” is murdered by the philosopher who, like the greedy poulterer in the parable, seeks to get more out of the mind than it can yield. Ferrier's identification of analysis (itself an act of mind, it is to be remembered) with physiological dissection is a stock metaphor, echoing Wordsworth's “We murder to dissect.” But in a historical moment, where psychophysical reductions of mind to brain were en vogue—the metaphor was also literal, with phrenologists seeking to draw the boundaries of thought as physiological zones.

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<sup>80</sup> The central target of Ferrier's criticism is Thomas Brown (1778-1820), who of course in hindsight and upon closer scrutiny is not always regarded as wholly “associated” with the research program in question. See Mike Dacey, “Association Without Associative Links: Thomas Brown and the Associationist Project,” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 54 (2015): 31-40. See also Margaret W. Landes, “Thomas Brown: Associationist(?)” *The Philosophical Review* 35, no.5 (September 1926), 447-464.

<sup>81</sup> James Frederick Ferrier, “The Philosophy of Consciousness (Part 1),” *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 43, no.268 (1838): 192. The conceptual metaphor of analysis as physical dissection is too vast to receive adequate treatment here; but Ferrier's imagery here does illustrate that the notion of “consciousness” is often imbued with properties that in a different intellectual context would be attributed to life itself.

The worlds into which Poe's tales bring us have already been visited by the knife of analysis. Just as the model of the physical sciences produces consciousness as a dead specimen, so too are Poe's death tales filled with ideal scenes for a fiction writer of the sensation tale to satisfy the hunger for empirical exactitude. For Ferrier, "man is a living soul; science has been trained among the *dead*."<sup>82</sup> Two claims are ventured here by Ferrier: Poe's tales do not help themselves to the former positive conviction, even as they concur with the latter. If this is true, then Poe's tales call into question the vitalism (including that which will be taken up by William James) that is sometimes positioned as an inevitable response to the limits of deterministic explanation. On the contrary, however, the limits of deterministic explanation mean precisely that no mental substance (soul) can be metaphysically posited. The utterly ungrounded "I" in "A Predicament" still has a voice.

Indeed, a metaphysical error (or slippage) must be committed in order for analysis (a mental act) to be regarded as reaching into the substance of things. I will return to this later in the next section. For now, I want to suggest that the sensation paradigm opens up a way of reading farther into Poe's corpus, even when the "sensation" is no longer the governing unit of analysis. We can now (happily) move beyond the sensation tale, to the "Tales of Ratiocination" for which Poe came to be known.<sup>83</sup> But the ratiocinative tale is no more preoccupied with analysis than the sensation tale was: in both styles, there is a perfect (and disturbing) fit between the narrator's analytical propensities and the physical disaggregation that they discover in their subject matter.

### 3. POE AND THE UNITS OF MIND: "THE MAN THAT WAS USED UP"

"The Man That Was Used Up" chronicles the narrator's obsessive inquiry into the personage of a well-known war general, "that truly fine-looking fellow, Brevet Brigadier General John A.B.C. Smith," and culminates with the disturbing resolution of that inquiry.<sup>84</sup> Throughout the story, the narrator's language resounds with the comic hyperbole of determinate fact. He struggles to manage the incompleteness of his knowledge: "Someone *did* introduce me to the gentleman, I am sure – at some public meeting, I know very well – held about something of great importance, no doubt – at some place or other, I feel convinced, – whose name I have unaccountably forgotten." Indeed, it is as if the very compulsion towards "comprehension" is what produces an epistemic black-out on the part of the narrator, who blames his memory

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>83</sup> Strictly speaking, "Tales of Ratiocination" refers only to "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" (1842-3), and "The Purloined Letter" (1841), the trio of stories later identified with the birth of detective fiction. Of these three I discuss only "Murders in the Rue Morgue" here, but I pair it with "The Man That Was Used Up" (1839) because I think they are both parodies of exhaustive analysis. See Poe's famous remark, in an 1846 letter, that "these tales of ratiocination... owe most of their popularity to being something in a new key." I think that Poe intended the musical metaphor to undercut the notion of ratiocination, not to reinforce it. In the same letter, he writes that a publisher who has a "taste for ratiocination" and wants to group the ratiocinative tales together in one volume "is not *representing* my mind in its various phases – it is not giving me fair play...one of my chief aims has been the widest diversity of subject, thought, & especially *tone* & manner of handling. Were all my tales now before me in a large volume...the merit which would principally arrest my attention would be the wide *diversity and variety*" (*SW*, 685).

<sup>84</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "The Man That Was Used Up," in *SW*, 190.

failures on a “degree of anxious embarrassment which operated to prevent any definite impressions of either time or place” (190-91). The narrator admits that “the slightest appearance of mystery – of any point I cannot exactly comprehend – puts me at once into a pitiable state of agitation” (191). A flurry of clauses meant to indicate epistemic commitment (“I am sure,” “I feel convinced,” “I know very well”) terminate in dashes that compulsively impede the flow of thought, rather than underscoring its contents. The linguistic markers of certainty blend comically with those of anxiety and actually prevent or block the very processes of empirical data-gathering that the narrator seems so driven to perform. As I have already indicated, the anxiety to know ironically prevents “any definite impression of either time or place” from forming. The *aesthetic* salience of the “indefinite” impression or sensation for Poe as critic (in perfect contradistinction to the aspirations of his narrators) is something that I demonstrate below. For now, it is striking that Poe’s story winks, so to speak, at the poetic function precisely at the moment when the narrator admits to falling short of his own criteria for empirical knowledge.

The General’s very name blurs the boundary between determinate precision and empty universality: “John A.B.C. Smith.” The name establishes an eerie and farcical congruity between the narrator’s desire to exercise a “definite” mode of thinking, on the one hand, and the object of his meditations on the other. That is, the general’s name seems to answer a little too perfectly to the modes of analysis, indeed the alphabetic discreteness, that the narrator brings to bear on him. After this unsettled beginning, the narrator begins to praise the general with a litany of descriptors whose discrete character at first goes unmarked in the narrative, or is taken for granted as a germane mode of description. For example, at first it seems to be a mark of the narrator’s adoration for “that truly fine-looking fellow, Brevet Brigadier General John A.B.C. Smith” that the narrator treats every part of his hero’s body separately. Here is a short sample of what goes on for pages:

The bust of the General was unquestionably the finest bust I ever saw. For your life you could not have found a fault with its wonderful proportion...The arms altogether were admirably modelled. Nor were the lower limbs less superb. These were indeed, the *ne plus ultra* of good legs. Every connoisseur in such matters admitted the legs to be good. There was neither too much flesh, nor too little, -- neither rudeness nor fragility. I could not imagine a more graceful curve. (191)

The narrator moves breathlessly from art history to the discourses of physiognomy to scientific classification and finally to a hilarious non sequitur about his sculptor friend, who might be inspired by the General’s body parts to do some “chipping”: “I wish to God my young and talented friend Chiponchipino, the sculptor had but seen the legs of Brevet Brigadier General John A. B. C. Smith” (191-92). The narrator’s lyricism spoofs (and is spoofed by) an early modern and even ancient mode of the blazon, where the body parts of the beloved are treated in metonymic order, but the associative frenzy of his thoughts undoes the conceit of separable components. And yet the sinister potential of Poe’s tale resides precisely in the blending of this amorous mode of analysis with the mechanical precision of the industrial age and its interchangeable parts: indeed, the narrator gushes, “I perceived, too, that the gallant soldier preferred topics of philosophical interest, and that he delighted, especially, in commenting upon the rapid march of mechanical invention.” Later on, he muses: “I left General Smith with a heightened interest in the man, with an exalted opinion of his conversational powers, and a deep sense of the valuable privileges we enjoy in living in this age of mechanical invention” (193).

But this “twist” in the plot (or rather in the process of investigation) means that the very personage of General Smith will answer to the fragmentation that was already implicit in the narrator’s descriptions. The revelation takes place when the narrator finally makes it into the general’s dressing room, an intimate interior space where the presupposed existence of an underlying self is suddenly and violently laid to rest:

As I entered the chamber, I looked about, of course, for the occupant, but did not immediately perceive him. There was a large and exceedingly odd looking bundle of something which lay close by my feet on the floor, and, as I was not in the best humor in the world, I gave it a kick out of the way.

‘Hem! Ahem! Rather civil that, I should say’ said the bundle, in one of the smallest, and altogether the funniest little voices, between a squeak and a whistle, that I ever heard in all the days of my existence. (197)

Just as in “A Predicament,” we are left wondering by what miracle or mechanism an “I” is produced out of what appears to be a bundle of “it”s. In this way, the analytical eye of the narrator has been corroborated – answered all too literally – by the horrific facts of Smith’s disaggregated person. The narrator’s investment in determinate facts is met by realities that are determinate beyond the narrator’s wildest speculation. Indeed, it is precisely the reduction of personal identity to determinate fact that makes the story so fantastical. We will see in a moment that there are canonical philosophical resonances to the proposition that the idea of personal identity is destroyed by its susceptibility to extant modes of explanatory reduction.

The central figure in “The Man that Was Used Up” disturbingly mirrors the narrator’s penchant for exhaustive analysis: The General can be exhaustively known because he is in fact exhausted by the sum of his parts – and answers perfectly, which is to say, horrifically, to the sensationalist paradigm and to extant units of analysis. The narrator’s desire for “full comprehension” is satisfied because the hero turns out literally to be composed of interchangeable parts. Quite simply (that is, by means of a philosophical poetics of simplicity, cynical in its concreteness), Poe’s tale makes all too plain the relationship between the narrator’s “objectifying” habits of description and the world of objects and objectification to which it answers.

It is precisely in this moment of analytic fragmentation that we leave the epistemological frame and start to learn something of the truth that is disguised in the General’s “non-descript” nullity. Here is the narrator watching in horror as the bundle gets “dressed” (constituted as a body) in his bedroom by having his “negro servant,” Pompey, assemble together a series of prosthetic body parts:

‘Strange you shouldn’t know me, though, isn’t it?’ presently resqueaked the nondescript, which I now perceived was performing, upon the floor, some inexplicable evolution, very analogous to the drawing on of a stocking. There was only a single leg, however, apparent.

‘Strange you shouldn’t know me, though, isn’t it? Pompey, bring me that leg!’ Here Pompey handed the bundle a very capital cork leg, all ready dressed, which it screwed on in a trice, and then it stood upright before my eyes. (197)

The General repeats (or “resqueaks”) the same question twice: ‘Strange you shouldn’t know me though, isn’t it?’, suggesting (contra what the General says) that what has become uncanny is the

continuation of personal identity, and not its interruption. The idea of enduring identity is passed off as a natural feat of the imagination, and at the same time as one that requires full access to the latest products and quick domestic labor: The General depends on his “negro servant” entirely to hasten both the illusion of his own continued existence, and the illusion of its uninterrupted recognition by the narrator: “Pompey, bring me that leg!” When, in a final flourish for the dressing ritual of the “bundle,” Pompey installs the General’s prosthetic tongue, the narrator remarks that Pompey “went up to his master, and opened his mouth with the knowing air of a horse-jockey” (198). This metaphor places the General in the role of the horse, but also invokes the dynamic of a puppeteer and puppet, suggesting just one more twist in a conceptual scheme according to which the “master” is precariously held together by black labor.<sup>85</sup> Pompey the bundler – the tale cannot do without him as a point of reference.<sup>86</sup>

The proto-modernist, surreal image of the General as a squeaking “bundle,” anticipating perhaps Kafka’s Odradek, would have struck a sharp contrast with the official imagery of Burton’s *Gentleman’s Magazine*, where Poe published the story under financial duress: the journal whose founder, William Evans Burton “aspired to create a journal deserving ‘a place upon the parlor table of every Gentleman in the United States.’”<sup>87</sup> It is indeed striking that in Poe’s tales even and especially the “victors” of history are subsumed under the logic of objectification. The much talked-about war that reduces the General to a commercialized “bundle” is referred to in the story via racist linguistic caricature as “The Late Bugaboo and Kickapoo Campaign.” This fictional war, during which the war hero gets himself “used up,” is a synecdoche for the series of “Indian Wars” or military attacks against indigenous peoples waged in the 1830s by Andrew Jackson using federal troops. Here is Poe’s war general as talking bundle:

‘And a bloody action it was,’ continued the thing, as if in a soliloquy; ‘but then one mustn’t fight with the Bugaboos and Kickapoos, and think of coming off with a mere scratch. Pompey, I’ll thank you now for that arm. Thomas’ [turning to me] ‘is decidedly the best hand at a cork leg; but if you should ever want an arm, my dear fellow, you must really let me recommend you to Bishop.’ (187)

For Robert A. Beuka, “The Man that was Used Up” is a satire of Jacksonian masculinity and the ethnic cleansing projects that underlie it. The story is “a revisionary look at the figure of the American, imagining a body – and, by extension, a body politic – whose illusion of wholeness or unity is both compromised and tenuously held together held together by contemporary race politics.”<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> See Teresa A. Godu, “Poe, Sensationalism, and Slavery,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 97.

<sup>86</sup> For a study of Pompey in other of Poe’s tales – but not this one – see Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 58. Morrison argues that Pompey, in “How to Write a Blackwood Article” represents a “slip” in the usual literary “strategies employed to secure [Poe’s] characters’ (and his readers’) identity.”

<sup>87</sup> See J. Gerald Kennedy, “Unwinnable Wars, Unspeakable Wounds: Locating ‘The Man That Was Used Up,’” *Poe Studies* 39-40, nos. 1-2 (2006): 79.

<sup>88</sup> Robert A. Beuka, “The Jacksonian Man of Many Parts,” *The Edgar Allan Poe Review* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 30.

The white power expressed as generic abstraction (“A.B.C.”) in the General’s name, then, becomes possible within the context of “Indian Removal.” On this reading, Poe’s narrator would succeed in “re-marking” the un-marked: “A remarkable man,” he says of Smith, the hero who at first seems utterly “General.” Poe calls new attention to the unmarked general by pushing his generality to the extremes whereby it becomes palpable again. He then discovers that this identity itself is a fiction or a *trompe d’oeil* effect whose piecemeal nature was really evident all along. The “self-made” man is anything-but; rather, he is made up of “store-bought” items and assembled by Pompey, his “negro valet.” Within this satire of associationist aggregation, some assembly is always required.

My aim here, however, is to situate Poe’s tale within the specific context of the parody of exhaustive analysis that can be found throughout his corpus. It could be rightfully objected that I am taking the epistemology of the tale too seriously, when the philosophical discourses appear more as available “talk” that is marshalled primarily for entertainment, and then perhaps secondarily as social satire. Yet the term “bundle” figures centrally in the notorious empiricist critique of substance articulated by David Hume and his readers – and perhaps even constitutes a parodic element common to both Poe and Hume, whereby a “bundle” is substituted for personal identity. The deflated General A.B.C. Smith as a bundle makes it impossible to neglect the fact that a naturalistic science of the mind is entangled with the story’s plot elements of farce and terror; that is, with an ‘analysis’ of substance generally (and the substance of white heroism, particularly) into nothing.

#### 4. WHAT IS HOLDING US TOGETHER? POE’S IRONIC EMPIRICISM AND HUME’S BINDING PROBLEM

Poe’s tale is deeply Humean in that it delivers up The Self as absence to a narrative obsessed with the incremental accumulation of realistic detail. The narrator of “The Man That Was Used Up” begins with a pre-emptive idea of the General as an enduring and independent substance – he begins, that is with the idea of identity – but this idea turns out to be, in technical terms, what Hume considered a mere “fiction.” Poe’s text itself – in contradistinction to the purported aim of his narrator, does not cover over the gaps and discontinuities that are inevitably discovered between atomic units of perception, but rather thematizes them. In this way, Poe’s fiction is actually antithetical to Hume’s notion of fiction. In Hume’s writing, the bundle as a metaphor undoes the fiction of identity, while preserving it as a felt absence in ensuing philosophical discourse. Similarly, Poe’s tale does not make a clean break with the convenient fictions of the cultural imagination but rather invites critical reflection on them as worthy of examination.

Here is Hume’s classic “bundle” formulation, which addresses the problem of personal identity (though with implications for the question of continued existence in general):<sup>89</sup>

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade,

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<sup>89</sup> The question could be asked of Hume, why aren’t outer objects also characterized as “bundles”? Does the notion of “perpetual flux and movement” figure into the skepticism of substance as saliently as it figures into the skepticism of the self?



love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception...If anyone upon serious and unprejudic'd reflexion, thinks he has a different notion of *himself*, I must confess I can reason no longer with him. All I can allow him is, that he may be in the right as well as I, and that we are essentially different in this particular...He may, perhaps, perceive something simple and continu'd, which he calls *himself*; *tho' I am certain there is no such principle in me*. But setting aside some metaphysicians of this kind, I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement.<sup>90</sup>

Here Hume formulates the provocative key insight that William James will revive over a century later in his "Stream of Consciousness" chapter, while claiming to contradict Hume (see above). That the idea of something "simple and continu'd" is itself contrary to experience. But Hume's famous passage seems more concerned with problems of narration than with metaphysical postulation. In fact, the ordinary first-person experimentalist who claims to discover a "sense of self" among his various perceptions must really be a "metaphysician" in disguise – that is, his empirical inquiry is clouded by preconceived commitments. We continue to "call" ourselves without ever being able to "catch" ourselves.

Characterizing sensory impressions in a way that pits them against the possibility of constancy right off the bat, Hume invokes "perpetual flux and movement" and the "inconceivable rapidity" with which perceptions succeed one another. This itself implies that the perceiver cannot really manage the processes of perception with which he or she is involved, and also emphasizes a distinction between the process of "perpetual flux" and conception *per se*. The fact that the different perceptions "are in a perpetual flux and movement" suggests that there is no one way to bundle them, and that the shape of the bundle will be forever adapting to the variations of its contents. Hume's emphasis that the perceptions "succeed each other with an *inconceivable* rapidity" suggests the absence of a point of reference that could comprehend the structure of what is collected; in fact it is precisely this point of reference that is diffused into a diverse collection of entities.

And what of the "bundle" that becomes the subversive new appellation for "the rest of mankind" – is the "bundle" to be taken as a metaphor? Apparently so, since the "bundle" makes the more neutral notion of a collection more vivid along figural lines; but at the same time, it is an image that by metaphoric means seems to want to *undo* the extra-literal or figurative elements that have been super-added to the particular sensory impressions that Hume considered to be primary phenomena. The designation "nothing but...a bundle of different perceptions" which hints at an explanatory reduction, therefore makes the bundle not only particularly striking as a metaphorical figure in the moment of empirical precision, but also a figure that is remarkable *in its form of metaphoricality*. For the "bundle" is a metaphor that, in construing the perceptions according to a certain figure, actually aims to negate the very possibility of form.

"Identity" becomes for Hume an illicit imposition on difference. But what holds the differences together? Some notion of identity, not only grammatical but categorical, is already presupposed merely in framing the first-person, introspective experiment that Hume initially uses

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<sup>90</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 2nd ed., eds. L.A. Selby-Bigge and P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 252.

to test out the notion of identity. The “bundle” formulation itself is produced in Hume’s text at the moment when he pivots from the first-person point of view (entering “most intimately into what I call myself”) to the third person (“I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle...”). As Barry Stroud points out (though he calls his own intervention a “vague complaint”), it is much easier to designate the Self as a “bundle” in the third person, than it might be to do so in the first person. Stroud asks, “Does his theory that we are all nothing but bundles of perceptions have whatever plausibility it has only because I do not ask the embarrassing question about my own identity that seems so easy to answer along Humean lines in the case of other people? What becomes of the mind or the imagination when it too is said to be a fiction?”<sup>91</sup>

Perhaps Poe’s tale corroborates Stroud’s observation that the Humean bundle as a construct in some way depends on the meeting of two minds, and is insupportable in the first-person case. There is a sense in which the General as a bundle is co-constituted by the narrator who pursues him. Conversely, the General may be helping to hold the narrator together. Revisiting the conclusion of Poe’s tale in light of the negative conclusion that Hume “venture[s] to affirm,” we may begin to wonder how the grasping of the Used-Up Man’s “identity” bears on the narrator’s own sense of self, and of rational inquiry. Recall that upon being acquainted directly with the General as a “bundle” in his dressing room, the narrator says that he “took leave of him at once, with a perfect understanding of the true state of affairs, with a full comprehension of the mystery which had troubled me so long. It was evident. It was a clear case. Brevet Brigadier general John A. B.C. Smith was the man – was *the man that was used up*” (89). It is not clear whether or not the narrator of Poe’s tale feels implicated by the frightening empiricist conclusion that he himself may be nothing but the set of fictionalized impressions that have been enumerated on the page.

Hume ironizes the conceit of introspection or self-narration to the point of dropping it altogether for more of a methodological critique of the notion of Self, suggesting ironically that he is prevented from postulating a Self – let alone explicating it – precisely by his meticulous empirical method. As I have already begun to indicate through the discussion of those self-observers that Hume calls “metaphysicians,” Hume opens the section on *Personal Identity* by citing “some philosophers, who imagine we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our Self” (251). Hume’s emphasis on “every moment” is critical – and not surprising for readers of Poe’s farce of the transnational sensation tale. Just like these fictional experiments with self-narration, the procedures of “some philosophers” are ironically self-undermining: they set up an impossible criterion for observation that is nevertheless identified as necessary for the philosophical conclusion that is sought. Indeed, Poe’s text, perhaps like Hume’s, moves in an ironic mode. A consciousness of Self would have to be sustained at “every moment” in order for the observation of object constancy to be empirically sound. This conclusion either destroys the viability of the idea of personal identity or radically calls into question the sufficiency of empirical evidence for the explanation of basic mental concepts. However, at the root of this falling apart of substance is not a distracted attention but rather a methodological devotion to what is empirically given.<sup>92</sup> In fact, it is a point that recalls the satire of exhaustive record that

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<sup>91</sup> Barry Stroud, *Hume* (London, England: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), 132.

<sup>92</sup> Though William James claims to reject Hume absolutely, in his “Stream of Consciousness” chapter, James’ criticism of sensationalism (which I have described above) revives Hume’s line of argument exactly: that reductive empiricism is unfaithful to its own empirical methodology. See James, *Principles*, 225.

has been woven into the literary history of the first-person from Tristram Shandy to Poe: doomed to failure from the outset.

It follows from the empiricist picture of mind that such a requirement could never be met with regard to anything at all, since “there is no impression constant and invariable.”<sup>93</sup> Therefore the empiricist’s trained, meticulous attentiveness to moment-to-moment change actually undermines the idea of substance, rather than detecting a basis for it. No enumeration of mental contents, no list or catalog, however exhaustive, could provide a basis for the identity that is “naturally” attributed to General Smith over and above his “A.B.C.” alphabetically discrete parts – or to anyone.

Hume continues: “Unluckily all these positive assertions are contrary to that very experience, which is pleaded for them, nor have we any idea of *self*, after the manner it is here explain’d. For from what impression cou’d this idea be deriv’d?” Hume describes a perturbing state of affairs in which we can not only be deluded about what is, but also about what ideas we in fact currently hold. It is not only that there is no Self, but also that there is no *idea* of the Self, since all ideas proceed from impressions. What we have in lieu of an idea is what Hume calls -- with perhaps not negligible damage to the field of literary studies – a “fiction.”<sup>94</sup> It is too bad that recent trends in cognitive science and literary study often equate the function of “narrative” with that of rendering order and coherence where none is to be found. This is indeed the Humean negative notion of “fiction,” whereas what I am pursuing here is a literary lineage that aligns mental and aesthetic form by defamiliarizing the attribution of continuity and unity.

Hume describes a perturbing state of affairs (for philosophy, but also for self-conception generally) in which people can not only be deluded about what exists, but also about what ideas they in fact currently hold. Unlike Kant’s later notion of an *a priori* category of identity, for example, for Hume the attribution of identity is the result of an irrevocable habit that is exercised over time – a tendency to join discrete sensory impressions together in ways that could never be rightfully deemed to be intrinsic to them.

As Barry Stroud comments in his book-length study of Hume, Hume does not invent the long tradition of treating ideas as correspondences to sensory impressions which are their basis (the Theory of Ideas); but he does move beyond that inherited empiricist premise (a premise itself, Stroud maintains, unquestioned by Hume) to the end of subjecting to radical interrogation such apparently groundless ideas as the idea of the self, or, by the same token, the continuity of

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<sup>93</sup> In fact, this feature of Hume’s argument leads A.J. Ayer to conclude that Hume’s argument is really logical and not “empirical” as he presents it to be: “There is nothing that would count as ‘stumbling upon’ oneself, as opposed to a particular perception.” Thus, “the idea of self as substance...is to be disregarded...because it is in principle unverifiable” [i.e. not just because no one has yet to verify it]. See A.J. Ayer, Introduction to *British Empirical Philosophers: Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Reid and J.S. Mill*, ed. A.J. Ayer and Raymond Winch. (London: Routledge, 1963), 27-28.

<sup>94</sup> Hume’s use of the term “to designate mental constructions lacking any known, objective reference or archetype” goes back to Hobbes and Berkeley. See Vol. 2 of David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton, eds., *A Treatise of Human Nature: A Critical Edition* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007) 703. However, the sense of a *necessary* or *productive* fiction that is activated in Hume’s usage may be more fully explained with reference to the concept of a “legal fiction,” which in the eighteenth century was more clearly defined than its literary counterpart. See Peter Degabriel, “The Legal Fiction and Epistolary Form: Frances Burney’s *Evelina*” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 14, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 24

objects --not least among them are the self.<sup>95</sup> The closer one subjects one's experience to scrutiny, the more glaring the gaps and omissions: "What will suffice to prove this hypothesis to the satisfaction of every fair enquirer, is to shew from daily experience and observation, that the objects, which are variable or interrupted, and yet are suppos'd to continue the same, are such only as consist of a succession of parts, connected together by resemblance, contiguity or causation" (*Treatise*, 255). In Hume's system, "our propensity to this mistake" is inescapable – that, is just as much a matter of fact as the fragmentary status of the experience itself: "We feign the continu'd existence of the perceptions of our senses, to remove the interruption; and run into the notion of a *soul* and *self*, and *substance*, to disguise the variation" (254).

Perhaps there is something pervasive about the way in which Hume's *intrasubjective* gaps implicitly index *intersubjective* ones. The unacknowledged gaps in experience that Hume is constantly beholden to have echoes in or are referred back, at the level of method, to intersubjective gaps. In this way he refers the gap within experience to a possible gap between and among different centers of experience: "If any one upon serious and unprejudic'd reflexion, thinks he has a different notion of *himself*, I must confess I can reason no longer with him. All I can allow him is, that he may be in the right as well as I, and that we are essentially different in this particular. He may, perhaps, perceive something simple and continu'd, which he calls *himself*; tho I am certain there is no such principle in me" (252). He then continues, referring to this imaginary layman clinging to a sense of self as an unreflective "metaphysician": "But setting aside some metaphysicians of this kind, I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement. Our eyes cannot turn in their sockets without varying our perceptions" (252).

Empiricist procedures here intersect uncomfortably with introspective ones. Hume is elaborating a method in the process of specifying a philosophical finding, and the constant mutual implications of both endeavors is perhaps one way in which philosophical empiricism opens up onto questions of intersubjectivity and "fiction" that modernist writers and their precursors tackle head on.

Hume's "bundle" takes the atomism inherited from the Theory of Ideas into a radical impasse, leading us into an explanatory framework which not only admits of its own contingent gaps, but concludes that such gaps are constitutive of any possible explanation.<sup>96</sup> Indeed, the term "bundle" only appears in the context of Hume's discussion of personal identity, but his skeptical account of personal identity is intimately connected with a broader critique of substance in general. Humean skepticism problematizes the synchronic unity and diachronic identity of "mind" and "body" alike. In Book I of his *Treatise*, Hume argues:

It may be infer'd that no other faculty is requir'd, beside the senses, to convince us of the external existence of body. But to prevent this inference, we need only

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<sup>95</sup> See extended discussion both of the so-called "Theory of Ideas" that Hume tacitly inherited from his empiricist predecessors and the controversies about whether or not he was bound to it in Barry Stroud, *Hume*, 9, 17-42.

<sup>96</sup> See Barry Stroud's observation that Hume "leave[s] the reflective philosopher with no reason for assenting to what he has discovered he cannot help believing anyway...Living in full recognition of these forces and limitations is what Hume means by the 'mitigated scepticism' he accepts." Stroud, "Naturalism and Skepticism in the Philosophy of Hume." *The Oxford Handbook of Hume*, ed. Paul Russell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 21.

weigh...that, properly speaking, 'tis not our body we perceive, when we regard our limbs and members, but certain impressions, which enter by the senses ; so that the ascribing a real and corporeal existence to these impressions, or to their objects, is an act of mind as difficult to explain, as that which we examine at present. (190)

Hume relegates *both* the metaphysical categories of “Soul” and “Substance” to “acts of mind” that are difficult to explain; and, as we shall see, material things, taken as continued existences, are not less “fictional,” in his nomenclature, than immaterial ones. In this way, crucially the “problem of personal identity” calls into question the notion of substance, generally. Rather than foregrounding a distinction between “inner” and “outer” realities, for example, Hume is more concerned with the uncritical (but apparently inevitable) unconscious, compulsive procedure or “habit” of mind according to which enduring, independent substances are posited by the mind, over and above the empirical evidence for them. Thus, the scientific investigation of substance refers us to “an act of mind” which then becomes the locus of inquiry, supplanting as it were the original investigation. Hume offers the following metareflection: “We may well ask, *What causes induce us to believe in the existence of body?* But 'tis in vain to ask, *Whether there be a body or not?*” (187). This adjustment of the lamp of inquiry, towards an imaginative faculty not fully beholden to the occasions of sense, prepares the way for Hume’s notion of “fiction.”<sup>97</sup>

## 5. IMPRESSIONS FICTIONALIZED

Hume’s notion of fiction and fictionalization is tethered to his commitment to the phenomenal reality of diversity over identity. His suspicion of constancy applies equally to knowing subjects as to objects known:

The identity, which we ascribe to the mind of man, is only a *fictitious* one, and of a like kind with that which we ascribe to vegetables and animal bodies. It cannot, therefore, have a different origin, but must proceed from a like operation of the imagination upon like objects. (259)

On Hume’s radical account, even the ascription of identity to “the mind of man” is itself relegated to an operation of the imagination, suggesting (albeit paradoxically) that the imagination does not itself rely on the fiction of “identity” for its own operations.<sup>98</sup> Notice how even in this passage, the imagination is not construed as a stable entity; rather the idea of substance is born of “a like operation of the imagination upon like objects” – a disarming and

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<sup>97</sup> See Noam Chomsky’s argument that Hume is an important part of a “rather significant change” in the history of science and philosophy “that took several centuries to become internalized” – a successful response to “epistemic limits” that involves “lowering one’s sights from understanding the world to understanding theories about the world.” *The Science of Language: Interviews with James McGilvray* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 134.

<sup>98</sup> This problematic will become much more central, as I turn to “Murders in the Rue Morgue” and the corresponding Humean question of whether or not the imagination is rule-governed in its progressions over time. I refer to this as the *descriptive* or *diachronic* dimension of the associationist paradigm (See the next section, “Why does one thought lead to another?”)

profoundly defamiliarizing way of pulling apart both sides of the static “subject/object” dyad central to his philosophical tradition. That is, Hume does not feel entitled to resolve “like operation of the imagination” across time into an enduring identity, any more than he thinks we are entitled to produce an identity out of the “like objects” that such operations of the imaginations produce.

In Hume’s *Treatise* the skepticism about the self – and indeed about any substance – is presented as following directly from an originary separability of perceptions from one another: “what we call a *mind* is nothing but a heap or collection of different perceptions, united together by certain relations, and suppose’d, tho’ falsely, to be endow’d with a perfect simplicity and identity.”<sup>99</sup> The critique of substance generally is not much different:

The smooth passage of the imagination along the ideas of the resembling perceptions makes us ascribe to them a perfect identity. The interrupted manner of their appearance makes us consider them as so many resembling, but still distinct beings, which appear after certain intervals. The perplexity arising from this contradiction produces a propensity to unite these broken appearances by the fiction of a continu’d existence. (205)

Ironically, then, the idea of personal identity, of a “self,” is simply not one that can live up to the scrutiny of the narrating self (or “metaphysician”) who seeks to corroborate it with empirical detail. Instead, the Self is the result of a “propensity to unite...broken appearances.”

The “General A.B.C. Smith” is an exemplary “composite substance,” and just for that reason is attended by the mystery that for Hume attends the ascription of synchronic unity. But it is the repeated social discourse of admiration for the General that generates the concept of his diachronic identity, while seeming merely to refer to something pre-existing. The mystery of the General’s enduring identity gets figured linguistically – through the motif of a repeated statement whose “content” always remains tantalizingly incomplete. One after another, a series of mutual friends seem on the verge of supplying the missing clue: “Bless my soul! – blood and thunder, and all that! – prodigies of valor! – heard of him of course? – you know he’s the man –” The narrator over and over again tries to coax from his interlocutors the conspicuously absent propositional content opened up by the statement that again and again he overhears in different situations, which each time are comically interrupted: “Smith! – Brevet Brigadier General John A. B. C.! Why, you know he’s the man –” Each promisingly definitive description is left open with (or annihilated by?) a dash. A Humean reading might suggest that Poe’s text, by exposing its narrator to these relentlessly comic but never-quite-identical repetitions, is thematizing the “smooth passage of the imagination along the ideas of resembling perceptions.” That is, the investigation of the General’s substance produces over time what it purports to characterize.

That the General may be the result of an intersubjective feat of the imagination, however, is not the conclusion that Poe’s tale draws. After witnessing the “bundle” first-hand, the narrator is finally able to supply the repeated catchphrase with its missing propositional content – but in such a way that nullifies “the man” as a grammatical and ontological subject, rather than supplying him with any known predicates: “It was evident. It was a clear case. Brevet Brigadier General John A.B.C. Smith was the man – was *the man that was used up*” (199). In this parody of exhaustive description, clarity is accompanied by nullity.

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<sup>99</sup> To call this into question is to put one’s finger on the central assumptions that remain unexamined in Hume, namely the atomistic empiricism that he inherits.

An acknowledgement of the tension between substance and the “broken appearances” that compose it is present in Poe’s tale when the narrator notes that the General, while plainly heroic, is nevertheless attended by a mystery that dogs the narrator: “I could not bring myself to believe that the remarkable something to which I alluded just now, -- that the odd air of *je ne sais quoi* which hung about my new acquaintance, -- lay altogether, or indeed at all, in the supreme excellence of his bodily endowments” (192). The narrator, dutiful in his method of explanation, seeks to reduce the “air of *je ne sais quoi*” to a determinate substrate, but then is simultaneously exasperated with the results of the explanatory reduction itself.

Moving beyond the critical, nominalist traditions of previous centuries, Hume asserts that “the controversy concerning identity is not merely a dispute of words. For when we attribute identity, in an improper sense, to variable or interrupted objects, our mistake is not confin’d to the expression, but is commonly attended with a fiction, either of something invariable and uninterrupted, or of something mysterious and inexplicable, or at least with a propensity to such fictions” (*Treatise*, 255). This “fiction” seems to be closely related to the “act of mind” that Hume credits with the ascription of “a real and corporeal existence to... impressions.” This “propensity to such fictions,” understood as an inevitable, naturalistic proclivity, must not be fully explicable in terms of the pre-conceived notions gripping the “metaphysician” who stubbornly continues to narrate himself differently from the way Hume might himself.

Elaborating the metaphor of “fiction” or aesthetic play, but tying it to dissimulation and deception, Hume writes: “Thus we feign the continu’d existence of the perceptions of our senses, to remove the interruption; and run into the notion of a *soul*, and *self*, and *substance*, to disguise the variation” (254). On the one hand, then, from the point of view of literary studies -- and the importance of this cannot be overstated -- Hume’s term “fiction” is a *faux ami*: Its meaning simply has nothing to do with the fictions we encounter when we read a page from Edgar Allan Poe, or Virginia Woolf, or Toni Morrison (although Hume’s chosen metaphor may be revealing of enduring denigrating attitudes in the Anglophone tradition toward novels). On the other hand, however, Humean “fiction” cannot be so easily identified with “delusion” as we might think (that is, it cannot simply be identified with the misapprehension of verbal art as a lie).<sup>100</sup> That is because imaginative “fictions” have a vital role in the production of objective knowledge. A capacity for fiction, then, for Hume, is not merely a capacity to make mistakes; it is rather an indication of the limits of rational explanation.

Barry Stroud elaborates the relationship between such “fictions” and the production of objectivity: “Our notions of some of the things we regard as objective (e.g. necessary connections between events, enduring objects, etc.) are thus explained in terms of fictions or operations of the mind.”<sup>101</sup> Stroud explicates the notion of “fiction” in Hume in the following way: “the idea of the individual mind is a ‘fiction’ in the sense that our having the idea is explained without supposing that there is any such thing.”<sup>102</sup> Fictions spring from internal causes, whatever their truth content.

However, it could be specified further that Hume’s use of “fiction” seems to focus on cases where diversity is abbreviated (he does not consider taking a single impression for a diversity of impressions to be a “fiction”; the characteristic “fictionalizing” gesture is one

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<sup>100</sup> For the conceptual distinction between aesthetic illusion and delusion, see Robert Kaufman, “Poetry’s Ethics? Theodor W. Adorno and Robert Duncan on Aesthetic Illusion and Sociopolitical Delusion. *New German Critique* 97 (Winter, 2006): 73-118.

<sup>101</sup> Stroud, *Hume*, 129.

<sup>102</sup> Stroud, “Naturalism and Skepticism,” 26.

according to which “the mind...slides easily” from one impression or another; or, as I have quoted above, one in which the mind “removes the interruption”). Connections which are felt as necessary are in fact contributed by the imagination. We may be forced, then, to acknowledge that “fiction” in Hume’s nomenclature, formulated wholly independently from his discussion of aesthetics, nevertheless suggests a complex intermediary position occupied by the imagination, between the poles of everyday and aesthetic cognition.

“There really is no end to the march of invention,” quips Poe’s General, whose Self has been unmasked not only as “manufactured” (from the point of view of mechanical reproduction) but also as entirely “fictional,” in just Hume’s sense: Both synchronically as a coherent material body, and diachronically as a war hero sustained by the moment-to-moment accumulation of social talk, the self-continuity of the “talking bundle” is a product of the narrator’s imagination, which – like all our imaginations – in Hume’s parlance “disguises the interruption.”

## 6. PAVING OVER THE GAPS: THE DISAVOWAL OF SKEPTICISM

Of course, there are other, more reductive ways of interpreting Hume’s skeptical impasse, or of resolving the relationship between fiction and skepticism. These are philosophical positions which I would like to suggest are enacted (but not necessarily endorsed) in Poe’s writing precisely in the way that the narrator covers over the skeptical moment with his “full comprehension.”

A current evaluation of the afterlife of Humean skepticism notes: “Out of Hume’s very forthright negative attitude there developed two more subtle variants. One of these variants is in the empiricist tradition. That tradition modified Hume’s approach by developing it into a form of reductionism. The experiences which gave rise, through habit, to the mistaken belief (in, for example, substance or causation) are presented as what the belief really affirms.”<sup>103</sup> Thus, on what I am calling the “uncritical” reading of Hume, the “bundle” would be interpreted as the ultimate reality previously named by the term “substance.” And indeed, this is precisely the nightmare that Poe’s tale delivers up to us in the guise of empirical fact.

Writing implicitly against the validity of this reception history (which is seldom precisely named in such critical assessments, suggesting its enduring pervasiveness), another contemporary Humean, Galen Strawson writes, “Hume was no sort of ontological bundle theorist.”<sup>104</sup> Rather, on Strawson’s account, Hume “thinks that ‘the essence of the mind [is] unknown to us’” —though even this last citation of Hume by Strawson required some grammatical modification for it to be rendered into fully determinate form.<sup>105</sup> Strawson is also

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<sup>103</sup> Robinson, Howard, “Substance”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2018 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/substance/>.

<sup>104</sup> See Galen Strawson, “Hume on Personal Identity” in *The Oxford Handbook of Hume* ed. Paul Russell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 272. See also Strawson, *The Evident Connexion, Hume on Personal Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 56-61.

<sup>105</sup> Here is the full citation from Hume:

For to me it seems evident, that the essence of the mind being equally unknown to us with that of external bodies, it must be equally impossible to form any notion of its powers and qualities otherwise than from careful and exact experiments, and the



right to suggest that Hume's very great commitment to the existence of a "faculty of imagination" itself is enough to undermine the ontological interpretation of the "bundle." Even Noam Chomsky, who denies outright that Hume is an empiricist at all, says of Hume that "his assumptions have often been converted into dogma presupposed without serious effort to show them to be valid, or to reply to classical criticisms that were raised against these principles."<sup>106</sup>

Whatever reading of Hume one pursues, it is striking that the trope of atomism has been taken in such vastly different directions: one stream took it towards the skeptical impasse of total disaggregation; another doubled down on the analytic method by describing the self's ultimate reality in terms of its reduction to parts. One is put to mind, for example, of the phrenological map of the brain as a reified "bundle"; or, of the modern notion of "localization of function" (indispensable to contemporary cognitive science) which grew out of phrenological study.<sup>107</sup>

Not less significant than the critical potential of Hume's text is the ambiguity of its Anglophone reception in the nineteenth century; how, for example the philosophical attitude of skeptical doubt could so easily be resolved into certainty. A glimpse of this confusion can be caught in the *Annals of Phrenology, I*, published in Boston in 1834 as a "result" of Spurzheim's visit to the United States and death there:<sup>108</sup>

'But,' says Mr. Taylor, 'do not phrenologists maintain that the brain is divided into a number of compartments called organs?' What say you upon this subject?' – *Ans.* 'Phrenology I consider in two lights. First, Hume, the sceptic, or infidel, affirmed man to be a bundle of ideas, -- that there is no such thing as an immortal spirit. His followers eagerly seized upon the supposed fact of there being those organic compartments in the brain, and maintained that the mind of man was a compound of a certain number of organs, the seat of different faculties...All these somehow, like David Hume's bundle of ideas, are jumbled or combined together, to make that rational, feeling, and world-enjoying creature, called 'man.'

'Now,' (remarked Dr. Elliotson) 'phrenologists are not the followers of Hume. As phrenologists they never speak of him. Gall knew nothing of him. So far from Hume having led the way for those who believe that the brain has compartments for various faculties, he led the way for the Berkleyans [sic], who denied that matter of any kind existed at all.'<sup>109</sup>

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observation of those particular effects, which result from its different circumstances and situations. And though we must endeavour to render all our principles as universal as possible, by tracing up our experiments to the utmost, and explaining all effects from the simplest and fewest causes, it is still certain we cannot go beyond experience; and any hypothesis, that pretends to discover the ultimate original qualities of human nature, ought at first to be rejected as presumptuous and chimerical (Hume, *Treatise*, xxi).

<sup>106</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Language and Responsibility* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

<sup>107</sup> I merely suggest below (but cannot fully enter into the possibility) that the unnamed history of phrenological science is haunting this ambivalence about empiricism's future after Hume.

<sup>108</sup> Robert E. Reigel, "The Introduction of Phrenology to the United States." *The American Historical Review* 39, no.1 (Oct. 1933): 77.

<sup>109</sup> "Objections of Dr. Kidd to Phrenology" *Annals of Phrenology* 1, no.2 (Boston: Marsh, Capen & Lyon, 1834): 161-162.

We can see from this debate, which occurred the year that Poe began publishing prose fiction, that Hume “the infidel” is recruited to two different, indeed strictly antithetical philosophical agendas which are both equally reductive: on the one hand, the denial of matter’s existence; on the other, an eliminative materialism that reduces all of human life to physiology, by means of an uncritical passage from the “bundle of ideas” to the “organic compartments in the brain.” However, what falls out of view in this majoritarian intellectual climate is the very skeptical impasse, or ambivalence about epistemic certainty, that I argue is preserved and re-activated by Poe in the literary domain. After all, to say that the mind is a “fiction” is not to deny the goings-on of mental phenomena, but actually to attempt a much more difficult claim: that our minds conceptualize themselves out of their own limited nature, but not in a way that necessarily accords with that nature.<sup>110</sup>

I would suggest that “The Man that Was Used Up” and other tales by Poe do not explore the boundary between skepticism and denial; rather they thematize the disavowal of skepticism by laying bare the gaps that inevitably emerge in the course of explanation. In this way, Poe’s tales distinguish themselves from just those “fictionalizing” or “narrativizing” tendencies that Hume calls critical attention to.

In a recent monograph on Poe that does justice to the “unamerican” character of Poe’s writing, Robert Tally observes that Poe’s “tales of terror...disclose the nightmare of the unknowable”; “the reader experiences a fear of, not merely the unknown, but the unknowable.”<sup>111</sup> This interpretation indeed captures the fears and anxieties of Poe’s interior monologists. Perhaps, however, the fear of the unknowable that Poe dramatizes through his philosophical first-person narrators points to a truer horror, a horror that came to be associated with determinate knowing and not with its failure.<sup>112</sup> This perspective can be especially helpful in appreciating both the philosophical import and the parodic value of Poe’s “mysteries” in general (which is not often acknowledged in Poe criticism in English) and of his ultra-famous “Murders in the Rue Morgue” – the “first piece of detective fiction” – in particular. Of course, such a perspective would destabilize the canonicity of the story as inaugurating crime fiction, since the reader’s involvement in the process of “deduction” would then have to involve a sense of complicity, rather than collaboration.

“The Man That Was Used Up” is a minor tale in Poe’s canon, so readers were perplexed when Poe chose to pair it with “Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841) in a pamphlet which he titled *Prose Romances* (1843). But reading the canonical “Murders in the Rue Morgue” alongside its strange minor companion text can help to estrange Poe’s most famous murder mystery, pointing up those very parodic elements that are sometimes subdued by an earnest adherence to its famous plotline. Indeed, Hatvary and Mabbot’s evocation of *Catch-22* in their 1968 facsimile edition of Poe’s pamphlet is apt, though this kind of resonance is not usually applied to “Murders in the Rue Morgue.”<sup>113</sup> The two *Prose Romance* tales together express a nightmare of the *knowable*, the continuation of philosophical empiricism beyond its skeptical

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<sup>110</sup> In this regard the excessive character of the imagination, its propensity to “spread itself on its objects” (including, of course, itself) could be regarded as a limit.

<sup>111</sup> Tally, *Subversion of American Literature*, 7, 83.

<sup>112</sup> Recall the narrator of “The Man That Was Used Up”: “the slightest appearance of mystery – of any point I cannot exactly comprehend – puts me at once into a pitiable state of agitation.”

<sup>113</sup> George Eon Hatvary and Thomas Ollive Mabbott, “Introduction and Bibliography,” Edgar Allan Poe: *Prose Romances* (New York: St. John’s University Press, 1968), 5.

impasse. Both tales ask, of the descriptive and reflexive dimensions of mental association, respectively: At what cost are we rendered fully knowable?

Few critical accounts of “Murders in the Rue Morgue” stress its explicit empiricist subtext: the discourse of phrenology. Yet it is no exaggeration to say that such strains of philosophy and science dominated intellectual culture in the United States at the time of Poe’s writing.<sup>114</sup> Poe’s fictional experiments take place in the immediate context of what historian George Frederickson calls “an era of hardheaded empiricism” in the United States, beginning around 1839.<sup>115</sup> The opening paragraph of the 1841 publication of “Murders in the Rue Morgue,” which was excised in subsequent publications, makes this connection quite clear: “It is not improbable that a few farther steps in phrenological science will lead to the existence of, if not to the actual discovery and location of an organ of *analysis*.”<sup>116</sup> This opening sentence, precisely because rhetorically impressive, ridicules the scientific discourse that it invokes in numerous ways. But most telling of all is the suggestion that scientific advances will *cause* the “*existence* of” an organ of the brain, and only afterwards perhaps lead to its discovery. The suggestion, of course, punning on the aspirations of empiricism, is that phrenological scientists, by exercising analytic methods, can actually *bring* an analytic brain muscle into the extant topography.

The later (and now canonical) publications of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” make no explicit mention of phrenology. But the tale’s new and permanent opening line continues the charade of authoritative inquiry while simultaneously suggesting a new impasse just and precisely where its pretended assertion “cannot be doubted”:

It cannot be doubted that the mental features discoursed of as the analytical, are, in themselves, but little susceptible of analysis.

On the one hand, the proposition that the organ of analysis cannot be analyzed reifies the analytic faculty as a cognitive primitive from the point of view of an empirical psychology that tries to identify the simple building blocks of the brain. On the other hand, however, the very proposal of simplicity (the terminus of analyticity) raises the problematic possibility that the mind itself is out of sync with its own modes of apprehension.

In this respect “Murders in the Rue Morgue” really is a cousin to its lesser known companion in *Prose Romances*, “The Man That Was Used Up.” We have seen how “fiction” is Hume’s term for the human capacity to impose the illusion of necessary links between impressions when none are empirically given. I am also arguing that we can glimpse, in Poe’s

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<sup>114</sup> Now commonly considered “pseudo-science,” but see Britt Rusert’s recent book for a compelling argument for why this latter term should be avoided. *Fugitive Science: Empiricism and Freedom in Early African American Culture*. (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 6-7, 16, 121.

<sup>115</sup> George Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind, The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny: 1817-1914* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 74. Frederick’s claim is that spokesmen for racist ideology in the South and North began to acquire for themselves an “aura of philosophical authority” in the 1830s. “Hardheaded empiricism,” of course, is a pun on cranial measurement and what we might call the “fiction” of a measurable intellect. Of course, the metaphysical notion of substance does not in itself imply a system of racial classification. Rather, it is the other way around.

<sup>116</sup> “Murders in the Rue Morgue.” Published facsimile. Edgar Allan Poe Collection, Series III, b.X-8.f.6. NYPL Archives & Manuscripts, New York.

tales, a critical reflection on and enactment of those strains of philosophical inquiry that go beyond Hume's skeptical impasse. Literalizing the bundle metaphor, phrenology and other uncritical empiricisms actually re-entrench the very fictions of the mind that Hume diagnosed – so would any theory, on this account, which claims to discover necessary connections where none are found.

I have discussed, through “The Man That Was Used Up” the reflexive problem of mental unity and the ways in which that text loosens up connections felt as necessary, thus preserving the very knowledge gaps that appear to be untenable for the narrator. But there is a second, and in many ways more influential set of “necessary connections” in the empiricist tradition that became even more canonically central to the literary presentation of consciousness: what I am referring to as the Descriptive Problem of mental association: *How does one thought lead to another?*<sup>117</sup>

## 7. WHAT MAKES ONE THOUGHT FOLLOW ANOTHER? *THE MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE* AND THE DESCRIPTIVE PROBLEM OF ASSOCIATION

I am arguing that fiction has an indispensable role to play in allowing us to feel the seams of our Humean “fictions” and categorical projections. In this sense, “actual” imaginative fiction, like Hume's philosophy itself, should be considered antithetical to Hume's fictions – to the outdated concepts and categories that have lost their empirical points of contact. I will start my discussion of “Murders in the Rue Morgue” by presenting the explicit problem of mental association that appears in that tale. I will then turn to the ambivalent tenor of Hume's own writing on the subject of mental association, before returning to a fuller reading of Poe's tale and its formal as well as thematic preoccupation with association. Here is Poe's narrator in “Rue Morgue,” the unnamed friend of C. Auguste Dupin who shares the distinguished detective's interest in consciousness, though rather vicariously:

There are few persons who have not, at some period of their lives, amused themselves in retracing the steps by which particular conclusions of their own minds have been attained. The occupation is often full of interest; and he who attempts it for the first time is astonished by the apparently illimitable distance and incoherence between the starting-point and the goal.<sup>118</sup>

With this problem of description as it concerns the sequences of thought and their trajectory, we come to the problem of the association of ideas in its most canonical formation as the question of how one thought leads to another. Here, I am interested in how this metafictional conceit of retracing the steps of thought both prefigures what will become the central preoccupation of modernist stream of consciousness writing and presents it as a potentially insoluble problem for determinate modes of representation.

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<sup>117</sup> I thank Judith Butler for helping me formulate this distinction.

<sup>118</sup> *SW*, 245.

Poe's narrator shares with Hume's *Treatise* an interest in the "illimitable distances" that are spanned by thought -- as well as the semantic field in terms of which the "movements" of thought have been spatialized:

The principles of union among ideas, I have reduced to three general ones, and have asserted, that the idea or impression of any object naturally introduces the idea of any other object, that is resembling, contiguous to, or connected with it. These principles I allow to be neither the infallible nor the sole causes of an union among ideas. They are not the infallible causes. For one may fix his attention during Sometime on any one object without looking farther. They are not the sole causes. For the thought has evidently a very irregular motion in running along its objects, and may leap from the heavens to the earth, from one end of the creation to the other, without any certain method or order. But though I allow this weakness in these three relations, and this irregularity in the imagination; yet I assert that the only general principles, which associate ideas, are resemblance, contiguity and causation.<sup>119</sup>

The "leaps" undertaken by thought itself "from one end of creation to another," create a problem for the general principles that are being sought. The fact that thought moves "without any certain method or order" itself poses a problem for the methodological thought process of the inquirer. And "though I allow this...irregularity in the imagination; yet I assert..." writes Hume using a semicolon, acknowledging (without resolving) the tension between the research program and the phenomena at hand. Hume's paragraph makes it possible to thematize *focused assertion* itself as a worthwhile object of inquiry, just as much as the wild vagaries of thought.

Here is a characteristic example of the way in which associationist discourse in the nineteenth century often relies on an analogy between the Descriptive Problem (*How does one thought lead to another?*) and the Reflexive Problem (*What grounds the unity of my thought?*):

Not only is the order in which the more complex mental phenomena follow or accompany one another, reducible, by an analysis similar in kind to the Newtonian, to a comparatively small number of laws of succession among simpler facts, connected as cause and effect; but the phenomena themselves can mostly be shown, by an analysis resembling those of chemistry, to be made up of simpler phenomena.<sup>120</sup>

Even the syntax of Mill's constructions, with their embedded subordinate clauses, seems to thematize the logic of atomism by equating comprehension with analysis --the reduction of what is complex to constituent parts. On Mill's view, the atomistic relationship of simple to complex ideas determines both the diachronic order of ideas and the synchronic composition of individual ideas, rendering both axes of association lawlike. The above description of associationism belongs to J.S. Mill and appears in the introduction to his philosopher father's *Analysis of the*

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<sup>119</sup> Hume, *Treatise*, 52.

<sup>120</sup> John Stuart Mill, introduction to James Mill, *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, Vol.1, x. Quoted in Cairns Craig, *Associationism and the Literary Imagination: From the Phantasmal Chaos* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 5.

*Phenomena of the Human Mind*, reissued in 1869.<sup>121</sup> As many commentators point out, it was hoped that the concept of mental association would carry an explanatory power analogous to gravity.<sup>122</sup> Yet Noam Chomsky, again providing a counter-narrative of this intellectual history, argues that the Newtonian model did not always renew the confidence of philosophers seeking to systematize knowledge of mental phenomena. Locke and Hume, writes Chomsky, “took quite seriously the new science-based mysterianism that arose from Newton’s demolition of mechanical philosophy.”<sup>123</sup> In a provocative reversal of Gilbert Ryle’s phrase, Chomsky writes, “It was the machine that Newton exorcised, leaving the ghost intact.”<sup>124</sup> Mill and Hume, then, certainly share the same Newtonian aspirations, but may differ wildly in their interpretation of what this entails.<sup>125</sup>

Poe’s “Rue Morgue,” too, may “leave the ghost intact” when it comes to what I am terming the Descriptive Problem of the order of ideas, which is precisely the problem that Dupin purports to solve: *How does one thought lead to another?* George Humphreys, in his classic handbook on stream of consciousness writing in fiction, argued that from the point of view of his writers, “the chief principle of the movement of consciousness is the common law of mental association”<sup>126</sup>

Up to the present day, discussion of Hume’s three associationist principles of the imagination (causality, contiguity and resemblance) frequently refer to them as his “laws of the association of ideas” – despite the fact that Hume never uses the word “laws” in his discussion. On the contrary, Hume makes clear in the opening of his *Of the Connection or Association of Ideas* that the associating faculty as such – the imagination -- is incompatible with the idea of lawlike behavior, for a number of reasons. Indeed, the more one bears in mind his skeptical conclusions, the more comical and possibly ironic some of Hume’s most classic formulations about the imagination in the *Treatise* begin to read. Here is the opening of Hume’s “Of the Connexion or Association of Ideas”:

As all simple ideas may be separated by the imagination, and may be united again in what form it pleases, nothing would be more unaccountable than the operations

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<sup>121</sup> I discuss Mill’s ambivalence about his father’s associationism, especially as it touches the question of art – and specifically music -- in a separate section. Mill’s ambivalent reception of associationism has surprising consequences for 20<sup>th</sup> century aesthetics. Nevertheless, as Craig shows, much of that ambivalence appears to have been recanted in this work written in support of the classic text by James Mill.

<sup>122</sup> Craig argues, contra the idea that associationist premises were quickly annihilated and rendered moot by British romanticism, that “associationist psychology” was “the most scientific – and therefore also the most *modern* account of the mind” (*Associationism and the Literary Imagination*, 7). For opposing views see Alan Richardson, *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 5, 6.

<sup>123</sup> Newton demonstrates, in the words of historian of science Alexandre Koyré, that “a purely materialistic pattern of nature is utterly impossible.” Quoted in Noam Chomsky, *What Kind of Creatures Are We?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 99.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>125</sup> In his introduction, describing progress on the association of ideas, Mill refers to a tradition of thinkers that includes Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke and Hartley -- but not Hume.

<sup>126</sup> George Humphreys, *Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954), 60.

of that faculty, were it not guided by some universal principles, which render it, in some measure, uniform with itself in all times and places.<sup>127</sup>

Hume's statement leaves open the logical possibility that the operations of the imagination really *are* unaccountable. The statement can be interpreted as a positive assertion of the "universal principles" of the imagination, that is, only on the added assumption that nothing is unaccountable – a premise to which, from a Humean perspective, one is hardly entitled. The idea that the imagination (or any faculty) might be "uniform with itself in all times and places" is not one that Hume can take for granted, for reasons that we have already explored – namely, the doubt cast on identity by the bundle argument. This uneasiness with respect to the "reflexive" dimension of association directly affects the explanatory scope that Hume is willing to grant to his own theory of diachronic mental association (what I am calling the "descriptive" dimension):

Were ideas entirely loose and unconnected, chance alone would join them; and it is impossible the same simple ideas should fall regularly into complex ones (as they Commonly do) without some bond of union among them, some associating quality, by which one idea naturally introduces another. This uniting principle among ideas is not to be considered as an inseparable connection; for that has been already excluded from the imagination: Nor yet are we to conclude, that without it the mind cannot join two ideas; for nothing is more free than that faculty: but we are only to regard it as a gentle force, which commonly prevails.  
(8)

What Hume describes here is a desired account of "universal principles" of the imagination, but he dismisses in advance the possibility that such principles – even if they were discoverable -- could ever be sufficient to determine a given course of mental events. The imagination connects, but its connections are never "inseparable" and in this respect, it is "free." The imagination works in a way that is non-deterministic, but also not subject to chance. Another way to put this is that the extant concepts of determinism and chance both fail to cover the workings of the minds.<sup>128</sup> Perhaps some of the power of Hume's skepticism relies on the nuance of these somewhat unparaphrasable formulations in his text. In this way, Hume's text exhibits the exercise of the imagination in the course of the study of the imagination. Chomsky places him in a tradition of "mysterian science" (a phrase that remains somewhat oxymoronic, but perhaps shouldn't).<sup>129</sup> But to leave room for mystery is not to posit any magical property intrinsic to the object of knowledge; rather, true mysteries arise out of the limited interaction between properties of the world and cognitive limitations as biological creatures and inquirers.

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<sup>127</sup> Hume, *Treatise*, 7.

<sup>128</sup> I am grateful to Souleymane Bachir Diagne for his formulation of conditions that "shape" as opposed to "determine" mental phenomena. Cornell School of Theory and Criticism, June 2015. This distinction is discussed in the context of his "Revister 'La Philosophie bantou': L'idée d'une grammaire philosophique. *Politique africaine* 1, no.77 (2000): 44-53.

<sup>129</sup> It is not at all oxymoronic from the point of view of Kantian philosophy. See Chomsky, "Problems and Mysteries," in *Language in Focus: Foundations, Methods and Systems*, ed. A. Kasher (Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science, Reidel, 1976, 281-357.

The epigraph of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” simultaneously raises the specter of mystery and purports (illicitly, on the epistemic traditions that we have been following) to conquer it through the trope of analysis:

What song the Syrens sang, or what name Achilles assumed when he hid himself among women, although puzzling questions, are not beyond all conjecture.

Sir Thomas Browne.<sup>130</sup>

And yet the song of the Syrens, and the assumed name of Achilles are mysteries not just because of their distance from the field of empirical observation, but rather because they are *fictions* to which no matters of fact respond (in fact, both the song and the assumed name are fictions within Homeric fictions) And yet Poe, via this decontextualized citation (from a work on archaeology), preparing the entrance of his fictional detective Dupin, invites us to imagine the existence of an inquirer who can cross the boundary, and ask the imagination to supply determinate contents. This opening pastiche is one way in which Poe stages parodically a very difficult and consequential antimony between the perceived requirements of objective knowledge — or at least the extant formulations of those requirements — and the imagination. And he does so by alluding, quite literally to the medium of fiction.

In this epigraph we encounter the imagination through the guise of imaginative fiction (as a genre or discourse); but very soon in the “Rue Morgue” mystery we are going to encounter the imagination in a more “direct” form of presentation — first, the imagination of the narrator, the ruminations of whose consciousness preempt the tale’s “official” mystery. Indeed, the story’s elaborate double prologue, beginning with the “phrenological” opening, strains comically against the “third-person” authoritative discourse that it imitates. These are proto-modernist moments of “stream of consciousness” writing, but ones that still wrestle with accounts of mind that cannot seem to furnish explanations without deforming their object of inquiry: “I am not now writing a treatise,” writes the narrator after having referred to “those faculties discoursed of as analytical”

Thus, by the time the descriptive problem of association in the mind “officially” arises in the text, with the announcement of an “occupation” that is “full of interest,” the very form of the tale’s telling has already embodied the problem of fluid association that it will claim to describe: What makes one thought follow another? Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin, Poe’s famous amateur detective, thinks he knows. This presumption and its spectacular results could be the real locus of horror in Poe’s story.

The story’s narrator first impresses upon the reader the extraordinary “analytic” prowess of his friend Dupin not by putting him to work on solving any crime within the main plot of the story (that comes later) but rather by re-telling, in the manner of a frame narrative, a scene that took place right before Dupin and the narrator read about the Rue Morgue murders in a newspaper:

We were strolling one night down a long dirty street, in the vicinity of the Palais Royal. Being both, apparently, occupied with thought, neither of us had spoken a syllable for fifteen minutes at least. All at once Dupin broke forth with these words:

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<sup>130</sup> Poe, *SW*, 240



“He is a very little fellow, that's true, and would do better for the Theatre des Varietés.”

“There can be no doubt of that,” I replied unwittingly, and not at first observing (so much had I been absorbed in reflection) the extraordinary manner in which the speaker had chimed in with my meditations. In an instant afterward I recollected myself, and my astonishment was profound. “Dupin, said I, gravely, “this is beyond my comprehension....How was it possible you should know I was thinking of--?”

...  
There was not a particle of *charlatanerie* about Dupin. “I will explain,” he said, “and that you may comprehend all clearly, we will first retrace the course of your meditations, from the moment in which I spoke to you until that of the rencontre with the fruiterer in question. The larger links of the chain run thus -- Chantilly, Orion, Dr. Nicolas, Epicurus, Stereotomy, the street stones, the fruiterer.” (245)

Poe parodies the conceit that one could retrace the sequence of another's impressions just as one might retrace their steps. The correspondences between the path of the walker and the sequence of the walker's thoughts are both metaphoric and metonymic: the intertextual echoes of these “steps in thinking” course are of course infinite; backwards to Socrates, to Rousseau's *Reveries* and ahead to what will be Dujardin's peripatetic *monologue intérieur*, to the “streets that follow/like a tedious argument” in Eliot's “Prufrock” all the way up to Mr. Ramsay's walk in Virginia Woolf, as we shall see. If the extended metaphor models the course that thought takes on the physical course taken by the body (Dupin and the narrator walking), then that mapping is itself severely complicated by the incursion of the walk (metonymically) in the thought sequence itself: by the contingent objects and goings-on that suddenly occasion shifts in the thinker.

These shifts are precisely what Dupin's associationism seeks to master; but we can already see that this involves an understanding of something more than purely mental. Here is Dupin, successfully retracing the steps of his friend's thinking:

‘Tell me, for heaven's sake,’ I exclaimed, ‘the method — if method there is — by which you have been enabled to fathom my soul in this matter.’ In fact I was even more startled than I would have been willing to express. (244)

The narrator ironically opens up a fresh gap between his inner states and their verbal expression, precisely at the moment when the distance between his “soul” and Dupin's “method” has purportedly collapsed. But earlier in the story, the narrator had referred to the specialty of analytical thinking as “the very soul and essence of method.” This chiasmic reversal suggests that we can fictionalize our modes of knowing as easily as we fictionalize one another: the idea of an essential “method” may be just as “fictional” (in Hume's sense) as the idea of an enduring ‘soul’ (240).

As if intrinsic to what it means to offer up his personal “stream of consciousness” to Dupin's “method” of narration, Poe's first-person narrator almost willingly sacrifices his post as the epistemic center of the story – an ironic commentary on the dogma of “first-person authority” when it comes to self-knowledge.<sup>131</sup> On the last page of Poe's story, once Dupin has solved the

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<sup>131</sup> Perhaps the metaphor is precisely *not* apt because of the disjunctive, almost saccadic nature of the thought described; but this tension also exists in William James' theorization of the “stream.”

Rue Morgue murders and provided an exhaustive description of them, the narrator omits, “I have scarcely anything to add.” In an echo of the conclusion of “The Man that Was Used Up,” the narrator completes the process of knowledge, and annihilates himself in the process.

The mysterious Rue Morgue killer, of course, turns out to have been an ape, an “Ourang-Outang” whose psychological transitions Dupin is equally masterful at inferring: “The screams and struggles of the old lady...had the effect of changing the probably pacific purposes of the Ourang-Outang into those of wrath” (26). A broad range of philosophical and scientific currents is available as targets of critique here (and the resonances only multiply nowadays, in the age of the fMRI of the brain), but underlying them all is the muted suggestion that, in Dupin’s eyes, the narrator’s thoughts are no less lawlike than the ape’s.<sup>132</sup> I do want to highlight, within this somewhat nightmarish scenario of determinate and determinable thought, the way in which Dupin’s brand of second-person narration (itself “framed” within the text) reduces the narrator’s consciousness to its associations: “I could not doubt that you murmured the word ‘stereotomy,’ a term very affectedly applied to this species of pavement. I knew that you could not say to yourself ‘stereotomy’ without being brought to think of atomies, and thus of the theories of Epicurus” (245-46). The associative link between the two words parodically undoes the atomistic premise that the two friends have entertained via the Epicurean theory: That is, there *is* no “atomie” atomically contained within “stereotomy” – The Ancient Greek roots are *stereós* and *átomos*, respectively – however the juxtaposition suggests a connection between what is “rigid” on the one hand, and what is indivisible on the other. In Hume’s terms, the ideas “resemble” one another to the extent that their (aural) impressions or sound-images in English do. The spoof of atomistic precision continues when the narrator says in earnest, “There was not a particle of *charlatanerie* about Dupin.”

On Dupin’s version of the laws of association, doubt has been expunged. The principles of transition do not merely shape or constrain the course of thought; they determine them: “I will explain,” he said, “and that you may comprehend all clearly, we will first retrace the course of your meditations” (245). The ambition to know the laws of association between ideas, to specify the links in thought’s chains, to deduce a thought on the basis of its occasion, to subordinate mental life to determinate causation – all these problems of transition do bear somewhat on questions of agency and freedom in the sense that the specter of unfree thought is haunting Dupin’s method (to the extent that his analytic method *as* thought itself is also understood as compulsive).<sup>133</sup> Lurking in the background of the incongruous and unbelievable “sharing” of thoughts that Dupin manages to facilitate by means of “analysis,” of course, is the dogma of subjective experience as insurmountably private. What I’m calling Poe’s “frame narrative” enacts a comic clash between reflective and absorbed modes of consciousness, but the terms are distributed between the two characters: the narrator who, in a wonderfully oxymoronic phrase, is “absorbed in reflection,” and the vigilant Dupin whose own inner monologue seems to have consisted precisely in the dissection of his companion’s.

In fact, the story’s altogether perplexingly extraneous double-prologue, if we can call it that -- all the expositional material that happens before the murder mystery actually gets going -- helps to concretize the shift in perspective that the narrator warns us the story is really “about,” quite in spite of its juicy plotline. It enacts a coming-into focus, with comic and terrifying results,

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<sup>132</sup> I am referring to the fMRI as a dramatic intensification and visualization of the conceit of “getting at the truth” of thought.

<sup>133</sup> Does the possibility of free thought require its own special kind of defenses against determinism, different from those required by the possibility of free action?

of the analytic "frame" of mind through which the story's facts eventually come to us: "The narrative which follows will appear to the reader somewhat in the light of a commentary upon the propositions just advanced" (4). In this ironic reversal of the internal hierarchies of relevance proper *both* for fiction and for assertoric discourse, the narrative comes by way of a "commentary" on the proposition. The story's introductory frame narrative, then, with its drama of "getting to the bottom of" private experience, both anticipates and preempts the actual murder mystery as a locus of comedy and horror. But this is precisely the "critical" set-up that Poe's "Tale of Ratiocination" adopts – to get hung up on the very "frame" of knowledge. Indeed, the bafflingly extraneous introductions by Poe's narrator make human (primate?) knowing capacities themselves newly palpable as curiosities that supplant their object of representation. This is one way in which a narrative frame doubles as a cognitive one.

Here again is the very first line of "Murders in the Rue Morgue": "The mental features discoursed of as the analytical, are in themselves, but little susceptible of analysis. We appreciate them only in their effects."<sup>134</sup> The prepositional phrase "in themselves" – a pivot by which grammatical subject is taken momentarily as indirect object – highlights a startling oscillation between self-reflection and absorption in an object – and even an unsettling of the boundary between mode and object of inquiry. It is true that the sentence itself – were it taken as an assertion and therefore susceptible to "analysis" – makes the case that analysis as a cognitive mood is grounded in something strange or alien to analytic methods – but this is only true if the sentence itself is taken as an assertion; whereas as fiction, the sentence calls for a method different from analysis. The very grammatical reflexivity of the sentence sets it into crisis. Indeed, who, we must ask, is making this assertion out of nowhere, about "the mental features discoursed of as the analytical" (2)? We do not know, but the voice continues, in a manner like that which William James will later refer to as "imponderable streaming":

Yet to calculate is not in itself to analyze. A chess-player, for example, does the one without effort at the other. It follows that the game of chess, in its effects upon mental characters, is greatly misunderstood. I am not now writing a treatise, but simply prefacing a somewhat peculiar narrative by observations very much at random.<sup>135</sup>

"I am not now writing a treatise" – says Poe's unreliable narrator, and ironically, we should believe him. That is because the sentence itself, if true, is not true in the manner that a treatise is true; it is rather true more in the manner of a performative utterance. To say positively "I *am* now writing a treatise" – and thereby indexically to fold the experience of thought into its argumentative substance -- would be already to have violated the generic conventions of assertoric discourse. Ironically, then, it is just the denial of "assertoric discourse" that brings the literary text into risky proximity with that very rhetorical mode. We are invited to follow the argument at the same time that we feel its status *as* an argument through the breakdown of the genre that is invoked; perhaps such a simultaneous embeddedness within – and detachment from – a discourse is achievable only in fiction. Ironically, only at this moment (and not later in the tale) is the narrator engaged in something properly called "deduction" – demonstrating only the self-centeredness of the deducer. Here is how the "proof" works: The narrator first negates an implicit premise (all calculation is analysis), supplies a counter-example that supports the

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<sup>134</sup> *SW*, 240.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

premise's negation (chess-players calculate but don't analyze), and finally invokes the language of logical entailment to draw a conclusion: "It follows that the game of chess, in its effects upon mental characters, is greatly misunderstood." The conclusion can only be made valid by smuggling in the added premise that the narrator's deductions are not widely understood. And, furthermore, who said anything about wanting to draw conclusions about the game of chess! The problem of relevance abruptly intercedes where the considerations were presupposed to be purely rational.<sup>136</sup> Thus, a meta-textual awareness of fluid association masquerades as logical entailment in the guise of what "follows." Poe's fiction is never more emphatically anti-analytical than in these moments of close-as-can-be adherence to the register of logical analysis, never more skeptical of what it means to follow thought or to make logical entailment into thought's paradigm.

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<sup>136</sup> The Gricean "maxim of relation," ensuring relevance in conversation, has been violated. See H. Paul Grice, "Logic and conversation," on vol. 3 of *Syntax and Semantics*, eds. Peter Cole and Jerry L. Morgan (New York: Academic Press, 1975), 41-58.

## CHAPTER 3: WOOLF'S BUNDLES: HUME AND LITERARY IMPRESSIONISM

In the previous chapters I showed that two nineteenth-century authors, Victor Hugo and Edgar Allan Poe, get very close to stream of consciousness narration, but they get there via parody. What they are parodying are the empiricist assumptions about the mind that their fiction has incorporated. As we saw, Hugo's condemned man and Poe's first-person narrators are intertextually connected through the transnational circulation of a commercial genre: the sensation tale. But both *Le dernier jour d'un condamné* and Poe's empiricist tale also represent important turning points in the literary elaboration of philosophical problems: both have first-person narrators who say, in effect, "here's a complete and exhaustive list of my immediate sensations." Furthermore, I've argued that the "Tale of Sensation," often read as earnestly gothic, is both parodic and seriously concerned with epistemology—for the same reasons. My readings of these individual texts have supported a more general proposal that I will continue to make in this study: Narrative form, precisely when it "breaks" or is in transition, discloses those inner structures of the mind that interpret, shape, and organize the "atoms" of perception, and therefore it exceeds an empiricist frame of reference focused only on mental content.

Tracing this tradition into twentieth-century modernism, I see Virginia Woolf also partaking in this lineage of "ambivalent" empiricism. My discussion below begins with the early part of Woolf's high phase, starting with *To the Lighthouse* and the philosophical views of consciousness that are implicated in the narration of Mr. Ramsay's thought. I then re-evaluate Woolf's classic programmatic statement on the "incessant shower of innumerable atoms" that rain down on the mind, and which fiction must try to capture. I investigate Woolf's simultaneous invocation and significant revision of the paradigm of the "atoms" of perception in her programmatic statement on "Modern Fiction." I connect this "ambivalent empiricism" on the part of Woolf to her significant revision of inherited paradigms of mental association, which had been growing increasingly rigid around the turn of the century. As we shall see, Woolf still takes the sensory impression as a central unit of analysis for her depictions of consciousness at work, but she also exceeds and indeed ironizes that empiricist framework, laying bare its limits. This is true both in her explicit poetics (her writing about fiction) and in her implicit poetics (the views embodied in her literary works). Her ambivalence about the sensory "atom" makes her a "constructivist" impressionist in my view, which is why this moment in modernism actually clarifies, in practice, some of the crucial questions at issue in the transition from Hume to Kant. Indeed, it is in her later, and most formally experimental work, *The Waves*, that Woolf moves fully beyond what I call the "empiricist" conceit of naturalistic narration; and it is here that I take Woolf's work to be most Kantian (or at least working in the impasse between Hume and Kant).

In the first half of this chapter, I argue that Woolf exposes in Humean fashion the gaps that the atomistic picture of the mind is dotted with. These gaps disrupt both the mind's descriptive continuity—the sequential course of thought—and its reflexive unity—the cohesion of the self at any given moment. More precisely, Woolf's fiction, like Hume's philosophy, disturbs the assumption of cohesion along these two axes. In *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and in *To the Lighthouse* (1927), the logic of mental association is still followed very closely. But in striking passages from *A Room of One's Own* (1928), Woolf begins to work out, in a quasi-fictional mode of writing, a program of "mental unity" that emphasizes the spontaneous power of a combining consciousness. I see *The Waves* as making good on the intimations of cognitive form that begin to surface in *A Room of One's Own*, resolving some of the associationist dilemmas

apparent in the earlier novels. In this way, Woolf's texts disclose *productive* gaps in experience which are filled in by subjectivity in ways other than those envisioned by Hume. In fact, I suggest by way of conclusion that Woolf's literary intervention into the philosophical problem of consciousness and its coherences produces something quite antithetical to the Humean notion of "fiction."

Woolf's novelistic poetics offers an alternative account of association which, far from being lawlike, expresses the spontaneity of a mind that holds itself together as a unity through contingent intersubjective relations. Woolf is in ironic, productive tension with the atomistic "impressionism" she engages. This means that the guise of neutral reporting, as with Poe, is treated ironically. But it also means that the reflexive unity upon which acts of thought, speech and their in-betweens depend is itself construed creatively, and, as I hope to show, in this chapter, inter-subjectively.

My second thesis operates at a much more general level – which is to characterize a broader relationship between fictional works and the philosophical (or argumentative/logical/assertoric) idiom as such. The way that Poe, and now Woolf, incorporate a philosophical idiom; the way they ironize reductive or overly-authoritative knowledge claims is itself deeply philosophical, in a manner that is linked with the philosophical demand to which Hume himself felt beholden, and perhaps even to a Humean form of irony.

Hume's work in the *Treatise* may suggest paradoxically that a unified, self-identical self is not actually required in order for knowledge to take place – although, as a consequence, Hume is skeptical about the kind of knowledge (or claims to knowledge) that are made on behalf of a purportedly continuous self whose continuity cannot be empirically grounded. Much of the literature that has been claimed for a tradition of "stream of consciousness" writing is well aware of the same dilemma that Hume stumbled upon while taking empirical observation of the mind to its limit. Although William James in his theorization of "stream of consciousness" claimed to go beyond Hume's unpalatable dilemma, Woolf's fiction in its implicit reflections on consciousness may do more justice to the complexities of that dilemma. Though Woolf was one of the most radical innovators of the kind of fiction that came to be known as "stream of consciousness," early on she was often not credited for these innovations.<sup>137</sup> "Fluidity" was one

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<sup>137</sup> Even in France, where she was considered canonical long before Anglo-American "high modernism" accepted her, Woolf's experimentation was routinely trivialized as a feminine derivative of Joyce. See Louis Gillet's assessment of *To the Lighthouse* [*La promenade au phare*] translated into French in 1929. He writes, "Jamais Mme Virginia Woolf n'aurait écrit ce petit chef d'oeuvre du *Phare*, s'elle n'avait songé tout le temps à *Ulysse*... Il n'est pas douteux que ce soit le même art, presque la même procédés, adroitement transposés, adaptés, nuancés, féminisés." Louis Gillet, "L'orlando de Mme Virginia Woolf," *Revue de Deux Mondes* 53 (September 1929): 222.

The same tendency to marginalize Woolf's innovative contributions to modernism predominated in the U.S. As late as 1984, Hugh Kenner echoes Gillet's bias when he writes dismissively, "Virginia Woolf, hating *Ulysses*, still made haste to exploit its riches." Kenner, who did not have much interest in Joyce either, goes on to pronounce that Woolf "is not part of International Modernism; she is an English novelist of manners, writing village gossip from a village called Bloomsbury." Hugh Kenner, "The Making of the Modernist Canon," *Chicago Review* 34, no. 2 (Spring, 1984): 57. See also the discussion in Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 9.

In contrast to Kenner, Toni Morrison's early readings of Virginia Woolf (in Morrison's masters thesis) went against the grain of contemporary critical reception. For a discussion, see Barbara Christian, "Layered Rhythms: Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison," *Modern Fiction Studies* 39, no. 3/4 (Fall/Winter

of the paradigmatic features for which stream of consciousness fiction came to be known.<sup>138</sup> But the attention to mental processes in Woolf's work – even in her earlier novels, which stay very much within an empiricist (or impressionist) paradigm – takes stock of the disruptions, fissures, and gaps in conscious experience. And her fiction, like Hume's philosophy, worries about the bearing that these gaps have on knowledge and its possibility. In an otherwise damning 1927 assessment of "Les lettres anglaises: Le roman contemporain," T.S. Eliot, reviewing contemporary English novelists for a French audience in *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, sounded a note of praise for Virginia Woolf that is suggestive of the philosophy of consciousness being elaborated in her work: "Elle [Woolf] ne se laisse pas aller, ainsi que M. Lawrence, à l'extase d'une perception momentanée. Son observation, qui s'exerce d'une façon continue, implique un travail d'organisation immense et soutenu." (She does not like Mr. Lawrence abandon herself to the ecstasy of one moment of perception; her observation is employed continuously and involves an immense and unremitting toil of arrangement).<sup>139</sup> At the turn of the century, the phrase "travail d'organisation" happens to carry a neo-Kantian resonance, as Eliot knew well.<sup>140</sup> More importantly, it points to the ways in which Woolf's text makes palpable the internal contributions of the knowing subject to her knowledge.

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1993): 483-500. For an indispensable resource on Virginia Woolf's global reception and the fascinating variations in the translation history, from country to country, and novel to novel see Mary Ann Caws, *The Reception of Virginia Woolf* (New York: Continuum, 2002).

<sup>138</sup> See Anne Fernihough, "Consciousness as a Stream" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Modernist Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 78.

<sup>139</sup> T.S. Eliot, "Les lettres anglaises: Le roman contemporain." *La nouvelle revue française* 164 (May 1927): 669-675. Collected, along with the previously un-published English original, in vol. 3 of *The Complete Prose of T.S. Eliot: The Critical Edition*, eds. Frances Dickey, Jennifer Formichelli, Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015) 86, 91

<sup>140</sup> See Théodor Ruysen's 1900 Introduction to Kant in French: "L'imagination impose à l'intuition un premier travail d'organisation, une véritable *synthèse figurée* qui prepare la *synthèse intellectuelle*." *Les Grands Philosophes: Kant*, 91.

## 1. FROM DUPIN TO MR. RAMSAY: TRANSFORMING THE DESCRIPTIVE PROBLEM OF ASSOCIATION

My first lesson in mathematics I had from my brother, who started me on Euclid. And I thought it was the loveliest stuff I'd ever seen...But I remember that it was a disappointment because he said *Now we start with axioms*, and I said, *What are they?* And he said, *Oh, they're things that you've got to admit, although we can't prove them.* So I said, *Why should I admit them if we can't prove them?* And he said, *Well, if you won't we can't go on!* And I wanted to see how it went on, so I admitted them for the time being...<sup>141</sup>

Bertrand Russell, 1959

Russell knew very well that axioms, by virtue of their very provisionality, make possible – rather than undermine -- the procedures of objective validity. At the same time, the possibility of constructing a logical proof is associated with the joys not only of being able to “go on,” but also of doing so in the context of a cooperative enterprise. But embracing both the restrictions of rationality -- and its dialogical possibilities -- is precisely what Woolf's Mr. Ramsay, whom we meet in *To the Lighthouse* in the grips of an associationist paradigm of thought's progression, is incapable of doing.

In her interdisciplinary, cognitive science textbook, published in 2001, Carolyn Sobel alludes to an enduring associationist framework when she writes the following about mental representation: "If thought rests on the mental representation of propositions, and if, as has been recognized by both classical thinkers and contemporary researchers, thought is associative, moving rapidly from one idea to another, it is likely that the associations are due to the shared elements in the associated thoughts."<sup>142</sup> On this account, "thought" both rests on propositional structures and at the same time is recognized as highly associative. But the "associative" and the "propositional" dimensions of thought have often grated against one another in Anglophone philosophical discourse.<sup>143</sup> Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* may provide some important counter-examples to this tradition, pointing towards a philosophical integration that may only now be catching on. She provides an alternative to a dichotomy -- between the empirical flow of experience and the objective character of judgment-- that was reaching a fever pitch, so to speak, at the time of her writing.

In Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue," Dupin's mental "powers of deduction" are pitted against the meandering trains of thought that he attributes to his friend, the narrator. As we have seen, there is a contrast in the very structure of the tale between associative thinking and "propositional thinking" or the kind of thinking worthy of argument. I have tried to argue that Poe's own tale becomes philosophical, however, not by identifying fully with the famous

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<sup>141</sup> "Bertrand Russell: Face to Face Interview with John Freeman," BBC, 1959.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1bZv3pSaLtY&t=241s> My transcription. Russell was 87 at the time of making these childhood reminiscences.

<sup>142</sup> Carolyn Sobel, Ed. *The Cognitive Sciences: An Interdisciplinary Approach, Mountain View*, (Ca: Mayfield Publishing Co., 2013), 47

<sup>143</sup> In the case of Hume, who radically demoted the role of reason in the explication of mental life, the principles of association were natural, "gentle forces" that convey our thoughts in habitual, but not necessarily rational, ways. But much more commonly, perhaps, philosophers in the tradition have pried apart rational thought from mental association by working the other way around –i.e., by excluding the merely associative from the sovereignty of the rational.



detective or expert in "ratiocination" – but rather by calling into question the form of the whodunit that reduces thought entirely to its associations. Dupin sets out to reconstruct precisely the sequence of his friend's thoughts, with both parties expressing just a bit too much enthusiasm about the success of that endeavor.

As Poe does in the *Rue Morgue*, Woolf in *To the Lighthouse* calls attention to the associative links made by the mind by focusing on a "breakdown case." In *To the Lighthouse*, it is now the process of reasoning which becomes precarious in its sequence. One of the novel's most famous passages presents to us in fictional form a philosopher, Mr. Ramsay, engaged in the activity of logical deduction.<sup>144</sup> Woolf's text both presupposes and problematizes the view that one thought naturally leads to another. Mr. Ramsay, whose thought sequences are at once described and embodied in the text, does not possess as much mastery over his own mental associations as he might like to think. His effortful concatenation becomes all the more parodic because of its pesky imbrications with a myriad of other associative chains – the chief of which is his unrelenting preoccupation with his own abilities. The philosopher's struggles with logical progression are both absorbed into and made to clash with the flow of thought in which they appear:

...without his distinguishing either his son or his wife, the sight of them fortified him and satisfied him and consecrated his effort to arrive at a perfectly clear understanding of the problem which now engaged the energies of his splendid mind.

It was a splendid mind. For if thought is like the keyboard of a piano, divided into so many notes, or like the alphabet is ranged in twenty-six letters all in order, then his splendid mind had no sort of difficulty in running over those letters one by one, firmly and accurately, until it had reached, say, the letter Q. He reached Q. Very few people in the whole of England ever reach Q.<sup>145</sup>

Woolf's free indirect style, the organizing rhetorical principle of this passage, is often read as an ironic critique of Mr. Ramsay's self-aggrandizing attempts at logical prowess, and indeed it does rather hilariously show how deduction is derailed by the very vagaries of association that it was designed to exclude. Mr. Ramsay's claims of generality are undermined by the subjective, narrowly self-referential obsessions with personal success and failure.

Woolf's passage moves characteristically from the semblance of assertoric discourse ("It was a splendid mind") to the gradual adumbration of a point of view. By the time the thought sequence approaches the phrase "very few people in the whole of England," with its childish grandiosity, we know that we are not only looking at Mr. Ramsay's mind; we are also, in part, within it, entangled in its terms. In an early discussion of this passage, Suzanne Ferguson treats the ambiguity and irony fostered by free indirect style as characteristic of literary impressionism. She writes: "This appears to be description by the narrator... but a little farther on it becomes increasingly evident that we are to take the alphabet analogy to be as well the literal content of

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<sup>144</sup> Unlike Poe's *Rue Morgue*, Ramsay really *is* engaged in deduction: Poe's detective was not engaged in "deduction" at all, but rather in a shaky process of causal inference that pretends a degree of certainty that is only possible in logical or mathematical abstraction.

<sup>145</sup> Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (New York: Harcourt, 1927), 53, hereafter cited in text as *TL*.

Mr. Ramsay's own meditation."<sup>146</sup> Indeed, the sentence that seems initially to characterize Mr. Ramsay's mind from a distance turns out to be an intensely focalized instance of self-characterization.

This pivoting point of view, so characteristic of Woolf's fiction writing, is one way that her style calls attention to the medium of narration in the elaboration of mental content, suggesting that a kind of sticky reflexivity adheres even to the "Ps" and "Qs" which would like to be abstracted from their modes of presentation. In defiance of strict empiricist paradigms, the dynamic movement of point of view as the passage progresses ensures that the medium of narration will not be taken for granted as a transparent window onto Mr. Ramsay's "mental content." In Poe's tale, Dupin's analytic "method" sliced up his friend's stream of thought into simple units that became the basis for the "deduction" of associative links. Mr. Ramsay's "Ps" and "Qs" reduced thought to their propositional contents (comically condensed with the letters of the alphabet).

Mr. Ramsay's stream of thought reveals a reification of categories of analysis. The narrator starts out by using the alphabet as metaphor or analogy for Mr. Ramsay's mental functioning ("For if thought...*like* the alphabet is ranged in twenty-six letters all in order..."; my emphasis); but then the narrator presents the letter "Q" as if it were the literal content of Ramsay's rumination. The separate pieces of Ramsay's thought, then, are first *compared* to letters of the alphabet, and then the letters become the topic of his thinking. The thought about thought reappears as the content of the thought. The irony and dual voice famously generated by free indirect style does not only trouble our access to Mr. Ramsay's mind; it also suggests that these forms of mediation, contra the apparent immanence of the Ps and Qs, are proper to the consciousness in question.

Ironically, it is this stylistically perspectival (or, alternatively, "voiced") dimension of the narrated material that cannot be captured by means of Mr. Ramsay's logical analysis. The passage itself parodically follows an "if-then" structure of logical implication, third-person focalized through Ramsay's mind: "For *if* thought is like the keyboard of a piano...*then* his splendid mind had no sort of difficulty..." (my emphasis). But Mr. Ramsay's thought *does* have difficulty in moving from one proposition to the next; a consequence which calls the original "premise" into question. The workings of ironic distance here, between Mr. Ramsay and the implied author focalizing his consciousness, give a sense of the ways in which consciousness itself complicates the guise of a report.

Similarly, the supposition that thought is like a piano is framed syntactically as a separate, dependent clause, and is therefore grammatically positioned outside Mr. Ramsay's consciousness, but of course it is suffused with the rhetoric of logical deduction that is the hallmark of Mr. Ramsay's interior point of view. The draft manuscript versions of the scene also emphasize the dual perspectives that open up right at the moment where the consciousness ventriloquized takes itself to be the most impersonal. In the early version: "The splendid intellect had no sort of difficulty, supposing thought to be like the keyboard of a piano divided into so many notes...in running over these letters firmly."<sup>147</sup> This early version has "*The*" splendid intellect instead of "his" – intensifying the irony that the more impersonal the thought represented, the more personal it is. As in the final version, the "splendid intellect" establishes its own second meta-stream of omniscience which embodies the very qualities of mind that it

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<sup>146</sup> Suzanne Ferguson, "The Face in the Mirror: Authorial Presence in the Multiple Vision of Third-Person Impressionist Narrative" *Criticism* 21, no.3 (Summer 1979): 246.

<sup>147</sup> *To the Lighthouse* "The Window," Folio 131, P. 65 Berg Collection, New York Public Library.

purports to enact at a distance. Woolf motivates the question of point of view right where the rhetoric of logical supposition sets it aside.

It is remarkable that Woolf's focalization techniques often foster ambiguity precisely at those moments that a character is striking the most decisive attitudes of knowing. We can see this in the break between the two paragraphs concatenating the inside-out description of Mr. Ramsay's mind as "splendid." The fully articulated proposition that begins the second paragraph, "it was a splendid mind" both re-iterates (a little defensively) and seems to double-back on the taken-for-granted definite description "...his splendid mind." The logical entailment that itself proceeds across the break between the paragraphs actually calls into question the mind's splendidness rather than grounding its certainty.

Woolf's passage ironizes an *activity* of thinking that is out of step with the *theory* of thinking that it ventriloquizes. Focalizing Mr. Ramsay, as we have seen, the "splendid mind" introduces the twenty-six letters of the alphabet as if they were the elementary units of some "mental instrument," proceeding as if automatically. But the guise of alphabetic completion actually collapses the real activity of logical "deduction" into triviality. There is a fertile confusion in Woolf's passage, made possible by the alphabetic frame, between the letters of an encyclopedic catalog and the letters of a logical proof. Nicole Ward Jouve emphasizes the list-like aspect of Ramsay's thought process when she characterizes his "famous attempt to work his way through knowledge from A to Z."<sup>148</sup> Ann Banfield identifies "Mr. Ramsay, working through the alphabet" with Woolf's father, "Leslie Stephen editing *The Dictionary of National Biography*." Banfield also, pursuing the encyclopedic model, compares Mr. Ramsay to a minor male character in *Mrs. Dalloway* who is seen "drafting sentiments in alphabetical order" (189). Ironically, however, this encyclopedic model, arranging knowledge according to the ad-hoc sequence of the alphabet, is exactly the opposite of the *logical* entailments that lead from *P* to *Q*.

Though it is most common to read Mr. Ramsay biographically in the context of Leslie Stephen, as it turns out, there is a more philosophically plausible model for Mr. Ramsay, one which situates propositional logic as a central point of reference for Woolfian stream of consciousness: a young philosopher and friend of the Bloomsbury group named F.P. Ramsey (1903-1930).<sup>149</sup> Woolf writes about meeting Ramsey in her diaries.<sup>150</sup> By this time in his short life, Ramsey had already contributed to the first English-language translation of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* (1922). Still more relevant for Woolf's passage about the letter "Q" is the special note of acknowledgment to Frank Ramsey that Russell and Whitehead attached to their Introduction to their 1925 Second Edition of their *Principia Mathematica*, the founding text of propositional logic.

After all, "Q,R...Z" are not just letters of the alphabet; they also echo what Woolf's friend Bertrand Russell called "propositional letters": "let *p,q,r,s,t* denote, to begin with, atomic propositions," Russell and Whitehead wrote in the 1910 *Principia*. Banfield crucially introduces the *Principia* as an intertext for *To the Lighthouse*. But while she acknowledges that "the letters are also logical symbols, tools of analysis for breaking things down into ever simpler parts," Banfield does not address the "if-then" structure of Mr. Ramsay's desired thought process -- the

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<sup>148</sup> "Virginia Woolf and Psychoanalysis," in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. Susan Sellers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 260.

<sup>149</sup> In their Introduction to the Second Edition, Russell and Whitehead write: "the authors are under great obligations to Mr. F. P. Ramsey of King's College, Cambridge, who has read the whole MS and contributed valuable criticisms and suggestions."

<sup>150</sup> She spells his name "Ramsay." Vol. 2 of *Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 231.

form of logical implication, which takes us beyond the aggregative model of experience and of knowledge alike: *If P, then Q* names a relationship of implication in which “Q” is the consequent, very different from the patterns of contiguity suggested by the alphabetical list. Logical implication is an activity which breaks up the flow of experience by reconstructing an order that is different from the sequence in which phenomena are given.

A further clue that Mr. Ramsay is engaged in deductive argument and not just in an alphabetic recitation of facts follows:

But after Q? What comes next? After Q there are a number of letters the last of which is scarcely visible to mortal eyes, but glimmers red in the distance. Z is only reached once by one man in a generation. Still, if he could reach R it would be something. Here at least was Q. He dug his heels in at Q. Q he was sure of. Q he could demonstrate. If Q then is Q – R – <sup>151</sup>

Some readers who are familiar with propositional logic have even, in their writings on this passage, supplied the missing “P” that in fact is never given in the text, a mistake that would actually indicate the success of Woolf’s figure in conjuring up its various frames of reference. How, then, to reconcile the validity that Woolf’s passage accords both to the associative stream of thought and to its rationalist refashioning, while ironizing both?

The incommensurability between syllogistic reasoning and the first-person point of view that Woolf stages in her Mr. Ramsay passage recalls a similar passage in Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilych* (1886):

In his heart he knew he was dying, but he not only couldn’t get used to it, he simply couldn’t grasp it, couldn’t grasp it at all.

The example of syllogistic reasoning he had read in Kiezewetter’s *Logic* – ‘Gaius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Gaius is mortal’ – had always seemed to him true only in relation to Gaius, not to himself. . . . What to Gaius was the striped leather ball that little Vanya had loved so much? What did Gaius have to do with him kissing his mother’s hand, and had Gaius ever heard the silken rustle of his mother’s dress? . . . So of course, Gaius could be mortal, and it was right for him to die, but for me, little Vanya, for Ivan Ilych, with all my thoughts and emotions – for me it’s a different story. It can’t possibly be that *I* have to die. That would be too horrible. <sup>152</sup>

There is ironically a form of dead certainty in Tolstoy’s passage which cannot be grasped by means of syllogistic reasoning. And the passage itself irrupts into the third-person narration of the novella, moving suddenly into a first-person *monologue intérieur*, lacking any typographical markings like italics or quotation marks, for which there has been no precedent in the course of the text. There is something about Ivan Ilych’s pronoun “I” which resists the very substitutability suggested by logical form. A crisis of point of view tries, fruitlessly, to resolve itself through syllogistic reasoning. And yet it’s almost as if Ilych could not get to such intimate first-person forms of enunciation, without first moving through an acknowledgment of the rational and its

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<sup>151</sup> *TL*, 54. In the early version: “If Q is really Q then R—” . . .

<sup>152</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, trans. Ian Dreiblat (Brooklyn, New York: Melville House Publishing, 2008), 60.

limitations: “For me, little Vanya, for Ivan Ilych” – not only does an engagement with the limits of syllogistic form bring about a mode of first-person expression which was not possible up until this point within the conventions of third-person “omniscience” text, but also the phrase “For me, little Vanya, for Ivan Ilych” reduplicates the gesture of self-reference as an oscillation between first-person and third-person point of view. In this proto-modernist moment, Tolstoy breaks the impersonal modality of the syllogism, and the third-person omniscience of his own text, in one fell swoop.<sup>153</sup>

One can move with certainty from “All men are mortal” to “Ivan Ilych is mortal” or even “I am mortal” through the logic rule of “universal instantiation.”<sup>154</sup> The truth of one proposition guarantees the truth of the other, and yet – as Mr. Ramsay knows too well – knowledge of one proposition does not at all guarantee knowledge of the other. Something new is introduced with the first-person case. Indeed, Ilych’s acquaintance with death launches him into a kind of knowing that stretches the form of the proposition. Of paramount importance in the passage is the “striped leather ball,” powerful precisely as a sensory non sequitur: “What to Gaius was the striped leather ball that little Vanya had loved so much?” The striped leather ball is marshaled by Ivan Ilych to forestall the logical substitution between himself and Gaius as variables in the proposition. Like Tolstoy, Woolf is interested in re-inserting syllogistic reasoning into the passing flux of thought (in Ivan Ilych’s case, a metonymy for his own mortality). For both authors, there is a special relationship between syllogistic reasoning and the kind of interiority or first-person consciousness that it both embraces and denies.

Let us return to Mr. Ramsay and his particular method of resolving the nineteenth-century quandary, posed so beautifully in Tolstoy, between the subjective flow of thought and the structures of propositions. As we saw above, Mr. Ramsay’s consciousness offers a simile or analogy for thought that purports to resolve Ilych’s problem by inscribing the unit of the proposition into the very architecture of the mental instrument. Let us focus now on the image of piano-playing as a simile for thinking that drives this strategy: “For if thought is like the keyboard of a piano, divided into so many notes, or like the alphabet is ranged in twenty-six letters all in order...” Underneath the imaginative comparison to musical and alphabetical domains which seems to render thought a little bit like art, and also a little bit like language, is a sterner premise. For the respect in which thought, the alphabet and the piano are said, in this moment of imaginative reflection, to resemble one another, is specifically that *discrete* aspect of the keyboard according to which it “is divided into so many notes.”

The keyboard-alphabet model of thought is a rich example of what Eve Sweetser calls a cognitive “blend,” in which three separate frames are thought together. The two source domains

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<sup>153</sup> Carl Proffer aptly calls this a case of “hidden” or “unmarked shift into” interior monologue.

Interestingly, this moment of total “unmarked” narrative rupture corresponds to Tolstoy’s initial, largely more experimental narrative plan for the novella: to use the form of a first-person diary. See Critical Commentary, in Carl Proffer, ed. *From Karamzin to Bunin: An Anthology of Russian Short Stories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), 26. Dorrit Cohn discusses *Ilych* at length but as a case of “quoted monologue” without noting this unsettling moment of departure.

<sup>154</sup> The most celebrated classic example of syllogism, at least since the nineteenth century, is just the one that Ilych cites (in the Anglophone context, most famously, *All men are mortal, and Socrates is a man; therefore, Socrates is mortal*). Thus, the predicate “is mortal” happens to have become exemplary for logical reasoning. But as in all cases of logical inference, the validity of the syllogism is independent of the particular predicates employed in proposition – morbid or otherwise. Nevertheless, it is precisely the content of the syllogism (mortality) and not the form that sharpens into focus as Ilych faces his own death. So the link to the syllogism is itself the emotionally associative connection.

(music, figured by the keyboard; and language, figured by the alphabet) are both simultaneously invoked as ways of construing a third, target domain: “thought” itself.<sup>155</sup> The linearly-organized keyboard and the alphabet give an atomistic, sequential picture of music and language, and therefore of thought. And yet both examples undermine exactly that kind of aggregative and reductive view: for music-making is not exhausted by the selection of keys on the keyboard; similarly, the ordered recitation of the alphabet is not tantamount to language. Neither is it the case that thought proceeds by running through a pre-given sequence of simple units. The views ventriloquized by Mr. Ramsay, in other words, may be unfair to the piano, as well as to the mind. Mr. Ramsay’s associationist metaphor of the keyboard mistakes the music for the notes. The keyboard image, then, would have been recognized in the Bloomsbury circle as a kind of stubborn vestige of a nineteenth-century philosophical paradigm: the persistence of atomistic discreteness. In fact, contextual resonances of the simile reveal that the piano keyboard was a frequent symbol for associationist paradigms. According to Phyllis Weliver, “Keyboard playing was a recurring nineteenth-century example of how association worked and how habits are acquired.”<sup>156</sup>

But such resonances also reveal the ways in which models of mind and of artistic practice were subjected to mechanical explanations which in a way exclude thought from the very account of thought. As it turns out, Ramsay’s seemingly fantastic keyboard has an even more direct shadow-text: the piano-like device built in 1869 by the logician and economist William Jevons. This was a “machine for doing logical inference,” the first machine to employ Boolean logic in doing so, and is one of the earliest proto-computers in history.<sup>157</sup> In his 1869 textbook, *The Substitution of Similars*, Jevons writes: “I have...made a successful working model...which may be considered *a machine capable of reasoning*, or of replacing almost entirely the action of the mind in drawing inferences.” In *The Principles of Science* (1874, reprinted 1913), he describes his invention in further detail: “The general appearance of the machine...somewhat resembles a very small upright piano or organ, and has a keyboard containing twenty-one keys. These keys are of two kinds, sixteen of them representing the terms of letter A, a, B, b, C, c, D, d, which have so often been employed in our logical notation.”<sup>158</sup>

This recent museum photo of Jevons’ “Logic Piano,” as it came to be known, shows there are letters of the alphabet (“propositional letters”) on every key, representing four different variables that the machine can handle as part of computing its logical operations:

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<sup>155</sup> Barbara Dancygier and Eve Sweetser, *Figurative Language* (Cambridge University Press: 2015).

<sup>156</sup> Phyllis Weliver, *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction, 1860-1900: Representations of Music, Science and Gender in the Leisured Home* (Aldershot ; Burlington, Vt.) Ashgate, 2000, p. 86

<sup>157</sup> For more on W.S. Jevons and the history of logic, see Souleymane Bachir Diagne, *Logique pour philosophes* (Nouvelles éditions africaines du Sénégal, 1991).

<sup>158</sup> *The Principles of Science: A Treatise on Logic and Scientific Method* 110.



William Jevons' "Logic Piano," built in 1869 and currently housed at the Sydney Powerhouse Museum. Photograph by Nelson Minar.<sup>159</sup>

Mr. Ramsay's simile, then, is not just a figure; it names a bizarre object that really combines the keyboard and the alphabet into an artifact that anticipates modern artificial intelligence, by seeking to determine the "laws of thought."<sup>160</sup> Woolf's mental "keyboard" then, invokes a nineteenth-century mechanistic conceit, updating it with twentieth-century nomenclature: p, q, r, post-*Principia Mathematica*. When Mr. Ramsay conceives of his thought as resembling both the keyboard and the alphabet, he is actually invoking the enduring model of

<sup>159</sup><https://www.flickr.com/photos/nelsonminar/127116445/in/photostream/>

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<sup>160</sup> The "logic piano" has great implications for the associationist premises that are carried over into the twentieth century. The logic piano may provide an illuminating and problematic context for the celebrated parenthetical remark by Woolf's friend Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*, section 6: "(Uttering a word is like striking a note on the keyboard of the imagination)" / (Das Aussprechen eines Wortes ist gleichsam ein Anschlagen einer Taste auf dem Vorstellungsklavier)." The parentheses that Wittgenstein employs are one indication that this is a view being ventriloquized, but not necessarily endorsed; contra some scholarship that takes it as a "dictum." *The Philosophical Investigations*, published after Wittgenstein's death in 1945, comprised his thoughts from the period between 1929 and 1945, and thus follows after *To the Lighthouse*. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 4.

the mind as machine. Thus Woolf's passage "streams" Ramsay's consciousness while simultaneously raising the mechanical specter of thought's finite predictability.

John Stuart Mill, famous for partially casting off the doctrinaire associationism of his father, James Mill, registers the anxieties, both philosophical and personal that were generated by such an intellectual milieu. George Scarre describes the special role that logical entailment played in J.S. Mill's rebellion against his father's associationist doctrine: "The younger Mill was sufficiently clear sighted to realise, and honest enough to admit, that associationism created severe embarrassments to anyone wanting to preserve a distinction between a movement of thought which is simply compulsive or automatic, and a rational inference."<sup>161</sup> The problem seemed to lie with associationism, and not with rational inference per se. In a climactic moment from his 1873 *Autobiography*, Mill describes his nervous breakdown at age 20 as directly precipitated by the specter of thought's finite predictability. His crisis, which he rightly views as a consequence of his father's philosophy, is cast in terms that resonate with Mr. Ramsay's keyboard:

I was seriously tormented by the thought of the exhaustibility of musical combinations. The octave consists only of five tones and two semitones, which can be put together in only a limited number of ways of which but a small proportion are beautiful : more of these, it seemed to me, must have been already discovered, and there could not be room for a long succession of Mozarts and Webers to strike out, as they have done, entirely new surpassing rich veins of musical beauty. This sort of anxiety, may, perhaps, be thought to resemble that of the philosophers of Laputa, who feared lest the sun be burnt out.<sup>162</sup>

Mill foreshadows Mr. Ramsay by drawing an analogy between the atomic units of tonal harmony on the one hand and the atomic units of consciousness on the other: Discrete tones and their recombination exhaust the set of musical possibilities, just as units of sensory experience and their recombination exhaust the set of mental possibilities, on the empiricist picture that Mill inherited from his father: "My course of study had led me to believe, that all mental and moral feelings and qualities, whether of a good or of a bad kind, were the results of association" (87). Though he registers the dark shadow that such a model of mind casts on the possibilities of artistic production, Mill does not quite question the aptness of the unit of analysis – or of *any* unit of analysis per se, the way William James does. Indeed, Woolf's satirical portrait of Mr. Ramsay articulates a resistance to exactly the critique of atomistic discreteness that led William

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<sup>161</sup> Geoffrey Scarre, *Logic and Reality in the Philosophy of John Stuart Mill*, Synthese Historical Library. Texts and Studies in the History of Logic and Philosophy, Vol. 34. (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), 10.

<sup>162</sup> John Stuart Mill, "A Crisis in My Mental History," *Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018 [1873]), 84. J.S. Mill ties his "musical" breakdown explicitly to the reductively associationist principles passed down to him by his philosopher father, James Mill:

It was the summer of 1826...the whole foundation on which my life was constructed fell down...My father, to whom it would have been natural to me to have recourse in any practical difficulties, was the last person to whom, in such a case as this, I looked for help...My education, which was wholly his work, had been conducted without any regard to the possibility of its ending in this result [i.e. the breakdown precipitated by the thought of the exhaustibility of combination].



James to theorize the stream of consciousness in the *Principles of Psychology*, where he proposes shifting the governing metaphor for consciousness from the “train” of thought to the “stream”:

Consciousness, then, does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as ‘chain’ or ‘train’ do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A ‘river’ or a ‘stream’ are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. *In talking of it hereafter let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life.*<sup>163</sup>

William James captures beautifully here the critique of fundamental units that are imposed by the thought-keyboard “divided into so many notes.” But his notion of unmediated, continuous “flow,” of a consciousness which “is nothing jointed,” still leaves many questions unanswered. Not so fast, Woolf seems to say in *To the Lighthouse*, suggesting that the moment of the “train” cannot so easily be dispensed with. Woolf’s narrator both seems to borrow the idea about discrete units of thought, language and musicality from Mr. Ramsay’s consciousness and to characterize Mr. Ramsay’s consciousness by means of that idea. Through free indirect style, as we have seen, Woolf presents us with a hybrid consciousness that characterizes itself as an arrangement of discrete units, but which at the same time seems to exceed its own self-characterization (or to foster an ironic distance from it).

Rather than merely lampooning the philosopher figure, then, *To the Lighthouse* elaborates its own philosophy precisely by critiquing those reductive intellectual fashions that are inherited through the father: whether James Mill or Mr. Ramsay. It would be possible to read the Mr. Ramsay passage as simply undermining the specificity of logical entailment by subsuming it into a catch-all category of associative thinking. But Woolf’s fictional sequence, in its narratological structure, also calls into question a deeper assumption about the mind and its functioning, an assumption that has inflected understandings of both “wandering” association and the logical deduction that it was pitted against -- that mental life can be reduced to its discrete “contents” and thereby form a predictable sequence.

It is tempting, but ultimately misleading, to read the Mr. Ramsay passage either as a wholesale indictment of rational norms on thought (implying that such cognitive activities are not also pursued by the women figures in the novel); or as an uncritical acceptance of philosophical thought’s total dissociation from life –namely, that philosophy has to be this way. Rather, the dichotomy between real, lived experience and philosophical abstraction can be overcome by noting Woolf’s work with point of view: Woolf’s experiments with point of view begin to chip away at the atomistic framework that reduces thought to its descriptive content, seeking an ultimate terminus to analysis. But as Woolf shows, the “Q” is not much of a simple at all.

Woolf shared with the classical empiricists a fascination with the descriptive problem of mental association—of how one thought leads to another. But *To the Lighthouse* also resisted the rigid reductivism to which the purported laws of thought had often been subjected in the nineteenth century. Interestingly, it was Woolf’s own father, the historian of philosophy Leslie Stephen (1832-1904), who unwittingly played a role in the appropriation of Hume’s philosophy into a more reductive nineteenth-century framework that made it appear consonant with the

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<sup>163</sup> James, “The Stream of Thought,” in *Principles*, 239.

legacy of Mill's associationism. Explicating what he takes to be Hume's central doctrine, Stephen writes:

Association is in the mental what gravitation is in the natural world. The name signifies the inexplicable tendency of previously connected ideas and impressions to connect themselves again. We can only explain mental processes of any kind by resolving them into such cases of association.<sup>164</sup>

As Gillian Beer points out, Hume was the philosopher Leslie Stephen "most admired," and indeed he devoted almost 100 pages of his major work, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (1876) to a recovery project defending Hume from his detractors, beginning with a section titled "Imperfect Appreciation of Hume."<sup>165</sup> Norman Kemp Smith, in his 1941 book *The Philosophy of David Hume*, dedicated an entire section to Leslie Stephen, under the heading "Current Misunderstandings of Hume's Teaching," a mark of the enduring historical importance of Stephen's assessment nearly seventy years after the publication of his *History*. "There is good excuse for the Mills," Kemp Smith writes sarcastically, alluding to the father and son who pressed Hume into service for their respective philosophical programs, "but it is otherwise with Leslie Stephen. His main interests were historical; and his *English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (1876) – a distinguished and masterly work which is still the best treatment of its subject – shows how congenial he had found Hume's writings and with what care he had studied them." And yet, after citing from Stephen's discussion of Hume, Kemp Smith concludes: "It would be difficult to compile a more misleading summary of Hume's actual teaching."<sup>166</sup> Leslie Stephen's take on Hume (which, according to Kemp Smith, reveals a larger trend in English letters in the late nineteenth century) is misleading because the attempt to "generate experience out of simple impressions by the mechanism of association in the manner of Mill... misrepresents both the spirit and the letter of the *Treatise*" (86). Kemp Smith continues to distinguish Hume's work in the *Treatise* from what later came to be known as "associationist" doctrine: "In opposition to such statements we must insist that Hume does not regard the principle of association as 'explaining' or 'generating' ideas or feelings, but only as stating certain of the conditions under which, as a matter of fact, we find them to occur" (86). According to Kemp Smith, in Hume's philosophy rational grounds for knowledge are replaced by natural propensities to believe.<sup>167</sup> Kemp Smith's "naturalistic" reading of Hume sought to rescue Hume

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<sup>164</sup> Leslie Stephen, Vol. 1 of *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1881[1874]), 44. *Internet Archive*.

<https://archive.org/details/thoughtintheeigh01stepuoft/mode/2up>

I cannot fully characterize here the somewhat subtle differences between Hume's view and the later associationist doctrines that sometimes claimed him as a model; but we can begin to see the difference by noting Stephen's language of "resolving" mental processes into associative ones. Above all, Stephen's invocation of "gravitation" is suggestive. Stephen, like Mill, took Hume's gravitational metaphor as an indication of association's lawlike quality, but recall that Hume only characterized association as a "gentle force." See my previous chapter about relevant nuances in the reception of Newtonian paradigms for the explication of thought.

<sup>165</sup> Gillian Beer, "Hume, Stephen, and Elegy in *To the Lighthouse*," *Essays in Criticism* 34, no. 1 (1984): 33; Stephen, *English Thought*, 309.

<sup>166</sup> Norman Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 83

<sup>167</sup> Kemp Smith, in his own words, aimed to "establish the contention that Hume's philosophy can be more adequately described as naturalistic than as skeptical" (83).

from his reputation as a philosopher dominated by “destructive urges,” and perhaps in this respect Kemp Smith did not differ quite so much from Stephen.<sup>168</sup> After all, a young John Stuart Mill, in his 1832 obituary of Jeremy Bentham, had called Hume, “the profoundest negative thinker on record...a man, the peculiarities of whose mind qualified him to detect failure of proof, and want of logical consistency...”<sup>169</sup> By 1895 Mill had radically re-evaluated this flatly negative interpretation of Hume, but all along Hume had remained the touchstone for Mill’s evaluations of contemporary philosophy.<sup>170</sup> Indeed, it may not be so much that Hume was “in eclipse in Britain in the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century” and “revived in the last third,” as John Skorupski has it; rather the influential lineage from Bentham to the Mills to Alexander Bain kept the Humean problematics at the center of their inquiry, even while flattening out precisely that *mix* of naturalistic and skeptical strands that re-emerges so vibrantly in Woolf’s working through of the Humean problems of consciousness. It is important to remember at what cost Hume was permitted to remain central to the canon, especially given the emphasis that Leslie Stephen’s Humeanism is accorded in critical interpretations of *To the Lighthouse*.

The special affinity between *To the Lighthouse* and Hume’s philosophy has been well documented.<sup>171</sup> Most accounts focus on the biographical connections. It is customary in Woolf criticism to read Woolf’s own father behind the figure of Mr. Ramsay, through his close relationship with Hume’s writing. Hume’s name is mentioned four times in *To the Lighthouse* in connection with Mr. Ramsay, who likes to talk about Hume to others and to himself. He can’t wait to talk to Charles Tansley, for example, about “Locke, Hume, Berkeley”—though tellingly it is just that accepted grouping of Hume with Berkeley and Locke that is problematic, as Kemp Smith has shown. Kemp Smith, arguing directly against the trends in Hume reception that Leslie Stephen carried forward, writes: “Does Hume agree with Berkeley in denying the existence of a material world? No; What we may describe as the chief aim of Hume’s philosophy is to prove that belief rests neither on reason nor on evidence.”<sup>172</sup> Discussions about Hume and *To the Lighthouse* often follow exactly this trend in Hume reception. Justin W. Keena, following

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<sup>168</sup> James Harris writes that “the traditional reading of Hume prior to Kemp Smith’s *The Philosophy of David Hume* was a negative one. Hume was viewed as a skeptic with nothing of his own to teach.” To this day, disagreements in the reception of Hume have often taken the form of a tug of war between a “skeptical” and a “naturalistic” dominant in Hume’s account of human nature. Harris continues: “it is, of course, possible to believe with some justification that Kemp Smith exaggerates in making the case for Hume’s being primarily a constructive scientist of mind.” (325) But to my mind, Hume’s challenge lies precisely in undoing the presumed antithesis between “skeptical” and “constructive” philosophy; that is, he holds out as a possibility form of scientific knowledge that does not reify its materials. But this is precisely the alternative that may have fallen out of view in the nineteenth century nexus. James A. Harris, “The Reception of Hume in Nineteenth-Century British Philosophy” in Jones, Peter, ed. *The Reception of David Hume in Europe*. London, New York: Thoemmes Continuum, 2005.

<sup>169</sup>The younger Mill’s evolving views on Hume are foregrounded in John Skorupski’s “Introduction: The Fortunes of Liberal Naturalism” in John Skorupski, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Mill* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1-34.

<sup>170</sup> I am referring to Mill’s *Examination of William Hamilton’s Philosophy*, discussed in Skorupski, 32.

<sup>171</sup> See, in chronological order: Gillian Beer, “Hume, Stephen, and Elegy in *To the Lighthouse*,” *Essays in Criticism* 34, no. 1 (1984): 33–55; Ann Banfield, *The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell, and the Epistemology of Modernism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 66, 193, 233, 366–68, 377; Justin W. Keena, “David Hume and *To the Lighthouse*,” *Philosophy and Literature* 42, no. 2 (October 2018): 376-393.

<sup>172</sup> Norman Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume*, 85.

Martha Nussbaum's article on *To the Lighthouse*, interprets the novel as posing the question "How, indeed, can we know others' minds?" Keena articulates what he takes to be the skeptical, and therefore Humean, import of the novel: "Human mental life excludes direct contact with external objects. External objects, if they exist (as every skeptic must hesitate to affirm), are inferred based on what is directly present to our minds, namely impressions and ideas."<sup>173</sup> But Hume's skepticism is more difficult to grapple with, and potentially more devastating to Western Reason, than the modes of "skepticism" that more comfortably entered the English canon. Could it be that Woolf's novel *criticizes* the conversion of Hume's problem into a world-denying idealism that reifies Mr. Ramsay's disengagement?<sup>174</sup>

The critical consensus has been that "Hume's ideas about perception, as articulated through Leslie Stephen, play a crucial role in the novel's structure and thematics."<sup>175</sup> However it is not necessary to side with Kemp Smith in this polemic in order to see that the nuances of Woolf's engagement with Humean problems – with problems of experience, that is – may exceed the reception history mediated by her father. Furthermore, it is important not to assume that Woolf's Hume is her father's Hume.

I have merely pointed to some of the nuances of Hume's nineteenth and twentieth-century reception history in English, but these already complicate seriously the straight arrow of transmission that is often drawn from Hume's *Treatise*, through her father's *History of England*, to Woolf's novel. Furthermore, the question of influence may be entirely beside the point. *To the Lighthouse* works out its own conclusions about mental association, and some of these may line up with Hume's own meditations on the matter. There's a history to the narrower reading of Hume, which I venture to suppose Woolf's novel is working against. Kemp Smith's interpretation of Hume brings out the distinctiveness in Hume's empiricism and may bring it into closer proximity with Woolf's project. To do a philosophical reading of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* it is not enough to state the philosophy of Hume, and her father's writings on Hume, as an influence. Rather, the question is, if Woolf is one of the major writers on consciousness of the twentieth century, what theorizations of mind and mental association are possible on the basis of her fiction? Woolf's own fictional elaboration of mental association calls into question both her father's reading of Hume and the predominantly rigid reading of association as ultimate law.

Like Hume's *Treatise*, Woolf's text is preoccupied with seeking out the sensuous occasions for thought – which some philosophy tries to leave out of the philosophical procedure. In her recent article on *To the Lighthouse* and the problem of "reality and perception," Emily Dalgaron cites Anthony J. Cascardi's observation about the philosophical implications of the novel as a form (Cascardi is addressing here novelistic form in general, not Woolf's novel): "the novel sheds light on the formation (discursive and otherwise) of the insights that philosophy regards as achieved, and, with that, articulates those things that philosophy tends to leave largely

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<sup>173</sup> Keena, "David Hume," (387).

<sup>174</sup> On the interpretation of Hume that I am trying to make space for here, Hume did not doubt the existence of an external world at all; rather, he doubted that reason is the means to secure our knowledge about the world. Indeed, whenever Hume makes a statement like "*there is no reason to believe X, Y, or Z*" – it is important to hear this as an *interrogation of reason* rather than as a doubt about external reality.

<sup>175</sup> J.H. Stape, "Essays on Woolf" *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 41, no.1 (1998): 99.

unspoken.”<sup>176</sup> Dalgaron proceeds to ask, “What access to philosophy does *To the Lighthouse* provide that is unavailable in other forms of writing”? It may very well be that Hume, in tracing back ideas to their sensuous occasion, joins forces with the novel as a form by speaking what “philosophy regards as achieved...those things that philosophy tends to leave largely unspoken.” If that makes Hume philosophical, or even, dare I say, it “literary” (an attribute Hume would have detested) -- so be it. Indeed, Stephen in his *History of English Thought* writes of Hume:

He and he alone, amongst contemporary thinkers, followed logic wherever it led him. Hume, indeed, may be accused of some divergence from the straight path under the influence of literary vanity...During his youth, however, he was a reasoner pure and simple.<sup>177</sup>

For Stephen, Hume's profound impact as a prose stylist on English letters is a mark of his "meandering" from the straight path of reasoning. But Woolf's Mr. Ramsay sequence suggests that thought does not proceed in so orderly a sequence as the latter-day empiricists might hope when they take the laws of association too literally. The Ramsay sequence also suggests one way in which the *novel* adheres to Hume's methodology – much more closely than Mr. Ramsay himself does, in fact. Woolf discloses the contingent *occasions* for thought, which some philosophy tries to leave out of the philosophical procedure, as Cascardi notes. Recall that Mr. Ramsay is scarcely aware of the ways in which he instrumentalizes his impressions of his own wife and child toward the “fortification” of an idea:

He was safe, he was restored to his privacy. He stopped to light his pipe, looked once at his wife and son in the window, and as one raises one's eyes from a page in an express train and sees a farm, a tree, a cluster of cottages as an illustration, a confirmation of something on the printed page to which one returns, fortified, and satisfied, so without his distinguishing either his son or his wife, the sight of them fortified him and satisfied him and consecrated his effort to arrive at a perfectly clear understanding of the problem which now engaged the energies of his splendid mind. (*TL*, 52-3)

The narrator's paragraph-long, meandering second sentence embodies Mr. Ramsay's secret wish “to go on thinking.”<sup>178</sup> The syntactic stylistics themselves show the ways in which Ramsay's thoughts gloss over the very concrete experiences that they are launched by. The experiential contents of thought are sidelined and subordinated grammatically via a dependent clause (“...as one raises one's eyes from a page and sees a farm, a tree, a cluster of cottages as an illustration, a confirmation of something on the printed page to which one returns, fortified and satisfied...”).

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<sup>176</sup> Emily Dalgaron, “Reality and Perception: Philosophical Approaches to *To the Lighthouse*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to To the Lighthouse*, ed. Allison Pease (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 69.

<sup>177</sup> Stephen, *English Thought*, 43.

<sup>178</sup> “The phrase “to go on thinking” is repeated three times in the novel, once from the point of view of Mr. Ramsay (“he wanted to go on thinking”), once from the point of view of Lily Briscoe (“she might be left alone to go on thinking, to go on painting”) and once from the point of view of Cam (“Now I can go on thinking whatever I like”). The desire for sustained continuity on the part of the singular stream of consciousness, then, is itself construed intersubjectively.

The dependent clause keeps the experience in abeyance by withholding full predication. The digressive quality suggested by the syntax is reinforced by the as-if status of the analogy, which changes out Mr. Ramsay for a hypothetical, impersonal subject (“one.”) The passage’s critical edge comes most sharply into focus when we realize, in yet another subordinate clause within the main clause, that Mrs. Ramsay and James have been reduced to just so much scenery – the instruments of thought. The focalized language, in other words, echoes in its structure the workings of the mind behind it. In a way, Woolf’s text privileges the experiential here and now precisely by showing its marginalization. At the same time that Woolf lays out a philosophy of language and philosophy mind, she also lays out a devastating critique of patriarchy in the family. Woolf doesn’t sacrifice one frame of reference for the other the way that Mr. Ramsay does.<sup>179</sup>

Doing philosophy does not necessarily involve bracketing empirical experience, though Mrs. Ramsay certainly directs this charge against her husband, the professional philosopher with his head in the clouds, whom she regards as “blind, deaf, and dumb, to the ordinary things,” despite his penetrating understanding of “extraordinary things.”<sup>180</sup> Mrs. Ramsay is watching her husband in the garden when “at that moment, he said, ‘Very fine,’ to please her, and pretended to admire the flowers. But she knew quite well that he did not admire them, or even realize that they were there” (108). Woolf’s passage thinks beyond the cliché that the real world necessarily recedes from view from the great man who philosophizing too deeply. Rather, the text suggests, if the garden world has been forgotten by Mr. Ramsay, perhaps it is because it has become so instrumental to his thinking processes.

I am suggesting that *To the Lighthouse* in its descriptive, narrative procedures, may be Humean in the way that it *exceeds* and interrogates Mr. Ramsay’s particular modes of philosophy. The father figure’s blindness to empirical reality is first of all a major source of the novel’s dramatic irony and comedy; and secondly, it is not at all characteristic of the kind of philosophy Hume advocated. The narrative procedures that Woolf instantiates share Hume’s attention to empirical detail. The novel dwells on the sensuous occasions for thought. Like Hume, it dismisses the viability of thoughts that are unclear about their own relationship to experiential triggers.

Earlier in the novel, through Mrs. Ramsay’s point of view, we see a perambulating Mr. Ramsay: “He slipped, seeing before him that hedge which had over and over again rounded some pause, signified some conclusion, seeing his wife and child, seeing again the urns with the trailing red geraniums which had so often decorated processes of thought, and bore, written up among their leaves, as if they were scraps of paper on which one scribbles notes in the rush of reading – he slipped, seeing all this, smoothly into speculation suggested by an article in *The Times* about the number of Americans who visit Shakespeare’s house every year” (66). Within Mr. Ramsay’s focalized consciousness, the “hedge,” the “urn of red geraniums,” and the “leaves” merely “decorate” his thought process as so much ornamentation. But the importance of these naturalistic particulars for Mr. Ramsay’s own thinking is simultaneously beyond his thinking – or perhaps the “hedge,” the “urn of red geraniums,” the “leaves” have been swallowed up by his consciousness in the imperceptibility of absorbed use.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> In the following chapters, I pursue the thesis that the synthesizing spontaneity of novelistic form suggests the possibility of being able to do both at once.

<sup>180</sup> *TL*, 107.

<sup>181</sup> The urn, from classical poetry to Keats’ “Grecian Urn,” is a central symbol for the aesthetic -- which Mr. Ramsay also regards as merely “decorative.”

The verb “slipped” which begins the passage, seeming to signal Mr. Ramsay tripping in the garden, actually resolves differently at the very end of the passage: “He slipped, seeing all this, smoothly into speculation suggested by an article in *The Times* about the number of Americans who visit Shakespeare’s house every year.” So “speculation” is the indirect object of his “slipping.” The sentence itself, accentuated by the alliteration centering around the “S” sound, thematizes the mental process of association suddenly launched by all these impressions in the garden. It is as if the “S” and “L” from the word “slipped” get distributed into the ensuing phrase, reverberating down the line through prosodic association: “He SLipped, Seeing aLL thiS, SmoothLy into SpecuLation.”<sup>182</sup> In addition, the adverb “smoothly” directly echoes one of Hume’s favorite and oft-repeated words in *The Treatise*. As we have seen in the last chapter, Hume frequently characterizes as “smooth” the elusive ease with which thought proceeds from one impression to another, or from impression to idea: He mentions in one place the “smooth and uninterrupted progress of the thought along a train of connected ideas,” in another other, the “smooth passage from the impression to the idea.”<sup>183</sup> But for Hume this very smoothness is also suspect, since it means that our thoughts create the illusion of clear and continuous identity: “But as the smooth passage of our thought along our resembling perceptions makes us ascribe to them an identity, we can never without reluctance yield up that opinion” (206). Mr. Ramsay’s “slip” also recalls the main direct reference to Hume in Woolf’s text, which is ironically not to the *Treatise of Human Nature* but a comical anecdote that circulated orally, about Hume “slipp[ing] in a bog”:<sup>184</sup> “[Mr. Ramsay] wanted to go on thinking, telling himself the story how Hume was stuck in a bog; he wanted to laugh” (104). The story about Hume is mentioned three times in all, each time unfolding only partially, until, finally when he senses that he can be alone, “Mr. Ramsay felt free now to laugh out loud at the thought that Hume had stuck in a bog and an old woman rescued him on condition he said the Lord’s Prayer, and chuckling to himself he strolled off to his study” (111).

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<sup>182</sup> This would be an instance of a “focalizing sound pattern,” in Benjamin Harshav’s theory of prosody. See B. Hrushovski, “The Meaning of Sound Patterns in Poetry.” *Poetics Today* 2 (1980): 39-5. See also “Do Sounds Have Meaning?” in Benjamin Harshav, *Three Thousand Years of Hebrew Versification: Essays in Comparative Prosody* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

<sup>183</sup> Hume, *Treatise*, 220, 208.

<sup>184</sup> The earliest written record of the oral Hume anecdote that I have found appears in the 1854 collection *Letters to William Mure of Caldwell*. In that volume, the anecdote appears as an editorial addendum to one of Hume’s letters from 1770:

... [Hume] resided in his former lodging on the northern slope of the Old Town... he was in the habit of taking the short cut across what was then a swamp, called the North Lock... On one occasion, while picking his steps along the terra firma, *he made a slip*, fell over, and stuck fast in the bog. Observing some Newhaven fishwomen passing with their “creels,” he called aloud to them for help; but, when they came up, and recognized the wicked unbeliever David Hume, they refused any assistance, unless he first repeated, in a solemn tone, the Lord’s prayer. This he did, without pause or blunder, and was extricated accordingly. He used to tell this story himself with great glee, declaring that the Edinburgh fishwives were the most acute theologians he had ever encountered (emphasis added).

See Fieser. *Early Responses to Hume’s Life and Reputation*, 183.

The seductive but unsettling “smoothness” of the imagination, akin to Mr. Ramsay’s “slipping,” marks exactly how Hume’s notion of the imagination spills out, so to speak, beyond the combinatorial mold accorded to association in doctrinaire empiricism. Indeed, it seems to be more a function of Mr. Ramsay’s imagination than any associative links immanent to the sense data that leads from the “hedge...the urn of red geraniums...the leaves” to the “speculation” about American tourism.

As well as marking a descriptive leap from sensory occasion to speculation, the “slip” also marks a radical narratological pivot, which like Hume’s drifting impressions, do not respect the boundaries of personal identity. For exactly at this moment in the passage, the point of view “slips” from Mrs. Ramsay’s to Mr. Ramsay’s, whose innermost speculation is now directly presented in the text as a form of interior monologue. His sequence of ideas proceeds from the trivial, to the masculinist, to the racist:<sup>185</sup>

If Shakespeare had never existed, he asked, would the world have differed much from what it is today? Is the lot of the average human being better now than in the time of the Pharaohs? Is the lot of the average human being, however, he asked himself, the criterion by which we judge the measure of civilization? Possibly not. Possibly the greatest good requires the existence of a slave class. The liftman in the Tube is an eternal necessity. (67)

There is an element of *non sequitur* in the catalog of questions, if we analyze the “train” of associations by attending to their contents alone. And yet, a thread does run through the cogitations of Mr. Ramsay, who moments ago treated the garden (and his own wife and children) as mere decorations to his own thought, and now, employing the same kind of instrumentalizing logic, now speculates along the lines of Mill’s *Utilitarianism* that “the greatest good requires the existence of a slave class.” According to what principles of association does one thought lead to another? Woolf’s passage suggests that there is a masculinist, hierarchical imagination in Mr. Ramsay’s mind that constrains the range of possible associations.

Woolf’s text points up the salience of the sensuous world by means of which Mr. Ramsay thinks. In this way, *To the Lighthouse* models a narrative procedure for seeking out the impressions at the origin of the idea. The primacy of the impression (and the process of investigation by which it is recovered) as a unit of analysis bears an interesting affinity with philosophical empiricism. For Hume, all ideas derive from experience (through the raw material of impressions). This means that ideas are only valid in so far as they can refer back to impressions of which they are copies. But this does not mean that Hume neglected the possibility that mental constructs could lose their grounding in sensory experience. On the contrary, it is precisely this predilection on the part of philosophers that Hume fiercely. In the *Abstract* to his *A Treatise of Human Nature*, which he published anonymously in 1740, Hume writes: “Whenever any idea is ambiguous, he [i.e. the author/philosopher] has always recourse to the impression, which must render it clear and precise. And when he suspects that any philosophical term has no idea annexed to it (as is too common) he always asks *from what impression that pretended idea is derived?* And if no impression can be produced, he concludes that the term is altogether insignificant” (Hume’s italics, my underscoring).<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Obviously the pharaonic reference evokes a different schema of race from the chattel slavery of the British Empire.

<sup>186</sup> Hume, *A Treatise*, 648-49.



The question “*from what impression [a] pretended idea is derived*” repeats throughout the *Treatise*, forming the basis for a practice of recurring investigation. For example, in Section 1.4.6, “Of personal identity,” he asks this very question and concludes: “It cannot, therefore, be from any of these impressions, or from any other, that the idea of self is deriv’d; and consequently there is no such idea” (252). A similar method is undertaken in relation to the critique of the idea of causation: “tis impossible perfectly to understand any idea,” he writes in that section, “without tracing it up to its origin, and examining that primary impression, from which it arises” (74-75). This process of “tracing [the idea] up to its origin” suggests that on Hume’s method, ideas are referred back not so much to their referential “objects” as to their causal histories, which in a sense are narratives about the idea’s provocation. But without a primary impression to ground it, the idea (and the term expressing it) is exposed as epistemically mystified. If *To the Lighthouse* lampoons Mr. Ramsay’s inversion of the hierarchy between sense impressions and ideas, then the novel takes to heart Hume’s insights precisely to the extent that Mr. Ramsay doesn’t.

## 2. WOOLFIAN BUNDLES: TRANSFORMING THE REFLEXIVE PROBLEM OF ASSOCIATION<sup>187</sup>

Let me now borrow a liminal moment of transition from Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* to make a transition of my own – or rather, to show how Woolf’s writing itself moves from the Descriptive Problem of mental association: *How does one thought lead to another?* to the Reflexive Problem: *Given these changes and shifts, what grounds the unity of my experience?*

Woolf’s earlier novel, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) takes Hume’s preoccupation with the impression’s discreteness and projects the sensory percepts, radically, onto an intersubjective modality. The gaps in the chains of association imply a deeper problem of (dis)association – the question of to whom the associations belong, and on what grounds such associations are bundled together at all. Woolf’s novel crystallizes this philosophical problem into narratological precision. The opening scene, famously, quickly begins to operate “within” two distinct dramatic settings, so to speak: Mrs. Dalloway’s mind (subject almost instantly to projections forward and backwards in time), and the mind of an unknown second character who exceeds Dalloway’s perspective:<sup>188</sup>

He must have said it at breakfast one morning when she had gone out on to the terrace—Peter Walsh. He would be back from India one of these days, June or July, she forgot which, for his letters were awfully dull; it was his sayings one remembered; his eyes, his pocket-knife, his smile, his grumpiness and, when millions of things had utterly vanished – how strange it was! – a few sayings like this about cabbages.

She stiffened a little on the kerb, waiting for Durtnall’s van to pass. A charming woman, Scrope Purvis thought her (knowing her as one does know people who live next door to one in Westminster); a touch of the bird about her,

<sup>187</sup> I am indebted to Elizabeth Abel for a correspondence and series of conversations in June 2018.

<sup>188</sup> Part of a series of secondary characters kaleidoscopically realized, *seriatim*.

of the jay, blue-green, light, vivacious, though she was over fifty and grown very white since her illness. There she perched, never seeing him, waiting to cross, very upright.<sup>189</sup>

The principle of transition – the pivot, we might call it – between Mrs. Dalloway’s and Scrope Purvis’ points of view on the busy London street is effected as a startling exchange of center and periphery. Mrs. Dalloway moves from subject to object of perception, relative to the point of view of Scrope Purvis, a character (or more perhaps more accurately, a perspective) that will never reappear in the novel.<sup>190</sup> As the second paragraph continues, the reader is invited to perform a grammatical gestalt shift that will make “A charming woman” the *content* of Scrope Purvis’ thought. Scrope Purvis’ figurative language of “bird,” “light,” and “perched,” recalls strongly William James’ central figure for two movements within the stream of consciousness – so that the terms for characterizing Mrs. Dalloway herself also implicitly help theorize her movements of consciousness and the formal possibilities that they authorize.<sup>191</sup> “There she perched never seeing him” – the passage ends with Scrope Purvis’ awareness of being “unseen.”

The passage from *Mrs. Dalloway* reveals how intimately related the two axes of association are: just as the impressions proceed by associative leaps and bounds, so too can they wander from one consciousness to another. Of the “substance” of Peter Walsh, all that remains is impressionist detail: “It was his sayings one remembered; his eyes, his pocket-knife, his smile, his grumpiness and, when millions of things had utterly vanished – how strange it was! – a few sayings like this about cabbages.” The impressionist, even pointillist bundle or aggregate of impressions of Peter Walsh literally prepares in the course of Woolf’s passage, an even more radical departure – the transition from one point of view to another. In the previous chapter, I discussed Hume’s notion of the bundle and how the descriptive gaps in the sequence of impressions were underlain by even more unsettling gaps – reflexive gaps in the coherence of the self. Here in Woolf’s passage, we see how one form of disaggregation gives way to another. But contra Poe, in Woolf this unraveling of the empiricist bundle of association actually enables intersubjective possibilities rather than leading to individualistic despair or lack of grounding.

In my discussion of William James’ “stream of consciousness” in the Introduction, I suggested that the theorization and literary enactment of a stream of consciousness implies a critique of atomism, but at the same time does not evade the problem that is plaguing the philosophy of mind in this key moment of transition; namely, it cannot – nor does it seek to – resolve the disjunction springing from the dual aims of being answerable to the qualitative character of experience, and describing it in epistemically objective terms. As we go deeper into

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<sup>189</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (London: Penguin, 1966), 6.

<sup>190</sup> This may echo the deductive proof about the chess game that Poe’s “Rue Morgue” narrator writes out, culminating in a *non sequitur*.

<sup>191</sup> “Perchings” and “flights” or, substantive as opposed to transitive moments in the flux of thought. This implicit figure of the bird appears in James’ “Stream of Thought” chapter,” but not as a dominant metaphoric system; rather it is one of several heterogeneous figures. For James, the “flights” are nearly impossible to settle on by means of introspection, because the moment they are nailed down they are precisely no longer themselves – they have become fixed as “perchings.” James takes up the problematic of Hume’s “inconceivable rapidity” of perceptions and introduces a new metaphorical system for articulating introspection, paradoxically as a process of self-interruption as much as observation. James, “The Stream of Thought,” in *Principles*, 43.

Woolf's corpus, we see that Woolf's aesthetic atomism amounts to a radical intervention into the Humean problem of the bundle.

In her famous passage from "Modern Fiction," Woolf reconciles together the aspirations of fiction and something like the requirements for an account of the mind:

The mind receives a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms . . . Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; but a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. (154)

In this classic image of impressionism, the mind – as extension of the retina – is conceived as a receptacle.<sup>192</sup> Whereas for Hume impressions differ in their "force or vivacity," Woolf embellishes this Humean parameter with more concrete detail. But the "myriad" characterizations of the different types of atoms already undermines the idea of the impression as a basic unit. Some impressions, while fleeting, nevertheless come already "engraved," as for example in an elaboration and intensification of the classical metaphor of the mind as a *tabula rasa* or seal to be imprinted. In Woolf's "shower of atoms" we see the inherited aspiration to treat the world of experience with the same Newtonian precision as the simple-compound relationships which were attributed to physical matter.

This classic statement of Woolf's novelistic poetics is inexplicably linked with British empiricism: the language of "receptivity" and the primary unit of the "impression," soon figured in terms of "atomism" all corroborate this reading.<sup>193</sup> Seldom, however, is the passage considered in the context of the empiricist *impasse* that underscores the insufficiency of atomistic premises, while being unable to dispense with them.<sup>194</sup> Here this tension appears in the guise of a compound metaphor that stretches the limits of imagistic visualization: The "gig lamps symmetrically arranged" seem to recapitulate the discrete character of the "atom," at the same

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<sup>192</sup> Impressionism has been termed "the retinal view."

<sup>193</sup> A classic study of Woolf by Maria DiBattista emphasizes the "form-engendering power of the mind" even in the programmatic atomistic statement. Maria DiBattista, *Woolf's Major Novels: The Fables of Anon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 5. Recent groundbreaking work by Dora Zhang emphasizes the disconnect between Woolf's theory and her descriptive practices. Dora Zhang, "Feeling with Woolf," in *Strange Likeness: Description and the Modernist Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

<sup>194</sup> A major counterexample is the account of "literary impressionism" that proceeds from the point of reference of *visual art*, and its accompanying interpretation of empiricism. Maria Kronegger argued that "impressionism is born from the fundamental insight that our consciousness is sensitive and passive; . . . consciousness faces this world as pure passivity, a mirror in which the world inscribes or reflects itself." Quoted in Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism*, 178. For contemporary assessments of literary impressionism, taking Kronegger as a point of departure, see Richard M. Berrong, "Modes of Literary Impressionism" *Genre* (2006) 39 (2): 203-228. Berrong describes the influence on literature of "impressionist painters" who "claimed that their canvases represented unanalyzed (i.e., passive) first impressions of the world around them." See also art critic John Canady: "the impressionist does not analyse form but only receives the light reflected from that form onto the retina of his eye and seeks to reproduce the effect of that light, rather than the form of the object reflecting it." *Mainstreams of Modern Art*, 182.

time, the atoms are “innumerable,” which already complicates the aggregative scheme.<sup>195</sup> On the other side from this calculus of fundamental units, we find not the Jamesian stream, but rather the “halo,” which is then immediately placed in apposition with a “semi-transparent envelope.” As Elizabeth Abel asks, “How does she get from the atoms to the halo?”<sup>196</sup> Woolf’s famous passage brings together two contradictory positions: invoking what I am calling the empiricist picture, without being limited by its terms. In fact, Woolf is radically unorthodox in her use of the impressionist principle of passive receptivity.<sup>197</sup> Another way of putting this is that there is an element of *constructivism* in her impressionism.

In his *Modes of Literary Impressionism*, Richard M. Berrong quotes Maurice E. Chernowitz’s work on Proust’s impressionism:

One of the most vital characteristics of pictorial impressionism...is the emphasis on aconceptual sensation...This instantaneous first impression involves the reaction which is experienced before the intellect has had time to intervene and interpret things in conventional, rational, causal terms.<sup>198</sup>

Chernowitz captures the epistemological motivations of the impressionist artist – to peel back the layers of interpretation that obscure the immediacy of what is empirically given to the senses. Accessing more of what is experientially given by reducing intellectual interference is a goal not to be trivialized. But the idea that the intellect “comes later” to the scene of perception, in such a way that its entrance could be forestalled, remains problematic.

As we have seen, Hume’s philosophical framework gave very good reason for regarding with suspicion what is “conventional, rational, causal.” Indeed, the fact that Chernowitz picks out causal reasoning as one of the paradigmatic impositions of the knowing subject shows the importance of Hume for such an impressionist problematic. But the idea of “aconceptual sensation” was not warranted on Hume’s picture. The mind (whether through force of “habit,” or “imagination,” etc.) continues to intervene all the same, as Hume knew all too well, but as more positivistic varieties of empiricism in the nineteenth century sometimes forgot. Stephen Eisenman writes, drawing on the French intellectual context surrounding Claude Monet and the impressionist painters: “By 1870 it had become clear that any art based upon impressions, that is, upon unmediated sensory experience, must resemble the colored patchwork that it was believed

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<sup>195</sup> It is not the only time that Woolf implicitly draws an analogy between a philosophy of mind and an urban space; see below.

<sup>196</sup> Personal correspondence, June 23, 2018.

<sup>197</sup> As is no doubt the case for many other impressionists, literary and visual who explore the limits of impressionism, which I am linking to its empiricist underpinnings. See Chana Kronfeld’s discussion of Paul Cézanne in the course of her treatment of Yiddish and Hebrew Introspectivist Modernism: “[Halpern and Fogel] launched poetic/critical explorations of the limits of impressionism. In the process, they pushed the impressionist prototype to its outer boundaries, to the place where, turning back on itself, impressionism becomes expressionism...the postimpressionist painting style of Paul Cézanne, who took impressionism so seriously he made it reach beyond itself, and in the process became the great deviant paragon whose work is now taken to be one giant prolepsis of all the high-modernist trends that were to follow.” Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism*, 178.

<sup>198</sup> Maurice E. Chernowitz, *Proust and Painting*. (New York: International University Press, 1945), Quoted in Berrong, *Modes of Literary Impressionism*, 204.

constituted *unreflective vision*” (my emphasis).<sup>199</sup> These latter-day construals of the sensory impression, which continue to inform understandings of impressionist art to this day, “severed any ties between perception and cognition.” But it is not necessary to view the insights of artistic impressionism through the dogmatic framework of “unreflective perception.” The positivistic empiricism through which impressionist achievement is sometimes viewed may have distorted our reception of Hume’s insights to the same degree that it has distorted our understanding of the artistic practices in question. There is a way to celebrate the utopian fantasy of sensory immediacy, without reducing it to a blanket denial of the forms of mediation that make sensory experience salient in the first place.

In her study of Woolf as “impressionist” literature, Jane Ferguson emphasizes that free indirect style “creates impressionist effects of ambiguity and irony and should be thought of as typically impressionist narration.” Here Ferguson in the late 1970s went against the then-normative version of literary impressionism that follows from, for example, Ford Madox Ford’s essay on the subject: “The object of the novelist is to keep the reader entirely oblivious of the fact that the author exists...even of the fact that he is reading a book. This of course is not possible to the bitter end.”<sup>200</sup> Ford’s valuation of engrossed absorption certainly does not escape irony, and the more ironic relation to direct experience highlighted by Ferguson has been echoed by others as paradigmatic of impressionistic creation itself. In his study of impressionism in contemporary culture, Jesse Matz, stresses the ironic component: “Not full, immediate insight but ironic mediation becomes impressionism’s means of longer survival.”<sup>201</sup> He continues: “As much as that brushstroke—the impressionist touch or *tache*; the spot, the smudge—could simulate something real, it also expressed the artist’s individual personality.” This “duality” of real seeing and personal vision,” or, “double venture of natural exactitude and artistic originality,” (37) expresses rightly the irony of the modality. But there is an irony proper to the philosophical quandary which has yet to be explored – the philosophical quandary about conceptual mediation which impressionism illuminates like no other artistic mode.

Monet and the other impressionists in painting as well as literature – like Woolf – are all too keenly aware of the crucial role that conceptualization plays in everyday experience. For impressionism, if it is to claim any fidelity to real-world experience, still needs a place to “put” conceptual activity, which itself is an empirical fact of mental life. To the extent that impressionism performs defamiliarizing work, it is also deeply rationalist, because it recognizes the pervasiveness of conceptualization in conscious life and the need to call critical attention to those concepts that are deployed too easily, and without enough sensory grounding. In fact, the very notion that the intellect “intervenes” on sensory experience presumes that a perceptual activity *prior* to intellection could be specified in the first place; that we can perceive, in other words, without already being involved in understanding what we are perceiving. This is exactly the presupposition that Kant, and Kantian scholarship up to the present day, continues to call into

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<sup>199</sup> Stephen F. Eisenman, “The Intransigent Artist or How the Impressionists Got Their Name” in *Critical Readings in Impressionism and Post-Impressionism* (Berkeley, UC Press, 2007), 150.

<sup>200</sup> Ford Madox Ford, “On Impressionism,” in *The Good Soldier*, ed. Kenneth Womack and William Baker (Ontario: Broadview, 2003).

<sup>201</sup> Jesse Matz, *Lasting Impressions: The Legacies of Impressionism in Contemporary Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 37.

question.<sup>202</sup> By suggesting that perceptual experience itself already implicates the understanding, Kantian philosophy at its best can be used to find a way to live with the conceptual dimension of thought. Similarly, there is an acknowledgment in Woolf's work of the role of intellectual mediation in everyday perception – how the mind's forms function both as enabling conditions, and as limiting factors on what today we call “being present.” My aim here therefore is first of all to suggest the ways in which Woolf's work renegotiates the impressionist maxims of sensory immediacy; secondly, to trace Woolf's increasing trajectory towards an appeal to internal “shapes” and “conceptions” beyond the unit of the sensory impression, indeed toward what I refer to as her “formalism.” This puts her corpus, which might be reframed as an ongoing inquiry into the philosophy of mind, in alignment with Hume's ambivalent empiricism, and eventually, with Kant. Why such an inquiry may be achievable only by fictive means is a question I pursue in the subsequent chapter, on *The Waves*.

### 3. ON WOOLF'S IMPRESSIONISTIC PROCEDURES

As in Poe, and as I have been arguing is characteristic of an associationist paradigm loosely defined, in Woolf, too, the reflexive problem of mental unity undergirds the descriptive problem of mental association, and also casts skeptical doubt on it. *A Room of One's Own* encapsulates an “impressionistic procedure” that is actualized in Woolf's fiction. However, *A Room of One's Own* also suggests a different order of priority between the descriptive problem of association and the reflexive one: That is, the reflexive moment can be drawn out only on the basis of a descriptive procedure. In a culminating moment in *A Room of One's Own* which I discuss below, Woolf arrives at an observation about the distinctness of the sexes, and the unity of the mind. But she accomplishes this only after retracing her own trains of thought, finally arriving at the topic of the lecture she is supposed to give. At the end of *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf's report on her own (immediate) past experience culminates in a moment of writing that seems to bridge all the various temporalities into a temporary “unity.” Narrated time and time of narration would seem finally to coincide, a termination point which would be a characteristic mark of literary autobiography. But this is precisely what Woolf deliberately avoids achieving, by staying in the conditional mood.<sup>203</sup>

Even so, the very first sentence that I would write here, I said, crossing over to the writing-table and taking up the page headed Women and Fiction, is that it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly. It is fatal for a woman

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<sup>202</sup> See my more detailed discussion in the following chapter. Hannah Ginsborg's work on Kant's *First Critique* has elaborated the role that the understanding plays in even basic perceptual experience, though this remains a contentious point in Kant scholarship.

<sup>203</sup> This deliberate avoidance proves especially significant for Gayatri Spivak, in her *Death of Discipline*. Spivak's examination of *A Room of One's Own* combines an intense political interest in aesthetic indeterminacy with a critical practice that demands certain forms of “care” and “attentive reading.” Spivak's response is that “Most readers take this sentiment to be Woolf's message to women, and try to find ways around such a statement. If, however, we ‘read’ the page in its fictive mode of paradox, we will see that this fine impartial sentence is never written.” Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 41.

to lay the least stress on any grievance; to plead even with justice any cause; in any way to speak consciously as a woman. And fatal is no figure of speech; for anything written with that conscious bias is doomed to death. It ceases to be fertilized. Brilliant and effective, powerful and masterly, as it may appear for a day or two, it must wither at nightfall; it cannot grow in the minds of others.<sup>204</sup>

As Gayatri Spivak notes in her reading of *A Room of One's Own*, to read Woolf's text as a statement of fact (or as a text that is "successful" or sincere in its prescriptive stance) is fundamentally to fail to carry out one of the central demands of the text. To misrecognize the built-in indeterminacy of Woolf's text is, ironically perhaps, to fail to carry out one of the central demands of the text. The imaginary sentence that Woolf goes on to write is not only fictional, but marked as unfinished, within its fictional context. Just as striking as Woolf's unfinished sentence in *A Room of One's Own* is the kind of account she has substituted, by the end of the essay, *in lieu* of any "nugget of truth," and in place of the imaginary sentence which, while having been abandoned, nevertheless subsists in her text under the sign of incompleteness:

All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon one minor point – a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction... But in order to make some amends I am going to do what I can to show you how I arrived at this opinion about the room and the money. I am going to develop in your presence as fully and as freely as I can the train of thought which led me to think this. Perhaps if I lay bare the ideas, the prejudices, that lie behind this statement you will find that they have some bearing upon women and some upon fiction. (4)

Woolf implies that what bears on the question of women and fiction is less the statement itself "about the room and the money" than the process of laying bare the assumptions and associations behind the statement. But those ideas and prejudices "[l]ying behind the statement" do not necessarily share the form of the statements that they lie behind. Unlike discrete statements, the ideas and prejudices emerge over the course of a "train of thought" that has to be "developed" in the "presence" of the listeners.<sup>205</sup> The statement alone, Woolf ironically suggests, does not make much of a contribution, except in conjunction with the set of premises from which it is drawn.

The poetics implied by such a procedure reveal, I think, a philosophical investment on the part of Woolf in the imaginative practice of referring an idea back to the sensory impressions from which it arose, the very methodology which, as we have seen, led Hume to the radical conclusion that there is no impression at all from which the idea of a "self" arises. Within this empiricist paradigm, it is only from this lack of a grounding sense impression that one is entitled (and actually compelled) to reject the idea of a self.

While disguised as a digression, the form of Woolf's argument in fact thematizes its content head-on. What is the subject of *A Room of One's Own* if not an inquiry into the

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<sup>204</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt, 1957), 108.

<sup>205</sup> Students of mathematics are often asked to "show their work" as a pedagogical aid. But in the context of mathematics, to expose to scrutiny your personal thought process in this way (as opposed to in the form of a logical proof) has no impact on the universal validity (or invalidity) of the final result. In contrast, Woolf implies that the maxim of "show[ing] the development of a train of thought" ought to attend any claim for universality on the part of women.

conditions of thought – what does it take (for a woman) to be able to write?<sup>206</sup> What vast networks of social and material forces are requisite in order for a thought to arise? Interestingly, for Woolf it is not a matter of establishing the grounds of *justification* for the opinion, but rather of relating the thought to the circumstances (environmental, material, social, psychological) in which it was conceived. When, for example, in the course of the essay’s embedded narrative, Woolf’s (fictional or biographical) meditations on Christina Rossetti are interrupted mid-sentence by a mouthful of soup (“Here was my soup”), what is going on here is not just a philosophical juxtaposition of inner and outer realities. The bowl of soup is not *only* an occasion for generating an unrelated “excursus” in the domain of inner reality, as Erich Auerbach beautifully argues about the role of outer objects in *To the Lighthouse*; rather, the bowl of soup is a prerequisite for thought in the most basic of senses – it is difficult to think on an empty stomach.<sup>207</sup>

Looking a bit closer at Auerbach’s reading of Woolf’s “digressive” experimentalism can clarify what I mean by Woolf’s “impressionistic procedures,” in part because Auerbach’s critical vocabulary is refreshingly free of entanglement with the discourse of associationism. In the final chapter of *Mimesis*, which he titles “The Brown Stocking,” Auerbach describes an early scene in Part 1 of *To the Lighthouse*. It is the scene in which (a plot summary might state) Mrs. Ramsay measures James’ leg for a stocking she is to knit for the lighthouse keeper’s little boy. Auerbach names his chapter after this “brown stocking,” perhaps by way of underscoring precisely what *isn’t* the primary subject of Woolf’s scene. Similarly, “Odysseus’ Scar” is the title of Auerbach’s first chapter, and yet again the effect is to illustrate the capacity of Odysseus’ scar, in the Homeric epic, to point *away* from itself. In Woolf as in Homer, Auerbach observes, the most elaborate narrative attention is bestowed not on the scar or the stocking themselves but on the opportunity for excursus that it generates. The natures of the two excurses, of course, are very different. According to Auerbach, in Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Ramsey measuring for the brown stocking becomes an occasion for a different type of occurrence to take center stage, an “inner process,” which now becomes the primary object of narration: “In Virginia Woolf’s case the external events have lost their hegemony, they serve to release and interpret inner events, whereas before her time inner movements preponderantly function to prepare and motivate significant external happenings.”<sup>208</sup>

One might ask, what kind of subject-object relation is implied by the idea that external events “release” inner events? Not unlike an epistemological take on subject-object relations, the idea of “release” suggests that thought is an effect of a physical encounter with an object. So, for example, a ray of light reflects off an object and into one’s eye, and occasions a visual image, or at a higher level of conscious processing – a thought about the object that occasioned it. But the model of visual perception does not capture the sense of “releasing” that I think Auerbach has in mind. Indeed, he writes, “the stress is placed entirely on what the occasion releases, things which are not seen directly but by reflection,” suggesting that what counts above all is some inner resource held in check until the moment where it’s propelled outward (540). And yet I suggest that inanimate objects maintain a kind of primacy in *To the Lighthouse*, if not as entities to be thought *about* then as entities to be thought *with*. Rather, if Auerbach is correct – and here Woolf’s novel must veer sharply away from epistemological preoccupations – the thought released by the brown stocking may not refer back to the stocking at all; the thought may not be

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<sup>206</sup> Using woman, for a change, as the point of reference.

<sup>207</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007), 538.

<sup>208</sup> Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 538.



about the brown stocking that released that thought. In other words, the thought's intentional content runs far afield of the object that occasions it; the "objects of thought" are different from the objects from which the thought springs. To take Woolf's famous phrase from her essay "Modern Fiction" (1919), the brown stocking – like so many other inanimate objects in *To the Lighthouse* – is the occasion for "a myriad of impressions" whose content or "aboutness" far exceeds the object that occasioned them.<sup>209</sup>

It is certainly true, then, that in *To the Lighthouse*, we find that "external events have lost their hegemony," and yet on the other hand it could be argued that to have an object serve as an opportunity for elaborate narrative digressions (digressions that cause attention to be drawn elsewhere, away from the object)--is precisely to privilege that object, even to imbue it with extraordinary properties. For what are the usual indices by which "hegemony" in Auerbach's sense could be established in a literary text? One could cite the differential amounts of time (or space on the page) allotted to particular types of representation, as well as the hegemony of subject matter suggested by certain typographical markers.<sup>210</sup> While Woolf's use of typographical markers in *To the Lighthouse* is hardly a uniform or univalent phenomenon, her famous parentheses – along with the brackets in which Mrs. Ramsay and other family members die, as Auerbach points out – all these devices help invert the hierarchy of narratable events that such typographical marks usually imply. Along with the idea that Woolf upends the priority of external over internal (or the relationship of "internal-external" vis-à-vis "central-peripheral"), it could be argued that the very notion of a hierarchical relationship among narrative elements has itself been subverted. Indeed, the taken-for-granted functions of these parentheses and brackets (for example, to indicate glosses on prior, foregrounded material) seem themselves to have been reconfigured. The relation between what is parenthetically and non-parenthetically rendered can therefore indicate something other than a hierarchy of narratable material. Indeed, like Mrs. Ramsay's brown stocking, the demoted "external events" actually acquire new salience precisely by being bracketed (typographically or otherwise).

Returning now to *A Room of One's Own* and its own quasi-impressionistic procedures, the injunction "to show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold" ceases almost completely to be a self-reflexive meditation on the lecture itself. Rather, Woolf's lecture itself becomes an inquiry into the occasions under which women can give themselves the opportunity to think. What emerges is a sense that thought (thought as everyday brain-firing, as well as thought as dogmatic statement in an institutional context) cannot arise without certain social, material and entirely quotidian grounds. Even the paraphrasable content of a formal talk has a process of development within a daily life-history. In this specific sense, then, Woolf is side-stepping her topic of women and fiction precisely in order to broach it. She articulates the context-specificity of her own intellectual position (in some cases, its entirely contingent material history), and in doing so actually opens up the category of women to more and more hearers.

I especially want to bring out that Woolf's rhetorical and political strategy as a critic – in which "how I arrived at this opinion" deposes even the primacy of the opinion itself – is congruent with an impressionistic technique that pervades many of her artworks. Even in *A*

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<sup>209</sup> Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction" *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. IV (London, Hogarth: 1994 [1925]), 160.

<sup>210</sup> Auerbach points out that the exterior occurrence between Mrs. Ramsay and James is "interspersed" with "inner processes" which "take up far more time in the narration than the whole scene can possibly have lasted" (529).

*Room of One's Own*, Woolf's narrating voice asks yet, as if she were herself enacting in words the poetics of a post-impressionist painting: "What was the truth about these houses, for example, dim and festive now with their red windows in the dusk, but raw and red and squalid, with their sweets and their bootlaces, at nine o'clock in the morning?"<sup>211</sup> Here, and of course most notably in novels like *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, objects are there to illuminate changing points of view, just as much as points of view are there to illuminate objects.

A key passage in *A Room of One's Own* also moves between these two registers. Woolf begins the volume –two lectures that took place in 1928 at the Cambridge women's colleges Newnham and Girton and appeared in print the following year –by remarking that "one cannot hope to tell the truth" about the matter at hand. She has been tasked with discussing the topic of "women in fiction" and decides that the only way to give an account of this topic is to fold her own sequences of thought *into* the propositional account of their outcome: "one can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold."<sup>212</sup> She embodies, in a way, the narrational perspective that is adopted by Mr. Ramsay and his sequences. It is, therefore, in a way a stream of consciousness procedure undertaken in the service of a form of writing that can be fully assimilated neither to fictional nor to truth-functional modes.

By following her own sometimes meandering processes of thought, however, Woolf encounters a problem of unity that is both externally occasioned and seems to signal something proper to "the mind." In the concluding chapter of the extended essay, Woolf narrates a pause in her research: "It was tempting, after all this reading, to look out of the window and see what London was doing on the morning of the 26th of October 1928." Out of this first-person perspective, a third-person and (chronologically) documentary perspective is launched. And then Woolf describes the following mix of percept and perception, with her characteristic absence of quotation marks:

The sight of two people coming down the street and meeting at the corner seems to ease the mind of some strain, I thought, watching the taxi turn and make off. Perhaps to think, as I had been thinking these two days, of one sex as distinct from the other is an effort. It interferes with the unity of the mind. (100)

In this passage, the meeting of a man and woman on a street corner appears as if to satisfy an urge for synthesis on the part of the consciousness that observes them. By way of counterpoint to the empiricist tradition for thinking of mental life in terms of discrete impressions or atoms, we are shown how Woolf's consciousness *makes something of* the scenes that it observes. The paragraph culminates with a conclusion – a problem, perhaps, is solved pertaining to her talk; or at least a hypothesis entertained: The guiding presupposition of sexual difference somehow itself threatens or contradicts the reflexive unity presupposed in any act of supposing anything – including supposing the sexes as distinct.

The culminating thought about the "unity of the mind" that Woolf registers having had while regarding this scene is both philosophical and unwaveringly metaphorical. By comparing the union of two walking people to the mind's unity, she suggests that the unity of the perceiver in some way calls into question or seeks to override the distinctness of what is perceived: It is as if the mind is relieved of the work of having to unite what was disparate. But the metaphorical mapping between the unity of the mind and a unity that has been lost to sexual difference is

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<sup>211</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 15

<sup>212</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 4.

striking. After all, on many epistemological accounts, it is precisely the unity of the mind that *enables* the differentiating work of determinate conceptualization. Yet Woolf's metaphorical mapping – itself described as an unfolding movement of consciousness – suggests that binary classification schemes violate the underlying unity of the mind, rather than being enabled by them.

In the last chapter we saw how Poe takes the Humean impasse relating to the “unity of the self” to its logical, insurmountable conclusion. This old problem of the *sensus communis* and the philosophical jargon that attend it arise quite suddenly in Woolf's passage from *A Room of One's Own*; but as is Woolf's custom, and with Humean flair, this happens in a way that is provoked by the particular sensory conditions of the London street. That is, as she gathers up the process of writing the speech into the speech's very content, there is a Humean inflection to the way in which the idea of the “unity of the mind” is itself tethered to its sensuous occasion. For Woolf, and specifically in this moment in her writing process, the disaggregation and unity that for Hume were a matter of natural science, are now couched in the discourse of urban modernity: “The fascination of the London street is that no two people are ever alike; each seems bound on some private affair of his own.” The “separateness” of sensation is not taken as a given, then, but rather is “motivated,” to use the Russian formalist term, by the distinct conditions of the city.

And then a very distinguished gentleman came slowly down a doorstep and paused to avoid collision with a bustling lady who had, by some means or other, acquired a splendid fur coat and a bunch of Parma violets. They all seemed separate, self-absorbed, on business of their own. (100)

In this passage, the mind of the narrator respects the boundaries, so to speak, of the distinct personages whose point of intersection (described as an averted “collision”) she begins to narrate. But then, in what Woolf calls a “pause,” a different mode of narration and perception emerges, announced by the key word, “moment”:

At this moment, as so often happens in London, there was a complete lull and suspension of traffic. Nothing came down the street; nobody passed. A single leaf detached itself from the plane tree at the end of the street, and in that pause and suspension fell. Somehow it was like a signal falling, a signal pointing to a force in things which one had overlooked. It seemed to point to a river, which flowed past, invisibly, round the corner, down the street, and took people and eddied them along, as the stream at Oxbridge had taken the undergraduate in his boat and the dead leaves. Now it was bringing from one side of the street to the other diagonally a girl in patent leather boots, and then a young man in a maroon overcoat; it was also bringing a taxi-cab; and it brought all three together at a point directly beneath my window; where the taxi stopped; and the girl and the young man stopped; and they got into the taxi; and then the cab glided off as if it were swept on by the current elsewhere.

The sight was ordinary enough; what was strange was the rhythmical order with which my imagination had invested it; and the fact that the ordinary sight of two people getting into a cab had the power to communicate something of their own seeming satisfaction. (100)

Woolf narrates in one fell swoop the same philosophical transition that I have been trying to trace: from an atomistic picture of consciousness, to the “stream” which answers and revises the atomistic mode. Unlike Hume’s “fiction,” however, Woolf’s metafictional writing in the fictionalized Oxbridge both enacts a unity in the scene and takes responsibility for that enactment.

In the moment of the imagined river, the “stream” of thought mixes with the stream of nature. The stream of nature is described as if it were already a stream of thought, uniting not only disparate persons but the distinct perceptions of them that were registered by one mind. With the sweeping momentum of a Van Gogh painting, the “force” that brings the disparate persons and sensory elements together in one fell swoop is described as if it is already an act of perception. But this apparent conflation of mind and world does not necessarily spring from an idealist commitment to a “world of pure experience,” as William James might have put it. Rather, the drama of Woolf’s passage, and its philosophical quandary, lies in the contrast between what she deems to be the merely “ordinary sight” registered by her consciousness, on the one hand, and the “rhythmical order with which my imagination had invested it,” on the other. Even the “pause,” then, that was originally construed as proper to the “very distinguished gentleman” during the conventionally realistic description, in light of this latter language, gets re-contextualized as a pause that is attributed as much as it is discovered by the observing eye (and ear). The pause is part of the “rhythmical order” that the narrator bestows on the world. The fact that two people cross each other in a city intersection, then, does not exhaust the unity in the scene. The unity is also what we might call *reflexive*: in comprehending how two people are brought together “out there,” Woolf’s fictionalized and fictionalizing consciousness is moved to a sublime – and gendered – riff on the transcendental “I.” Woolf’s narrator gains an insight into how she herself may be held together by holding others together.

The “ordinary” sight becomes extraordinary not because of its contents but because of an exchange that has taken place between percepts and perceiver, unbeknownst to the former but registered by the latter. Woolf is struck by “the fact that the ordinary sight of two people getting into a cab had the power to communicate something of their own seeming satisfaction.” The “seeming satisfaction” of the two people getting into a cab together is communicated to the perceiver – not so much by simple contagion (the perceiver absorbing the happiness of the couple). Rather, there is a way in which the perceiver *as* a consciousness construing the scene in a certain way, imbuing it with a “rhythmical order,” begins to conceive herself as engaged in an unifying activity analogous to the physical coming together of the two people – and furthermore, partially constitutive of it. With a careful attention to the distinctness of the observer from the scene observed, Woolf’s narration nevertheless gives voice to a philosophically nuanced position according to which the work of consciousness emulates the work of fiction writing – by announcing itself as a medium that not only describes but also co-creates the scenes that it takes in.

Writing on De Quincey in the period leading up to *The Waves*, Woolf imagines the future of the novel in the following way: “Then it is not the actual sight or sound itself that matters, but the reverberations that it makes as it travels through our minds.” Woolf brackets the importance of the “sight or sound itself,” but neither do her novelistic techniques privilege some determinate object or referent whose reality the sight or sound might guarantee. Rather, she values the “reverberation” of that sensory impression. These reverberations of sensory impressions can themselves be empirically registered, to be sure, but are not exhausted by the atomistic contours of their sources. Just as “it is not the actual sight or sound itself that matters,” this echoes Woolf’s

evaluation of the merely “ordinary” sights that become fodder for the imagination. The imagination exercises its faculty for “reverberation” not in the form of phantasmagoric elaborations, but precisely in its “order.” Woolf deploys the atomism of impressionistic empiricism in a way that is “away from facts; free; yet concentrated.” How Woolf, contra Poe, accomplishes this departure from fact precisely through the route of sensory detail is something I investigate in the rest of this chapter.

Woolf finds a departure from the “ordinariness” of perception not through the “shock effect” that Poe’s tales both exploited and transcended, but through the (everyday but never banal) work of the imagination in organizing the materials of the sensorium. The “something more” that exceeds sensation for Woolf, the spontaneity of mind that is both the content of her meditation and its trajectory, is crucially linked to intersubjectivity, to the multiplicity of persons. That is the individualism presupposed by “unity of the mind” is itself unsettled by the interpersonal merging that for Woolf already underlies the idea of unity.

#### 4. “THE ATOMS OF MY ATTENTION:” BERNARD, *THE WAVES* AND THE SHIFT TO FORM.

Just as Hume assigns epistemological value to “interruption” in the sequence of impressions, so too does the problem of association become intensified in Woolf’s experimental novel of 1931, *The Waves*. Described by Woolf in her letters as a series of “dramatic soliloquies,” or a “play-poem,” *The Waves*, if it is a novel, is certainly not a first-person novel; at the same time, the word “I” appears repeatedly, recurrently, and by six different alternating speakers – but only ever in quotation marks. If we take as a point of reference Hume’s notions of interruptions or gaps in the sequence of impressions, it is clear that Woolf’s novel reevaluates such discontinuities but does so in two ways. The consciousness named Rhoda (often read as Woolf herself) heart-wrenchingly incorporates something profound about the form of the novel into her own, seemingly uniquely-alienated personality: “One moment does not follow another. You did not see me come.” The interrupted flashes of perception do not render visible the process of coming *into* appearance. Elsewhere, Louis answers Rhoda: “Rhoda comes now, from nowhere, having slipped in while we were not looking.” But do they hear each other? It becomes clear that even the word “said” repeated throughout – one of the only words attributed to the unmarked narrator, cannot be taken for granted. Rather, the term “said” seems to bring together an instability that is both reflexive and descriptive.

Woolf’s programmatic and oft-cited statement in “Modern Fiction” (1919) about the “incessant shower of innumerable atoms” looks like a vindication of epistemic methods in the pursuit of verbal art, in its modernist aim to catch the “moments of perception” as they go by. In Woolf’s modern fiction passage, there is an exhaustion with the hopelessness of keeping pace with the mind, the acknowledgment of a kind of perpetual incompleteness in the empiricist tasks; but it looks as if the basic empiricist method remains unquestioned – the gathering of naturalistic fact. But it is not so simple. Here I pursue the thesis that *The Waves* (1931), with its radical innovations in form (and its meta-reflective awareness *of* form as such) actually goes against the very manifesto that has been made to stand for Woolf’s novelistic poetics. Thus, even and especially fiction that takes “impressionism” as its model will necessarily exceed the “retinal frame of reference.”

A parallel can now be seen between Woolf's "Modern Fiction" passage about the atoms, and William James' "Stream of Consciousness" chapter in the *Principles of Psychology*. As I show below, James acknowledges the paradox of "melting the snowflake by catching it" but does not rethink his commitment to the primacy of what is empirically given (indeed, this is what makes him, very much still an empiricist, albeit a radical one). Indeed, what I'm calling late Woolf's fiercely ambivalent empiricism intensifies in *The Waves*, and especially through the consciousness named "Bernard" who explicitly talks about the "atoms of [his] attention" in the context of remembering his *old way of being*. The "atomistic view" implicates both his view of the world and of his own mind, pressure to maintain, or "compose" a coherent self under the pressure (social, political, gendered) of such disaggregation. Indeed, the consciousness called "Bernard" appeals to the paradigm of the atom while recounting a time during which "I became, I mean, a certain kind of man":

Toast and butter, coffee and bacon, the *Times* and letters – suddenly the telephone rang with urgency and I rose deliberately and went to the telephone. I took up the black mouth. I marked the ease with which my mind adjusted itself to assimilate the message – it might be (one has these fancies) to assume command of the British Empire; I observed my composure; I remarked with what magnificent vitality the atoms of my attention dispersed, swarmed round the interruption, assimilated the message, adapted themselves to a new state of affairs and had created, by the time I put back the receiver, a richer, a stronger, a more complicated world in which I was called upon to act my part and had no doubt whatever that I could do it.<sup>213</sup>

Whereas in Woolf's "Modern Fiction" passage, she emphasizes that character of the mind that must "receive" the "incessant shower of innumerable atoms" that constitute the sensory given, in *The Waves* Bernard transfigures this paradigm into its opposite, only to criticize it. In fact, it is part of the consciousness named Bernard's ironic self-critique and critique of masculinity that it must take itself as "active." In direct contradistinction to its classical uses, the "atoms" here are not passively registered, but rather behave like the good masculine subject that "*disperses them*" in a fantasy of self-importance quickly reaching imperial proportions. The atoms behave "deliberately," responding with willful action to the receptivity of the telephone figured as a "black mouth." They don't "receive" the message at the other end of the telephone, but rather "assimilate" it.

By the end of the passage, the "swarming atoms" are mirrored by the men who conceive of their agency in this self-assured manner: "Clapping my hat on my head, I strode into a world inhabited by vast numbers of men who had also clapped their hats on their heads, and as we jostled and encountered in trains and tubes we exchanged the knowing wink of competitors and comrades braced with a thousand snares and dodges to achieve the same end – to earn our livings." They're swarming, but then they resolve into the same old homogeneity which is linked with the businessmen, the constructed subjectivity of the middle-class civilized "male." The adaptability of the atoms resolves into the homogeneity of "the same end – to earn our livings" (261).

I propose to use Bernard's phrase "to earn our livings," as a pivot towards a moment in Woolf's critical writing that is highly relevant for *The Waves* and the ways in which views of the

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<sup>213</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (New York: Harcourt, 1978), 261.

mind are imbricated for her with the problem of poetic form. In her 1927 critical essay, “The Narrow Bridge of Art,” Woolf imagines a future form of fiction that “will be written in prose, but in prose which has many of the characteristics of poetry.”<sup>214</sup> She says that “it will make little use of the marvelous fact-recording power, which is one of the attributes of fiction” (and an attribute of a certain philosophy of the mind, we might add). The intimate link between the novelistic genre and the form of mind is pursued further when she writes, “For under the dominion of the novel we have scrutinized one part of the mind closely and left another unexplored. We have come to forget...that we spend much time sleeping, dreaming, thinking, reading, alone; we are not entirely occupied in personal relations; *all our energies are not absorbed in making our livings.*”

As J.W. Graham points out in his study of *The Waves* and the history of its construction as a text, such remarks by Woolf are of primary importance to the poetics that she was developing in advance of – and by way of – the writing of *The Waves*.<sup>215</sup> In particular, Woolf’s ambivalence about “personal relations,” and, implicitly, non-silent activity, will be crucial for understanding the experimental form of *The Waves*, which is the focus of the second half of this chapter. It is a hallmark of *The Waves* that exactly this dimension of being “alone” is given voice (or made space for) through the concrete dramatization of spoken dialogue. For now, I want to highlight that the shift away from outmoded forms of representation called for by Woolf’s critical essay is exactly mirrored by “Bernard” himself, inside her fiction. The atoms in Bernard’s passage are linked with the daily grind of bourgeois individualism, but also, and importantly for our purposes, linked with a different kind of narrating practice altogether – the “biographical” style of an unproblematic third person, informational report. In this sense Woolf continues the tradition in Poe of an ironic realism that centers on the exactitude of the sensory unit of measure. Here is Bernard’s consciousness, giving a depersonalized soliloquy that itself slips into “the biographical style” to describe his old sense of self as a *biographer*, providing an “accurate record” of the life of Bernard:

“Once I had a biographer, dead long since, but if he still followed my footsteps with his old flattering intensity he would here say, ‘About this time Bernard married and bought a house. . . . His friends observed in him a growing tendency to domesticity . . . . The birth of children made it highly desirable that he should augment his income.’ That is the biographic style, and it does to tack together torn bits of stuff, stuff with raw edges.”<sup>216</sup>

The so-called “biographic style,” akin to the “dominion of the [old] novel” that Woolf the critic diagnoses, creates continuity, completes propositions; and yet it is marked by gaps and ellipses; it is complete and fulfills its narrative function precisely to the degree that it “tacks together torn bits of stuff” – in other words, a continuity which betrays its truer nature as pastiche:

“After all, one cannot find fault with the biographic style if one begins letters ‘Dear Sir,’ ends them ‘yours faithfully’; one cannot despise these phrases laid like Roman roads across the tumult of our lives, since they compel us to walk in step

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<sup>214</sup> Virginia Woolf, “The Narrow Bridge of Art,” in *Modernism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey (Malden, MA., and Oxford: 2005), 907.

<sup>215</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Waves: Two Holograph Drafts*, ed. J.W. Graham (Hogarth: London, 1976).

<sup>216</sup> Woolf, *The Waves* (Harcourt), 259.

like civilized people with the slow and measured tread of policeman though one may be humming any nonsense under one's breath at the same time – 'Hark, hark, the dogs do bark,' 'Come away, come away, death,' 'Let me not to the marriage of true minds,' and so on. 'He attained some success in his profession... He inherited a small sum of money from an uncle' – that is how the biographer continues and if one wears trousers and hitches them up with braces, one has to say that though it is tempting now and then to go blackberrying; tempting to play ducks and drakes with all these phrases. But one has to say that" (259-60).

In this passage a style of narration is linked directly to a civilizing impulse that "paves over" and "compels." The "Dear Sir" becomes just like the nursery rhyme – "Hark, hark, the dogs do bark" – this apart from the distinction between high and low register that is both suggested and then dismissed via juxtaposition. Here, late in *The Waves* and in Bernard's life, the third person is presented as just as fantastical as the first person appears to be in the beginning of the work during childhood.

The "atomism," and the biographical form of narration associated with it, that Bernard now retrospectively describes having been embroiled in only makes more salient the forms of merging which have come to characterize his consciousness. "How strange," he says at one point, "the willow looks seen together." In this radically experimental, yet grammatically possible statement, the object reflects back a connectivity with other minds that may not be otherwise accessible. Here is another characteristic passage of Bernard-like "unity":

"The tiger leapt, and the swallow dipped her wings in dark pools on the other side of the world," said Rhoda.

"But here and now we are together," said Bernard. "We have come together, at a particular time, to this particular spot... We have come together (from the north, from the south, from Susan's farm, from Louis's house of business) to make one thing, not enduring – for what endures? – but seen by many eyes simultaneously. There is a red carnation in that vase. A single flower as we sat here waiting, but now a seven-sided flower, many-petalled, red, puce, purple, shaded, stiff with silver-tinted leaves – a whole flower to which every eye brings its own contribution." (126-27)

The different appearances of the flower are successively compared and refined towards the construction of objectivity. Bernard describes a process of discovering more and more *what is really there* to be known in the object, through intersubjective comparison. This passage juxtaposes Humean disaggregation directly with the possibility of a Kantian picture that proposes to move beyond an unintegrated series of shocking impressions towards a unity. But this "unity," described through a perspectival imagination, is not "fictional" in the Humean sense of a reified, enduring substance. On the contrary, the unity in question is one of formal and self-conscious synthesis, producing multi-dimensional unities that are subject to revision. The result is not so much the discovery of a "substance" ("for what endures"?) but rather a multi-dimensional construct "to which each eye lends its contribution."

In a moment we will come to the question of how the formulation of unity within Bernard's passage is modified by its immediate juxtaposition with Rhoda's utterance. For now, let us start with the fact that in Bernard's passage, what is "whole" is positioned in *opposition* to



what is “single.” In fact, it is just the condition of “single”ness which must be overcome in order to reach a wholeness that remains latent, not only in the object of perception, but in the collectivity of perceivers. It is as if the unity of the object is shored up by the unity of the perceivers, and vice versa. The red carnation in the vase is figured as an achievement of many people coming together. As in the passage from *A Room of One's Own*, the singleness of the flower is itself artificial. The “unity” of the flower *does not mean that it is actually singular*; on the contrary the singleness of the flower is itself precisely the artificial, “uninformed” starting condition that must be superseded. The “unity” of the appearance of the flower is achieved through the spontaneous work of combination performed by the perceivers; and then the spontaneous combination of that work of combination itself, across different perceivers. The carnation gives new meaning to a philosophical poetics according to which the objective reality of the thing is realized by its being seen. The multiplicity of the object is restored to it by the fortuitous event of its being “seen by many eyes simultaneously.” Bernard’s consciousness – although itself just one facet, and therefore itself still “as-if” – points to a reciprocal relationship: the wholeness of the flower makes us feel, for a moment, as if we are not separate from one another in the consolidation of the flower’s many views.

The multiplicity of views does not destroy the constancy of the object, but on the contrary enables it. Bernard’s meditations on objectivity and intersubjective form are foreshadowed by his entrance into the urban landscape at the beginning of the chapter: “How fair, how strange,” said Bernard, “glittering, many-pointed and many-domed London lies before me under mist.” London itself, then, is the model for the conditions of appearance that Bernard will attribute to the red carnation. But further, he thinks that to be seen from multiple perspectives could make *him* real as well: “I think of people to whom I could say things; Louis; Neville; Susan; Jinny and Rhoda. With them I am many-sided. They retrieve me from darkness”; “I wish then after this somnolence to sparkle, many-faceted under the light of my friends' faces” (116). If he were to fulfill his aspiration of becoming “many-sided” and “many-faceted,” Bernard would resemble the “many-pointed,” and “many-domed” London skyscape that he so admires. Yet though Bernard wants to be “many-sided,” he understands that, as in the cubist rendering of a face, this geometry is *not* an inherent feature of the object. Rather, becoming “many-sided” is a condition that can only be attained kaleidoscopically, by being observed from multiple points of view. The object then becomes a kind of accumulation of the spatiotemporally disparate angles from which it is observed: “I think of people to whom I could say things; Louis; Neville; Susan; Jinny and Rhoda.” Apart from Rhoda, each potential “viewer” (actually, interlocutor) is separated from the other by a semi-colon, suggesting the absolute interruption of one perspective by the other. Only Rhoda stands apart typographically – paradoxically by being conjoined (“...and Rhoda”). Interestingly, even Bernard’s thought, the thought “of people to whom I could say things” enters the list as just yet another item. This apparent category mistake actually suggests that Bernard’s thought does not so much comprise Louis; Neville; Susan; Jinny and Rhoda by “representing” any of them (as a colon might indicate) but rather that the thought of people to whom he can say things has simply entered the catalog of multiple views.

Again, as in a cubist painting, the identity of sequence is bracketed for the sake of a “simultaneous” reflexive unity of multiple perspectives. I read this scene as a response to the associationist impasse expressed *both* in Poe’s “Man that Was Used Up” and in his “Rue Morgue.” It is a spatialization of time that creates a new kind of objectivity – paradoxically, because it requires fantastic means in order to be achieved. This is the irrealism of realism in the

modernist period: the underpinnings of objectivity which themselves are laid bare as quite wild and strange.

These passages point to the ways in which Woolf offers intersubjectivity as a response to the problem of object constancy. But the conditions of possibility for appearance offered by Bernard's consciousness are by no means final. Of course, we may very well question whether Bernard's new kaleidoscopic or cubist form of intersubjective objectivity really resists the "fictionalizing" tendency (in the Humean sense) that he attributed to the "biographic style." Indeed, does his fantasy of unification not risk "tack[ing] together torn bits of stuff, stuff with raw edges"? The consciousness called "Bernard" sets aside the classic aspirations of substance as "enduring object" built up over multiple viewings, and instead attends to the reflexive unity that is possible (perhaps only fleetingly) in the space of a moment.

## 5. MODERNIST FICTION AS "NON-FICTIONAL," ON HUME'S ACCOUNT OF FICTION

In a famous diary entry dated 28 November 1928, Woolf writes in anticipation of the work that would become *The Waves*, that "the idea has come to me that what I now want to do is to saturate every atom." Woolf associates "waste, deadness" with "the inclusion of things that don't belong to the moment," a practice of "superfluity" which she then associates not only with a mode of writing but also with a mode of perception: "this appalling narrative business of the realist: getting on from lunch to dinner: it is false, unreal, merely conventional. Why admit anything to literature that is not poetry – by which I mean saturated."

It seems to be characteristic of the "moment" defined by poetry that it possesses unity without seeking to pave over the disconnected links between and within moments. We see here that Humean "fiction" – which we can now link with "this appalling narrative business of the realist" – is perfectly antithetical to Woolf's own modernist reinvention of fiction. The task of literature as she sees it is precisely to cut away or undo the falsifying impositions of order that bring us away from the moment. Woolf's novelistic poetics do not eschew epistemic objectivity but rather, like Hume's philosophy, recalibrate its criteria toward what is empirically given. "Getting on from lunch to dinner" is the uncritical response to Rhoda's call, "One moment does not follow another. You did not see me come." The realist cliché, understood by Woolf as conventional chronological narration, is precisely the narrative "fiction" that Hume lays bare, and which both Woolf's art and Hume's philosophy seek to redress, as critical empiricists who must undo their own central premises: Objectivity as *undoing*.

## 6. RHODA – THE PERSISTENCE OF RUPTURE

On the one hand, Bernard's "many-sided" red carnation allegorizes the structure of *The Waves* itself – that is, the form of his consciousness looks very much at times as though it mirrors the form of the work as a whole, where multiple voices are presented in parallel, and none serve as a privileged point of reference. On the other hand, however, *The Waves* is constructed so that Bernard's meta-reflection on form is itself just one of many ways of seeing.

Indeed, the different voices in *The Waves* do not give us separate personalities characterized by distinct discourses; what they do give us instead are different *forms*. It is

impossible to read Bernard, for example, and not consider the incursions that Rhoda's point of view (or her meditations on point of view) make in the narrative, without resolution. It is time, then, for us to return to Rhoda – the consciousness for whom discontinuity is a permanent condition. Indeed, Rhoda –like Hume– cannot allow herself to presuppose the unity of the object upon which Bernard's life-affirming modes of triangulation depend. We can read Bernard and Rhoda, respectively, as consciousnesses who differ *formally*. They take different stands on the conditions of possibility underlying the appearance of objects, including themselves. And yet both consciousnesses are motivated by a resistance to the forms of narrative coherence that Hume called by the name of "fiction."

As I have hinted, the "red carnation" passage where Bernard develops his intersubjective resolution to the problem of object constancy is immediately preceded by an utterance belonging to Rhoda, which cannot be folded into Bernard's solution: "'The tiger leapt, and the swallow dipped her wings in dark pools on the other side of the world,' said Rhoda" (126). Rhoda's form of narration sketches a possibility for unity that cannot be realized: a deep sense of incommensurability and incongruence haunts her two narrated events even as they are figured provisionally as a sequence ("the tiger leapt, and the swallow dipped its wings...") The two beings share a "world," but at the same time could not be farther from each other. Perhaps from some perspective their opposite movements together jointly compose two complementary strokes in a single, cyclical frame. But there is a finality to the separateness that Rhoda articulates grammatically: the paratactic syntax – the "and" – actually precludes a connection that might be drawn there, leaving the two creaturely movements as parallels that never meet.

What is remarkable about the poetry that Rhoda "says" here is that it hints toward grids of spatial and temporal coherence; these grids are implied by her consciousness but never fully identified with it. This is true for disparate events held together through their temporal relation ("leapt"; "dipped"), as well as disparate events held together through their spatial relation ("on the other side of the world"). It is not that Rhoda denies the spatio-temporal grid into which "life" plunges her; on the contrary, she is haunted and indeed annihilated by an acknowledgment of its constructedness.

Certainly, there is no stream of consciousness in Rhoda's text, nor is there what William James called "a feeling of relation." And yet Rhoda's devastating expression of formal intermittence is itself still "related," at least intratextually, even when it claims not to be: For the beginning of Rhoda's utterance concatenates the end of Neville's. "I rise from my worst disasters, I turn, I change. Pebbles bounce off the mail of my muscular, my extended body. In this pursuit *I shall grow old*." And then immediately we get Rhoda's voice: "*If I could believe*," said Rhoda, "*that I should grow old* in pursuit and change, I should be rid of my fear: nothing persists. One moment does not lead to another" (130, emphasis added). Rhoda's thoughts pick up the traces of Neville's in order to state their disparity. The concatenation mimics the flow of an actual conversation: Neville's assertion serves as a point of departure for Rhoda to clarify the differences in her own inner landscape. She takes up Neville's assertion and answers it – but by recasting its content into the form of a conditional proposition that cannot be satisfied: She attaches "If I could believe that" to Neville's "I shall grow old," a process of concatenation that breaks its own chain.

Rhoda cannot make herself conform to the requirements of narrative sequence. The moment she articulates perhaps most heartbreakingly this discontinuity, however, the tiger reappears: "One moment does not lead to another. The door opens and the tiger leaps. You did not see me come." Rhoda's feelings of invisibility take the complex form of an impersonal

philosophical statement that is at the same time an expression of personal pain. We get a skeptical conclusion, a poetic and fantastic juxtaposition (door opens; tiger leaps), and then a direct address and a complaint about being unnoticed: “You did not see me come.” Still, at the level of form (what I am glossing as the “conditions of possibility for appearance”), Rhoda’s observation about what her friends do not see does justice to the true, if tragic, nature of perception in Humean terms. We “yield” to a great “propensity to... mistake,” Hume writes, when we “boldly assert that...different related objects are in effect the same, however interrupted and variable.” He continues: “In order to justify to ourselves this absurdity, we often feign some new and unintelligible principle, that connects the objects together, and prevents their interruption or variation” (254). Through Rhoda, the combination of pathos and irony in Hume is revealed. And through Woolf – contra Hume – imaginative fiction is distinguished from the “feigning” of interruptions that Hume says we perform at the most fundamental level of perception.

In the conclusion of Book 1 of the *Treatise*, Hume writes: “In all the incidents of life we ought still to preserve our skepticism. If we believe that fire warms, or water refreshes, ‘tis only because it costs us too much pains to think otherwise” (270). For Hume, the basic facts of life expressed in phrases such as “fire warms” and “water refreshes” are themselves results of fictionalization, a glossing over of how intolerable it would be if the basic components of our experience were revealed to be not as connected as we might like them to be. The very display of grammatical subject-verb agreement in phrases like “fire warms” and “water refreshes” reveals a bent of mind (or “propensity”) that encourages necessary connections when none may be there at all. Rhoda’s fictive utterance, “the door opens and the tiger leaps,” coming as it does after “one moment does not lead to another,” may be a way of expressing with accuracy the character of experience, precisely without indulging in the habituated forms of “feigning” and “disguising” that Hume finds both endemic to ordinary acts of understanding, and irresistible. Each of Rhoda’s three statements seem unrelated to the other; stringing them together creates a text that can only exist in fiction; we are drawn to make analogies among the fragments. And yet the statement “one moment does not lead to another” simultaneously holds and negates those very interpretive proclivities that they invite. Through Rhoda, Woolf imagines a painful view of reality unfictionalized. And in doing so, Woolf uses the imagination of a fiction writer in ways that Hume could not account for.<sup>217</sup>

Woolf’s text (especially read from the vantage point of Rhoda) problematizes the very notion of relation itself in such radical ways that she casts serious doubts on the “stream of consciousness” – both as a philosophical notion and as an organizing principle for a literary work of art. William James wanted to recover for the philosophical and scientific study of consciousness what he termed the “feeling of relation”: “we are never without the feeling of relation,” he says, talking about the technical issue of how different mental states are connected, but with an emotional tone that suggests its urgency for a human psychology that does not make alienation into a natural condition.

In fact, Hume was one of the targets of James’ most severe attacks, his “Stream of Thought” chapter from the *Principles*. Referring to a group that he called the “Sensationalist” philosophers, James writes: “Many of them, like Hume, have gone so far as to deny the reality of most relations out of the mind as well as in it. Substantive psychoses, sensations and their copies and derivatives, juxtaposed like dominoes in a game, but really separate, everything else verbal

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<sup>217</sup> Nor did he care to do so.

illusion—such is the upshot of this view.”<sup>218</sup> We can recall that on Hume’s “bundle theory” of the self, for example, there is no account of what “ties” the human bundle of experience together. James’ intertextual engagement with and rejection of Hume’s “bundle theory” means that James attempts to pre-empt the necessity of “gathering” by building *into the content of experience* precisely those joints and junctures of relatedness whose experiential grounding Hume skeptically eliminates. He really regarded those “ties” as phenomenally available (though I think James’ willingness to engage in open dialogue about his own at times crippling depression suggests that he may have been more sensitive to Rhoda’s predicament than the “Stream of Thought” chapter lets on).

Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to say that James theorized the “stream of consciousness” because of how important he thought the “feeling of relation” was to mental life, cautioning that we should accept no final philosophical account of the mind in which “one thought does not lead to another.” James maintains, boldly, that the very connections that Hume denied are actually available as observable phenomena of consciousness: “We ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue* or a feeling of *cold*” (245-46). But James’ defense of the relational character of experience, in this last claim, still suffers from the sensationalist paradigm, where life appears “chopped up into bits.” The idea that the separable units of language (“and,” “if,” and “but”) reflect discrete units of thought remains a reification of atomistic simplicity that undoes the very claim for relation that James is seeking. Furthermore, James is wrong to think that the “feeling of *and*” is antithetical to Hume’s picture, since what the naturalistic side of Hume’s account tries to show is precisely those “natural propensities” by which we, in fact, do fill in the gaps. These formulations are less persuasive than James’ other imaginative descriptions of the “transitive” aspect of thoughts-in-motion, which he compares to the flight of a bird. Indeed, James’ image schemas of the “flights” and “perchings” of thought are so persuasive precisely because James acknowledges that the “transitive” in thinking (as opposed to the “substantive, the places where the bird lands), disappears from view the moment we try to get it under the magnifying glass: “As a snow-flake crystal caught in the warm hand is no longer a crystal but a drop, so, instead of catching the feeling of relation moving to its term, we find we have caught some substantive thing, usually the last word we were pronouncing, statically taken, and with its function, tendency, and particular meaning in the sentence quite evaporated” (243, 244). In this philosophical mood, and in the same chapter, James acknowledges the central paradox of empiricism: the feeling of “and,” of the connectedness of sensory impressions, is for profound reasons not of a piece with the empirical “contents” that it conjoins. Those relations must occupy a different order of being, so to speak, in the mental architecture.

In fact, in this moment James carries forward an important insight about the distinctness of form from the Kantian tradition: namely, that while the “transitive” or “substantive” parts of the mind (or of a sentence, for that matter) appear to be on a par with one another, they are actually distinct – in ways that cannot be made plain by direct observation. Similarly, we must relate to “form” in a different way from the way we relate to objects; if we focus our attention on it the way we focus attention on an object, we risk converting it into one.

But one need only take *The Waves* as a point of reference for literary experimentation with consciousness to see the power of enduring strains in the modernist period that are quite opposed to the aesthetics implicit in James: This “Humean” strain views empirical ascriptions of

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<sup>218</sup> James, *Principles*, 244-45.

indelible relation<sup>219</sup> with suspicion – regarding it as the stuff of uncritical, “habituated” or “customary” falsification. Of course, for Hume, naturalistic philosopher as he was, there is nothing wrong or falsifying about our habits and customs of weaving continuity – so long as we don’t use these natural propensities to sponsor grander claims on behalf of reason.<sup>220</sup>

The critical strains within both Hume and Kant seem to have fallen out of James’ view when he was developing his “stream of consciousness” in contradistinction to extant nineteenth-century views; and likewise, these critical strains have sometimes fallen out of view when it comes to considerations of the literature to which James’ “stream of consciousness” sometimes lent its name.

As many critics have noted, *The Waves* is not a work of “stream of consciousness” fiction and constantly frustrates critical attempts to make it work within that framework.<sup>221</sup> The idea that “one moment does not lead to another” rejects the view of the mind as perpetual flux – the free flow of association from one thought-word to another. So *The Waves* is a rejection of stream of consciousness both in its form and in its thematics (at least, through Rhoda’s monologues). Or to put it another way, *The Waves* resists reifying consciousness both as fundamentally atomistic, and as fundamentally fluid. But *The Waves* itself is also an example of a text that does not have a stream of consciousness as a *structure*. It does not use free indirect discourse; it does not mimic in its syntax the flow of associations; it is not structured as a mimesis of semi-conscious thinking.

Edouard Dujardin’s *Les lauriers sont coupés* (1887) is the short novel credited as the “minor work” to “inaugurate a major movement.”<sup>222</sup> Dujardin’s elaboration of a *monologue intérieur* was taken by Joyce as a principal model. The novel’s title, with its images of laurels that have been snipped, suggests the end of the age of heroism in a way that is not conveyed by the English translation. The passage I will quote here presents the inner workings of a modernist bourgeois anti-hero for whom the deployment of the conscious “I” is an exercise in disaggregated “non-relation,” not to mention humiliation. In a café, the narrator Daniel notices a handsome couple and decides to give the woman his *carte de visite*, on which he tries to scrawl a clever and enticing invitation. But the stop-start rhythm of his writing, obsessively smudging out and correcting every line, highlights the saccadic narrative mode itself by which his thoughts are being rendered.<sup>223</sup> Indeed, what have here is a profound absence of “ands” – but rather sentence fragments separated by semicolons:

Mon porte-cartes; une carte avec mon adresse, cela est plus convenable; mon porte-crayon; très bien; Quoi écrire? Un rendez-vous à demain. Je dois indiquer plusieurs rendez-vous. Si l'avoué savait à quoi je m'occupe, l'honnête avoué. J'écris: «Demain, à deux heures, au salon de lecture du magasin du Louvre...» Le Louvre, le Louvre, pas très high-life, mais encore le plus commode; et puis où

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<sup>219</sup> Logical relation is another story. I take this up in my book project.

<sup>220</sup> I thank C.D. Blanton for this clarification.

<sup>221</sup> See Humphreys, *Stream of Consciousness*, 105.

<sup>222</sup> Leon Edel, Introduction to *We'll to the Woods No More* by Edouard Dujardin, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Directions, 1958), xxvii.

<sup>223</sup> I’m borrowing the term “saccadic” from Galen Strawson who argues, contrary to William James and the Stream of Consciousness, that mental life is characterized by discontinuity. Strawson offers a critique of William James on the basis of a “saccadic” view of perception. Galen Strawson, “Against Narrativity” *Ratio (new series)* 17, no. 4 (December, 2004): 428-452.

ailleurs? Le Louvre, allons. À deux heures. Il faut un assez long délai; au moins depuis deux heures jusqu'à trois; c'est cela; je change «à» en «depuis» et je vais ajouter «jusqu'à trois.» Ensuite «je... je vous attendrai...» non «j'attendrai»; soit; voyons.<sup>224</sup>

Yes, I must try my luck with a note. My cardcase; a card with my address on it; that's the correct thing; my pocket-pencil, right. What shall I say? An appointment for to-morrow. Better give her the choice of where. If that solicitor, stout fellow, knew what I was up to! I write: *To-morrow at two o'clock in the reading room at. At one of the big shops; the Louvre; -- at the Louvre.* Not quite high-life, perhaps, but very handy; can't imagine any better place. That's it. At two o'clock at the Louvre. I mustn't pin her down as to time; better say from two to three, anyhow. Yes, I change *at to from*, and add *till three*. Next: *I shall . . . I shall look out for you*; no, *I shall be looking out for you*. Easy now; let's see..."<sup>225</sup>

By the time he figures out what he wants to say, of course, his food has arrived, and the couple has long gone. He then finds his own writing *dégoûtant* on multiple levels:

Ma carte va être chargée de ratures, dégoûtante, illisible: c'est absurde; je vais m'enrhumer dans cet odieux cabinet de lecture plein de courants d'air; et d'abord cette femme ne prendra pas mon billet. Je le déchire; en deux, la carte; encore en deux, cela fait quatre morceaux; encore en deux, cela fait huit; encore en deux; là, encore; plus moyen. Eh bien, je ne puis pas jeter ces morceaux à terre; on les retrouverait; il faut un peu les mâcher. Pouah, c'est dégoûtant. A terre; ainsi, certes, on ne lira pas. (26)

No, I say, my card will be covered with corrections, hideous, illegible. It's absurd; and I'll catch a cold in that rotten reading-room, full of draughts as it is, and in any case, she will refuse to accept my note. There, I tear it up; in two pieces; tear across; four pieces; again; that makes eight. Again; no, imposs. It won't do to drop these bits of card on the floor; someone might pick them up; better try chewing them. Ugh! Horrible taste. Drop them then; there's no fear of anyone reading. (27)

The image of the narrator tearing to bits and then literally chewing up and swallowing his own visiting card also reflects sardonically on the *form* of such "internal" narration itself: "tear it up; in two pieces; tear across; four pieces; again; that makes eight." Indeed, in a critical essay Dujardin defines *monologue intérieur* as "Discours sans auditeur et non prononcé" – precisely the status of the "swallowed" words scribbled on the carte de visite. Dujardin's new form fits in with what Dorrit Cohn calls "the pervasive loneliness of the monologist."<sup>226</sup> He advocates for a poetics of punctuated rhythms, of sentences reduced to a "syntactic minimum" – in other words, his *monologue intérieur* is intriguingly at odds with the theoretical elaboration of the "Stream of Consciousness" that William James publishes only three years later, with its insistence on

<sup>224</sup> Edouard Dujardin, *Les lauriers sont coupés* (Paris: Librairie de la revue indépendante, 1888), 25-26.

<sup>225</sup> Dujardin, *We'll to the Woods*, 26.

<sup>226</sup> Cohn, *Transparent Minds*, 245.

“feelings of relation.” Here is Dujardin’s definition of *monologue intérieur*: “un personnage exprime sa pensée la plus intime, la plus proche de l’inconscient, antérieurement à toute organisation logique, c’est-à-dire en son état naissant, par le moyen de phrases directes réduites au minimum syntaxial de façon à donner l’impression tout-venant.”<sup>227</sup> By reducing the phrase to a “syntactic fragment,” Dujardin reveals that his conception of consciousness and language persists in its atomistic picture. His aim is to get down to the simplest unit of experience – one that precedes the impositions of the understanding (“antérieur...à toute organization logique”). But the result of this experiment, comically intensified in the passages I have just quoted, is to show just how the most “basic unit of perception” is meddled with by the understanding.

It is precisely this picture of consciousness that Woolf parodies in *The Waves*. This meta-fictional move is most palpable through Louis’ reflections while sitting in a café:

“I prop my book against a bottle of Worcester sauce and try to look like the rest...Yet I cannot. (They go on passing, they go on passing in disorderly procession). I cannot read my book, or order my beef, with conviction. I repeat, ‘I am an average Englishman; I am an average clerk,’ yet I look at the little men at the next table to be sure that I do what they do.”

“People go on passing; they go on passing against the spires of the church and the plates of ham sandwiches. The streamers of my consciousness waver out and are perpetually torn and distressed by their disorder.” (93)

Louis is possessed not of a “stream of consciousness”; but rather, of “streamers.”<sup>228</sup> Woolf satirically substitutes William James’ term of art for the inner workings of the mind, a metaphor that is at once metaphysical, celestial, and almost embarrassingly trivial, flimsy and commercial.

The metaphor of a “stream” presupposes a continuous flow which *The Waves*, especially read from the vantage point of Rhoda and Louis, takes apart. From Louis’ vantage point, it is as if the streaming people communicate their disorder to the instruments of consciousness that behold them. I say “instruments” because Louis’ consciousness is itself described in the plural – as a grouping of “streamers.” A parallel is thus produced between the form of his own noticing and the form of the “people” who “go on passing.” And yet perception is soon seen as something quite other than a “mirroring” relation: In Woolf’s elaboration of the “streamers” metaphor, awareness is a collection of antennae that are themselves re-arranged and even damaged (“torn”) by the objects that are sensed. Consciousness is not a form of mirroring but rather of “reaching out” which may be damaged by what it encounters. The image of consciousness not as “stream” but rather as a set of “streamers” expresses a yearning for relation that is perpetually frustrated by an onslaught of separate, yet homogeneous phenomena. But this form of fragmentation, transferred from the “disorderly procession” to the form of consciousness that seeks to apprehend it is, for Louis, just as for Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own*, inexorably linked with city

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<sup>227</sup> Dujardin, *Lauriers*, 230.

<sup>228</sup> The word “streamer” seems to be as adaptable as the motion that it expresses. In Woolf’s corpus it refers once to a comet she sees in the sky, at another time to a flag or decoration. In her diary entry chronicling the July 19, 1919 “Peace Day” celebrations in London, Woolf notes the “long tongue-shaped streamers attached to the top of the Nelson column...furled and unfurled, like the gigantic tongues of dragons,” a sight which she singles out as breaking the monotonous ceremony of “these peace rejoicings,” which are otherwise “calculated, politic and insincere...carried out with no beauty, and not much spontaneity.” Vol. 1 of *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed by A.O. Bell (New York: Harcourt, 1985), 222.



life. At the same time, the strategies for weaving continuity are discredited as rote and automatic repetition without difference. Just as Rhoda says, "I pull on my stockings as I see them pull on theirs," Louis says, "I look at the little men at the next table to be sure I do what they do." It appears that Rhoda was not entirely alone in her defamiliarizing perspective on habituated activity, associating the consolidation of a self with mimicry.

To return to the leitmotif of the tiger, it too offers a ruptured form of continuity. By re-enacting the tiger's leap Rhoda takes up a thread of association (or maybe disassociation) that was formulated early in her childhood: "With intermittent shocks, sudden as the springs of a tiger, life emerges heaving its dark crest from the sea" (64). The metaphors of the present moment are shifting; the "springs of a tiger" immediately are recast in terms of a different creaturely frame of reference. An allusion to Woolf's friend T.S. Eliot's "Gerontion," the leaping tiger is a figure for the present moment itself – whatever its contents – but construed as an unintegrated series of "intermittent shocks."<sup>229</sup> Why give oneself over to such an unbearable susceptibility? Rhoda describes the relationship to the nearly-abusive onslaught of life as one of "attachment": "It is to this we are attached; it is to this we are bound, as bodies to wild horses. And yet we have invented devices for filling up the crevices and disguising these fissures" (64). As in Hume, the image of being "bound" (one thinks of Hume's bundle) points to a reality that has not yet been falsified; over and above this condition of being bound, however, we "invent...devices" aimed at "disguising these fissures."

On the one hand, we are "bound"; on the other hand there are "fissures" which we are in the habit of "disguising." Rhoda echoes the terms that Hume uses when he writes that "we feign the continued existence of the perceptions of our senses, to remove the interruption: and run into the notion of a soul, and self, and substance, to disguise the variation."<sup>230</sup> Rhoda continues with a catalog of ordinary sights defamiliarized as "invented devices": "Here is the ticket collector. Here are two men; three women; there is a cat in a basket; myself with my elbow on the window-sill – this is here and now."<sup>231</sup> The "here" and "now" joins the catalog of ordinary, fully cognizable objects and relations which for Rhoda, like Hume, reflect "invented devices for filling up the crevices and disguising these fissures." As for Hume, the self is just one among a catalog of feigned substances.

Early on, Rhoda associates the tiger with the shocks attending the space of the moment. This association continues to give form to her self-narration during the dinner party scene, years later: "I am afraid of the shock of sensation that leaps upon me, because I cannot deal with it as you do —I cannot make one moment merge in the next. To me they are all violent, all separate; and if I fall under the shock of the leap of the moment you will be on me, tearing me to pieces" (130).

Rhoda's consciousness provokes a serious re-evaluation of present-tense experience. How can one "live in the moment," when one moment does not lead to another? The present moment does not accord Rhoda a perpetual presence, but rather shocks with its unintegrated

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<sup>229</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt, 1991), 29. For a discussion, see Julia Briggs, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 251. Adorno on the "shock" as the content of literary experience in an automated society is also relevant here. While Adorno is discussing Edgar Allan Poe, this is one more way in which the poetics of Woolf and Poe may be linked. Theodor W. Adorno, "Late Extra" in *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (New York: Verso, 2005).

<sup>230</sup> Hume, *Treatise*, 254.

<sup>231</sup> Woolf, *The Waves*, 64.

concatenations—the shock of its piercing, maximal brevity. Like Hume, Rhoda takes seriously the gravity of reconciling with the piercing singularity of what is given at each moment of awareness. For her, the present becomes uninhabitably discrete. Separation is linked with violence, but she finds herself lacking those “fictions” – the devices that help us cope with the shock of moments experienced discretely. For Bernard, the “here and now” was the locus of the ephemeral “many-faceted” unity of the red carnation. “We have come together, at a particular time, to this particular spot,” he says, anchoring the multiplicity of the group in deictic specificity.

But Rhoda echoes Bernard’s language of “particular time... particular spot” to express her isolation from precisely that sort of view. For her it is this particularity that fragments and disaggregates, rather than serving to ground observation. Again she becomes lyrically dialogical in her expression of the violence wrought on the “I” by the mere fact of temporal duration, in a section we’ve alluded to briefly above:

but since I wish above all things to have lodgment, I pretend, as I go upstairs lagging behind Jinny and Susan, to have an end in view. I pull on my stockings as I see them pull on theirs. I wait for you to speak and then speak like you. I am drawn here across London to a particular spot, to a particular place, not to see you or you or you, but to light my fire at the general blaze of you who live wholly, indivisibly and without caring in the moment. (131)

For Rhoda, the Humean “fiction” of personal identity is literally a fiction of imitation, of pretending. Not unlike Poe’s “Man that was Used Up,” she goes through the motions out of which the subsistence of a Self is fictionally accumulated—but does so from the standpoint of total abjection. (The agony in the habitual “pulling on my stockings” returns in her final soliloquy, which hints obliquely at her suicide). Unable to “live wholly in the moment,” Rhoda lives fully the Humean skeptical lesson that is glossed over by others who are more expert at “disguising the interruption.” The very same principles of relation that Hume claimed do not hold up to empirical scrutiny leave Rhoda utterly bereft — a figure of loss who prefigures her own absence in the narrative, from which her suicide (like Woolf’s) will disappear her.

Elaborating on her lack of mechanisms for “deal[ing] with” the space of the moment “as you do,” Rhoda’s consciousness expresses: “I have no end in view. I do not know how to run minute to minute and hour to hour, solving them by some natural force until they make the whole and indivisible mass that you call life.” Rhoda’s mode of perception suggests a pointillist painting, but viewed up close and without the integrating vantage point that would produce the semblance of coherence. The transition from the atomistic grain of sensory experience to something “whole and indivisible” called “life” suggests the ardor of constructing a coherent temporal schema for our lives, or a linked narrative thereof. The chemical or mathematical process of “solving them by some natural force” suggests that Rhoda views herself as lacking the very naturalistic “propensity” that Hume thinks is impossible to shake: the use of the imagination to ease the strain of the moment, but at a cost: life must be to some degree “fictionalized” in order to become calculable.

Woolf’s ambivalence about the present moment (the “here and now”) reaches a fever pitch through the consciousness of Rhoda, telling us something about the way that understanding works that is again akin to Hume. In the Conclusion to *Of the Understanding*, Book 1 of his *Treatise*, Hume refers repeatedly to the indispensability of the imagination for tying together

sensory impressions which are otherwise disparate: “Without this quality,” writes Hume, referring to the imagination, “we cou’d only admit of those perceptions, which are immediately present to our consciousness.”<sup>232</sup> And yet, the very indispensability and ubiquity of the imagination for the most basic acts of “understanding” means that we are constantly falsifying what is empirically given in order to construct knowledge. The imagination, then, is simultaneously celebrated by Hume for moving us beyond the narrow window of fleeting, present-tense observation, and denigrated by him: “No wonder a principle so inconstant and fallacious shou’d lead us into errors.” The imagination moves us beyond the “here and now,” which Hume has shown is not even sufficient to support the basic structure of an object. Using the logic of a *reductio ad absurdum*, Hume shows that the negation of the imagination leaves us with almost nothing; or with a something that is by turns diminished into something scarcer and scarcer. Here is the full context in which Hume’s remark on the imagination appears. Note how the “Nay” of negation successively narrows the window of what is empirically given independently of imaginative elaboration:

Without this quality...we cou’d never assent to any argument, nor carry our view beyond those few objects, which are present to our senses. Nay, even to these objects we cou’d never attribute any existence...Nay farther, we cou’d only admit of those perceptions, which are immediately present to our consciousness...

Hume concludes positively his proof by negation: “the memory, senses, and understanding are, therefore, all of them founded on the imagination” (265). But we are left with the unsettling result that the imagination is responsible not only for what is experienced as absent, but even for what is experienced as present.

It is important to observe how the very same philosopher who, accepting radical discontinuity, refuses to conjecture beyond the “here and now,” turns in his skeptical conclusion against the dominion of the present moment. As a true empiricist, Hume’s allegiance to the moment is ambivalent, and so is his idea of immediate presence. The very end of Book 1 of the *Treatise* offers advice about how to deal with philosophical skepticism. In the literature on Hume, these passages have sometimes been taken as providing specific conditions under which philosophical inquiry can legitimately proceed in the face of skepticism, and I am not sure that this is the case.<sup>233</sup> Here is the very last paragraph in *Of the Understanding*, which begins with Hume making a prescriptive claim. At first he seems to affirm the special philosophical value of what is “immediately present to consciousness.” We can easily recall Rhoda’s and Bernard’s preoccupation with “particular” moments in time and place, when we read in Hume that “we shou’d yield to that propensity, which inclines us to be positive and certain in *particular points*, according to the light, in which we survey them in any *particular instant*...” (Hume’s italics). But Hume’s attraction to the present moment is quickly transformed into repulsion, when he finds difficulty in producing the kind of specific, unfabricated knowledge that was offered by sensory immediacy:

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<sup>232</sup> Hume, *Treatise*, 265.

<sup>233</sup> See, for example, Henry Allison, “Hume’s Philosophical Insouciance,” in *Custom and Reason in Hume: A Kantian Reading of the First Book of the Treatise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); and Don Garrett, “Reason, Normativity and Hume’s ‘Title Principle,’” in *The Oxford Handbook of Hume*, ed. Paul Russell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016)

On such an occasion we are apt not only to forget our skepticism, but even our modesty too; and make use of such terms as these, *'tis evident, 'tis certain, 'tis undeniable*...I may have fallen into this fault after the example of others ; but I here enter a *caveat* against any objections, which may be offer'd on that head; and declare that such expressions were extorted from me by the present view of the object, and imply no dogmatical spirit, nor conceited idea of my own judgment, which are sentiments that I am sensible can become no body, and a sceptic still less than any other (273-74; italics in the original; underlining is mine).

This is a remarkable way to conclude the first book of the *Treatise of Human Nature*. The image that Hume uses for empirical observation is one of extortion. It is as if the perceiver is forced under duress to comply with the terms of knowledge-making; and it is as if those terms emanate from the object itself. He describes the linguistic markers of epistemic certainty (*'tis evident, 'tis certain, 'tis undeniable*) as if they are really falsifications, wrested from him by violence. Bad philosophy (in the form of the cliched expressions of certainty used by all of us in argumentation) is extracted from the philosopher by the force of perception in the present. The same "present view of the object" that was privileged as the only viable window for empirical observation becomes a coercive force that deprives the perceiver of any agency whatsoever. Anticipating the corrective (or response) Kant will deliver, we can note how profoundly antithetical the idea of judgment is to any notion of agency.

Hume evokes philosophical skepticism and its distancing effects, which he dynamically contrasts with the consoling effects of everyday absorption in the world: "and though we incessantly correct ourselves by reflection, and return to a more accurate method of thinking, yet we cannot long sustain our philosophy, or take off this bias from the imagination."<sup>234</sup> In an astonishing moment of self-loathing, he writes of the effect his philosophical inquiries, and the realization of the "impossibility of amending" what he calls his "disordered faculties": "I am first affrighted and confounded with that forlorn solitude, in which I am plac'd in my philosophy, and fancy myself some strange uncouth monster, who not being able to mingle and unite in society, has been expell'd all human commerce, and left utterly abandon'd and disconsolate" (264). Rhoda can help shed light on the sudden incursion of these violent images of alienation at the end of Hume's study of human nature: "All violent, all separate" says Rhoda of the moments that she cannot make merge together. It is extraordinary that Hume's anxiety, with its philosophical trappings, remains a pressing concern almost two centuries after the *Treatise*, appearing now in 1931 in the voice of Rhoda.

Indeed, Hume finds that "nature herself...cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium: I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends...Here then I find myself absolutely and necessarily determin'd to live, and talk, and act like other people in the common affairs of life" (269). Hume describes the pleasures of bourgeois leisure as the work of "nature herself" – a coping mechanism on a par with those slippages of mind that make "one moment merge into the next," which he considers naturalistic properties of human beings. However, this equation of cognitive habit with social form calls into question his notion of a "natural propensity" right at the moment where his skepticism is supposed to resolve itself. Maybe not everyone has access to the same soothing fictions? One cannot help thinking

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<sup>234</sup> For the challenge of understanding how to integrate Hume's different philosophical moods, see Janet Broughton, "Hume's Naturalism and his Skepticism," in *A Companion to Hume*, ed. Elizabeth Radcliffe (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 425-440.

about the social differences, gendered and otherwise, that made it the case that such radical skepticism, indeed even the annihilation of the concept of the self, in the case of Hume, does not prevent him from enjoying just the kind of recreation that for Rhoda offers no respite whatsoever from alienation. Hume's "dining scene" reads quite differently from Rhoda's.

What kind of relationship to the present moment is engendered by the combination of skepticism and empiricism in Rhoda, and in Hume? There is a remarkable ambivalence about moment-to-moment attention in both texts. Both renderings of consciousness involve an ironic attitude towards the moment-to-moment precision that is suggested by empiricist observation. It is perhaps surprising to find in both Woolf and Hume the shock and even violence that the authors associate with "being in the now." Their joint perspective on "present perception" casts a new light on the valence of the moment in Woolf's work at large, calling into question any celebratory embrace of "the moment" that Woolf's impressionism may have misled us to attribute to her, for example in *Moments of Being*.<sup>235</sup>

While she was writing *The Waves*, and right after "discarding her first version of the novel" in the summer of 1929, Woolf recorded the following eight lines from Wordsworth's *Prelude* in her diary, calling it "a very good quotation".<sup>236</sup>

The matter that detains us now may seem,  
To many, neither dignified enough  
Nor arduous, yet will not be scorned by them,  
Who, looking inward, have observed the *ties*  
*That bind the perishable hours of life*  
*Each to the other, & the curious props*  
By which the world of memory & thought  
Exists & is sustained.<sup>237</sup>

I have emphasized in italics the "Humean" dilemma alluded to by Wordsworth's speaker through his invocation of a popular eighteenth-century hymn: the precarious (and possibly falsifying) "ties/That bind the perishable hours of life/Each to the other."<sup>238</sup> But first, a note on the context in which such reflections appear in Wordsworth: As the allusion to "curious props" suggests, the Wordsworth passage that Woolf extracted follows from the poet's childhood recollections of being a spectator enjoying the "mean delight" of the popular theatre in London. Of the famous personage Jack the Giant-Killer, the poet writes: "Delusion bold! And how can it be wrought?/The garb he wears is black as death, the word/ 'Invisible' flames forth upon his chest" (1850, 285).

The quotation that Woolf extracts suggests that there is more than just "mean delight" (274) to be gleaned from the "delusion bold!" of the theatre. Looking inward, for Wordsworth,

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<sup>235</sup> "These separate moments of being were however embedded in many more moments of non-being," Woolf reminds us. "Every day includes much more non-being than being." Woolf, *Moments of Being* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 70.

<sup>236</sup> Deborah Parsons, introduction to *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2000), vii. See Woolf's diary entry of August 22, 1929 in vol. 3 of *Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 247.

<sup>237</sup> Woolf refers to Book VII, lines 458-466. She would have used the 1926 Oxford edition of Wordsworth's 1850 text. My subsequent references are to William Wordsworth, Vol. 1 of *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, ed. Mark L. Reed (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

<sup>238</sup> John Fawcett, "Blest Be the Ties that Binds" (1782).

involves a disarming discovery: the continuity of time is laid bare as a primary “prop,” one to which we become re-sensitized by the “delusion bold!” of the theatre. The “world of memory & thought/Exists & is sustained” by ignoring the props – or as Rhoda says, with Hume, by “disguising the fissures.” Indeed, here is Hume invoking that very same image of a “tie” (necessary connection between sensory impressions, in his jargon) in the same breath as he expresses his disillusionment with its artificiality:

Nothing is more curiously enquir'd after by the mind of man, than the causes of every phaenomenon...we wou'd not willingly stop before we are acquainted with that energy in the cause, by which it operates on its effect; that tie, which connects them together; and that efficacious quality, on which the tie depends. This is our aim in all our studies and reflections: And how must we be disappointed, when we learn, that this connexion, tie, or energy lies merely in ourselves.<sup>239</sup>

For Wordsworth, as for Hume, the mental faculties themselves appear as artifices, whose conceits must be maintained according to a principle that the poet likens to the willing suspension of disbelief necessary for experiencing fictional worlds. Interestingly enough, however, it is somehow the crudest forms of fiction which in their overt theatrically permit this critical reflection on the inner world: the form of theatre that has no pretense of verisimilitude – in which “the word ‘invisible’ flames forth upon [the actor’s] chest”!<sup>240</sup> In this proto-Brechtian moment, the gross props of sensationalist theatre are more stimulating to the poet’s “imaginative power” than “more lofty themes” (Wordsworth 465). No wonder Woolf returns to the model of drama in her composition of *The Waves* and in her literary criticism from the period, in which she tries to overturn the present order of novelistic convention by envisioning “the poetic dramatist of the future.”<sup>241</sup> In the next section I investigate one such theatrical “gross prop” employed by Woolf for anti-naturalistic ends.

## 7. WHAT DOES THE WORD “SAID” MEAN IN *THE WAVES* ?

“Look at the spider’s web on the corner of the balcony,” said Bernard. “It has beads of water on it, drops of white light.”

“The leaves are gathered round the window like pointed ears,” said Susan.

“A shadow falls on the path,” said Louis, “like an elbow bent.”<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> Hume, *Treatise*, 267.

<sup>240</sup> See Robert Kaufman’s discussion of artistic semblance as “protocritical illusion.” On this Marxian -- and Kantian account --the aesthetic *as-if* announces and identifies itself *as* illusion or semblance, so that both the semblance *and the reality it relates to but differs from* are simultaneously registered. Robert Kaufman, “Poetry’s Ethics? Theodor W. Adorno and Robert Duncan on Aesthetic Illusion and Sociopolitical Delusion,” *New German Critique* 33, no. 1 (2006): 110.

<sup>241</sup> “The Narrow Bridge of Art,” in *Modernism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey (Malden, MA, and Oxford, 2005), 909.

<sup>242</sup> Woolf, *The Waves*, 9.

The *Waves* is composed of a series of dramatic soliloquies, polyphonic utterances assigned to six voices whom we first encounter as children. As I show above, the “internal dialogue” between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* played on the ambiguity between silence and external speech. Here even deeper indeterminacies are at play. What does the word “said” mean, here – does it stand for a literal utterance, to be imagined taking place in a fictional world? The developmental psychology notion of “parallel play” in early childhood, proposed by Mildred Parten in 1932, makes it a little more socially acceptable to imagine dialogue that takes place this way, in blatant violation of the norms of conversation.<sup>243</sup> Still, it is not clear how the children’s speaking fits into the dramatic situation. The speech verb, “said,” conventionally introduces a dialogue, but here the voices don’t seem to be addressing one another, if they’re speaking at all. We get dramatic indicators for a situation that cannot be dramatized. Throughout her work, Woolf expresses a profound understanding of mental interaction, whether through the “dialogic” dimension of parallel interior monologues or through triangulation of perception around a common object.<sup>244</sup> Holding open the question as to whether triangulation is ever fully achieved, the children are nevertheless already involved in relations of responsiveness that they cannot fully account for, but that their “utterances” (realistic or not) attest to. One challenge posed by Woolf’s radically unfamiliar form, then, is how to interpret the word “said” that

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<sup>243</sup> Before children can play with each other, they engage in “parallel play.” Parten, M. B. (1932). "Social Participation among Preschool Children." *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*. 27(3): 243–269. But I am suggesting, in a Romantic and Kantian vein, that the “play” in question belongs to perception alone.

<sup>244</sup> Pascal Engel’s assessment of Donald Davidson’s late concept of “triangulation” is helpful here: “Towards the end of his philosophical career, Donald Davidson put much emphasis on what he called ‘triangulation,’ the thesis that only someone who has interacted linguistically with another person and the world they share could have language and objective thought.” Here is Davidson himself:

Without this sharing of reactions to common stimuli, thought and speech would have no particular content—that is, no content at all. It takes two points of view to give a location to the cause of a thought, and thus to define its content. We may think of it as a form of triangulation: each of two people is reacting differentially to sensory stimuli streaming in from a certain direction. Projecting the incoming lines outward, the common cause is at their intersection. If the two people now note each other’s reactions (in the case of language, verbal reactions), each can correlate these observed reactions with his or her stimuli from the world. A common cause has been determined. The triangle which gives content to thought and speech is complete. But it takes two to triangulate.

Until a base line has been established by communication with someone else, there is no point in saying one’s own thoughts or words have a propositional content. If this is so, then it is clear that knowledge of another mind is essential to all thought and all knowledge.

Pascal Engel, review of *Donald Davidson’s Triangulation Argument, A Philosophical Inquiry*, by Robert H. Myers and Claudine Verheggen, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (February 12, 2018); Donald Davidson, “Three Varieties of Knowledge” in Vol. 3 of *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective: Philosophical Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 212-213.

introduces each utterance. Indeed, all we really know, which becomes clearer in the course of the work, is simply that the conventions for reporting speech have themselves been reconfigured.<sup>245</sup>

Bernard, the “synthesizing” consciousness, is the first child-speaker to make his utterance explicitly dialogical, opening up the possibility of real “externalized” speech, and also upending the impression as a basic unit by suggesting the primacy of the dialogical. “Look,” he says, or appears to say, either to himself, to his cohort, or to anyone at all. To borrow terminology from Bakhtin, the “addressivity” of thought is not limited to speech.<sup>246</sup>

Thus, the opening of the *The Waves* immediately involves us in a set of utterances whose status cannot be easily settled. “Said” is the ultimate novelistic descriptor, because it purports to give you the content of an utterance – as if the content of the mind is just unuttered speech. But it is equally implausible that the utterances are externalized speech as it is that they should be taken as “sentences in the head” of children.<sup>247</sup> “Even the most precocious children would never talk like this,” points out J.W. Graham, who edited Woolf’s holographic drafts.” He continues:

Because Virginia Woolf makes no attempt to distinguish the style of one speaker from that of any other, it is difficult to read the speeches as stream-of-consciousness; and this difficulty is increased when we perceive that the rhythm, sentence structure, and vocabulary of any one speaker do not change noticeably between childhood and middle age. Yet most critics approach *The Waves* as an example of stream-of-consciousness writing.<sup>248</sup>

My sense is that even the most prototypical “stream of consciousness” writing will systematically fail the mimetic criteria that is sometimes imposed upon it. And yet, there is a relationship between late Woolf’s experimental technique and the goal of getting right to some degree what thinking is.

Catherine Addison reads *The Waves* within the history of prose-poetry, a tradition which “has never been very common in English” but which was the hallmark of post-romantic experimentation in French and other languages. This is part of what makes *The Waves*, specifically, such an “anomal[y]” in English literature.<sup>249</sup> Addison points out, however, that “for all this incantatory lyricism,” *The Waves* is still “normally regarded as a prose novel, presumably because it defers to...the conventions of prose paragraphing.” It becomes almost a matter of typography.

This cultural tendency to flatten poetry into prose is actually ironized within the work itself. Indeed, I would argue that the word “said” functions as an extended parody of the very “biographic style” – the tired-out mode of conventional narration that Bernard claims to have

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<sup>245</sup> Not one of H. Paul’s Grice’s four conversational maxims, are met, for example. “Logic and conversation,” in P. Cole & J. Morgan (ed.), *Syntax and Semantics, 3: Speech Acts* (New York: Academic Press): 41–58.

<sup>246</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, “The Problem of Speech Genres,” *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* trans Vern W. Mcgee, ed. Carol Emerson Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986).

<sup>247</sup> The notion of “sentences in the head” is one way of construing Jerry Fodor’s “language of thought” hypothesis. Jerry A. Fodor, *The Language of Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).

<sup>248</sup> J.W. Graham, “Point of View in the Waves: Some Services of the Style.” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 39, no.3 (April 1970): 194.

<sup>249</sup> Catherine Addison, *A Genealogy of the Verse Novel* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 33.



abandoned, encapsulating everything that is wrong with conventional realist narration and its documentary pretenses, according to Woolf in her criticism. Bernard links the “biographic style” with a form of masculinity that he is trying to distance himself from: “Once I had a biographer, dead long since, but if he still followed my footsteps with his old flattering intensity he would here say...” But there is good reason to believe that Woolf has not cut ties completely with this outmoded form; rather, the “biographic style” persists *as parody*:<sup>250</sup>

As J.W. Graham notes in his careful study of *The Waves* and its formal distinctness, “in the manuscript of *The Waves* [Woolf] scribbled at one point the following request: ‘The author would be glad if the following pages were not read as a novel.’”<sup>251</sup> We might then ask, if in *The Waves* Woolf works tirelessly to supersede the “dominion of the novel,” then why does she retain the realist novel’s most conventional marker – the third-person narrator’s indicator of a “character’s” speech – the word “said”?

Graham writes: “The most striking departure from prevailing narrative convention is the handling of verb tenses. For most of the book, the characters speak in the pure present (I go), a form of the present tense which we rarely use in speech or thought” (194). Graham even goes so far as to transpose a passage from *The Waves* into the past tense, to show what a distorting effect this would have on the “intensity” of the “pure present.” In Graham’s transposed version of a soliloquy from Susan, “Susan [in the past tense] sounds as if she were giving a methodical minute account of her past actions,” a result that undoes the magic of Woolf’s chosen mode. Generally, then, the characters speak in the pure present. Graham claims of “the use of the word ‘said,’ which implies that someone is reporting the speeches” that “these faint vestiges are all that remain of a narrator with whom the book started, and who remained explicitly and prominently in it through most of the first draft” (196-97). Graham does not make the connection, but according to his own keen linguistic analysis, the repeated use of the past tense speech-act marker “said” is a “departure” from the departure – the use of the non-realist “pure present” in the work.

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<sup>250</sup> Indeed, the full title of *Orlando* (1928), the novel that immediately preceded the composition of *The Waves*, is “*Orlando: A Biography*.” As soon as the novel opens, Orlando is described through a parody of description:

Directly we glance at eyes and forehead, thus do we rhapsodise. Directly we glance at eyes and forehead, we have to admit a thousand disagreeables which it is the aim of every good biographer to ignore.

With this parody of moment-to-moment observation, Orlando’s narrator is very much like the internal “biographer” that Bernard imagines used to follow him around. Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt, 1993), 16-17.

<sup>251</sup> J.W. Graham, “Point of View,” 193.

## 8. *THE WAVES IS NOT WHAT THEY SAY*

That strange flower, the sun,  
Is just what you say.  
Have it your way.

Wallace Stevens, "Gubbinal" (1923)<sup>252</sup>

I have been trying to show how fiction that leads up to the "stream of consciousness" cannot be reduced to the model of a transparent record of experience, even though it undoubtedly engages that model. So far, I have suggested that Victor Hugo and Edgar Allan Poe lay bare the limits of empiricism, by problematizing the terminus of analysis. Now, moving through modernism and the "stream of consciousness" proper to its late-modernist undoing, I have proposed that Virginia Woolf leads us to a positive characterization that answers the skeptical impasse that Poe and Hugo shared with Hume. For Woolf, literary form works in such a way as to disclose that the process of perception is never finished.

I allow this first stanza of Wallace Stevens' "Gubbinal" to intrude upon my discussion of Woolf in order to highlight one way in which *The Waves* both fixates on "saying" as a conceit, and stakes its poetic project on producing modes of description that fail to meet the expectations that "saying" produces: *That strange flower, the sun, / Is just what you say*. In this sentence spanning two poetic lines, the "just" of precision merges with the "just" of reduction. This sardonic expression of exactitude linked not only to "what one says" but to saying itself as a matter of public fact, produces a tenuous ambivalence about factual description echoing the parodies of exhaustive knowledge that we found in Poe. In contradistinction to the very statement that it voices, the poem itself is precisely *not* just what it says. In particular, Stevens' central device, metaphor, resists the idea that the sun is "nothing but" any of the forms by which it could be construed. Neither can the mode of deadpan irony upon which the comprehension of the verse hinges itself be located in "just what one says." But the apposition between "that strange flower," and "the sun," – two terms which are non-synonymous but nevertheless co-referential – demonstrates a latent "something more" in the light source that is named by both terms but exhausted by neither. The capacity for concatenated re-description demonstrated in the first line already contests the reduction to paraphrase that the second line pretends to concede to the convention-wielding interlocutor. The "strange flower" both refers to the sun and re-describes it under new aspects. This metaphorical proliferation challenges the associative link between precision and reduction in *just what you say*. In this way, Stevens' poem undermines its own official message by warning against ever mistaking an apt metaphor for the final word.

Even the metaphors play with their non-metaphorical, or prose shadows, in Stevens' poem. The description of the sun as a "strange flower" brings a novel metaphor to life, but simultaneously evokes a metaphor that is already conventional or "dead": the sunflower.<sup>253</sup> Yet

<sup>252</sup> Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1957), 85.

<sup>253</sup> "A so-called dead metaphor is not a metaphor at all, but merely an expression that no longer has a pregnant metaphorical use." Max Black, "More About Metaphor." *Metaphor and Thought*, 2nd ed., ed. Andrew Ortony (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 25. See also Chana Kronfeld, "Novel and Conventional Metaphors: A Matter of Methodology," *Poetics Today* 2 (1981):13-24; Eve Sweetser, *Semantic Structure and Semantic Change: A Cognitive Semantic Linguistic Study of Modality, Perception, Speech Acts, and Logical Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press). For

by reversing the normative order of tenor and vehicle (the flower as sun, rather than the sun as flower), Stevens' apposition points to a constant interaction or circulation between what is figurative and what is literal. Indeed, the poem implies that the sun as object or fixed point of reference itself would not even have to change for the creativity essential to language to bring about the dawning of new aspects: "That tuft of jungle feathers,/That animal eye,/Is just what you say," the third verse continues relentlessly, re-naming over and over again the subject of the poetic sentence. Instead of a fixed subject undergoing multiple predicates, here a multiplicity of description is heaped ironically upon a grammatical subject that will be predicated one way only—as having the property of being whatever someone else says it is. And yet, in direct contrast to the proposition that the poetic sentence pretends to advance, the constant renewals of language (the co-referentiality but non-equivalence of the different metaphors appositionally positioned) suggest that the relation between word and thing is never finished. That is, the thing is never finished being known or experienced. In other words, the Stevens poem exceeds in its form the very paraphrasability that it pretends to imitate.

It is certainly possible to place this unfinishedness on the side of the sun, so to speak, through the idea that there is a "life" or "animism" in the thing perceived (here the sun) that makes it fail as a fixed object of description that can be exhausted.<sup>254</sup> What I want to emphasize, however, is the unfinishedness that Stevens, and now Woolf in the late 1920s, begins to position on the subjective side – that is, on the side of perception and language, through the gaps that plain speech or "saying" can cover up.

"I wonder if it is good to feel this remoteness – that is, that *The Waves* is not what they say," Woolf wrote in a diary entry dated October 5, 1931, after the publication of her most experimental work.<sup>255</sup> The reviews for *The Waves* were almost suspiciously positive, and Woolf may have been right to wonder what might be missed in these acts of recognition. Indeed, the work's legibility leads to its misrecognition as a novel with determinate characters. When Woolf says *The Waves* "is not what they say," she is talking directly about what the critics say about the work; but she is also perhaps putting her finger here on a formal issue that is important to *The Waves*: Is the work equivalent to what the various voices *say* in it? How are we to understand the status of the quoted speech that constitutes the bulk of the work? The idea of what is said, then, figures as an important *internal* device in the play-poem, the basis for a negative form of poetics that Woolf developed in contradistinction to her previous works. Woolf's remark about "what they say" also helps corroborate an element of cultural critique in *The Waves* that is wholly independent of its reception: the fact that the series of quoted utterances of which novel appears to be composed almost entirely, nevertheless may not be "what they say" at all. That is, *The Waves* itself is a work that risks being mistaken for "what they say" precisely in order to drive a wedge between thought and the conditions of its appearance.

Sometimes the most difficult words are the ones we already know. In a way, it is the least remarkable word in the entire corpus of English literature, but the profound problem posed by

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contrary views, see George Lakoff, "The Death of Dead Metaphor," *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity* 2, no. 1 (1987): 143-147.

<sup>254</sup> Ross Posnock, lecture. Columbia University, October 19, 2017. I am grateful to Ross Posnock for discussing the poem with me.

<sup>255</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary: Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Leonard Woolf (London: Hogarth, 1959), 170. Thus, Woolf registers her uneasy response to the otherwise "kind and outspoken" review in *The Times*: "Really, this unintelligible book is better 'received' than any of them...odd that they [*The Times*] should praise my characters when I meant to have none" (171).

Woolf's unrecognizable experimental novelistic form can be posed through what appears to be its least problematic term. As I noted above, "said" is the only word in the primary sections of the novel, aside from the proper names that it accompanies, and the italicized interludes, that appears outside of quotation marks. Understanding *The Waves* as drama or as "play-poem" is one way, then, to ironically bring into relief the work's novelistic dimensions. If *The Waves* were actually to be performed aloud as the dramatic form suggests, with each voice assigned to a different actor, a somewhat comic situation would inevitably arise where someone has to be assigned to "the narrator," whose sole text is "said," the only word that escapes quotation marks.<sup>256</sup> That actor, should he or she accept the job, must be very alert and ready to interpose the word "said" at exactly the right time, in the caesura between the two different segments of each's voice's utterance. What looks like the most utterly conventional element of novelistic narration thus becomes something unfamiliar and strange in the context of its dramatic framing.

Woolf tried twice to write the novel with a narrator, and finally got rid of him/her, leaving only what Graham calls the "vestige" of "said" and the italicized interludes, spoken from the point of view of an undramatized voice. Because the "said" in "Neville said" is not italicized, we cannot automatically identify it with the "narrator-remnant" who introduces the voices within the dramatic frame, by saying "said."<sup>257</sup> Woolf's return to drama – in this case, to the choral mode of classical Greek tragedy – can be understood as a way of trying to undo (and also relativize) the crude realistic conventions of narration which have taken hold under the banner of the novel as a genre. It is not the first time that modernists have reverted to pre-modern models (and indeed mixed together different genres) in order to undo habitual ways of thinking about and doing art and philosophy that had crystallized in the intervening centuries. For, as James Ellington writes in a different but related context (the renegade resuscitation of the ancient Greek atomism of Epicurus, Lucretius, Leucippus and Democritus in the new physical science of the renaissance: "Revolutions in thought not infrequently occur by a return to and adaptation of some mode of thought long in disuse."<sup>258</sup>

In "On Not Knowing Greek," Woolf places a special emphasis on the key ingredient:

This is what the choruses supply; the old men or women who take no active part in the drama, the undifferentiated voices who sing like birds in the pauses of the wind; who can comment, or sum up, or allow the poet to speak himself or supply, by contrast, another side to his conception. Always in imaginative literature,

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<sup>256</sup> I have not been able to access the text of the 2008 multimedia National Theatre adaptation entitled *Waves*, directed by Katie Mitchell. See also the musical theater setting of *The Waves*, adapted by David Buckham and Lisa Peterson (1990, 2018). Woolf's work has been of particular interest to composers of music, and the tendency has been to voice the quoted text from *The Waves* as directly sung lyrics. Ned Rorem's 2000 piece "The Waves" sets the final paragraph of Woolf's novel (Bernard's soliloquy), beginning and ending *in medias res* without including the narrative framing. Daron Hagen's setting of Jinny's text in his *Rapture and Regret* similarly omits the speech-label "said." See Nicole Kenley Miller, "Voicing Virginia: Adaptations of Virginia Woolf's Words to Music," PhD Dissertation. University of Houston, 2018.

<sup>257</sup> As C.D. Blanton points out, the introductory interludes have a parallel structure in that they are similarly repetitive and unattributed. The impersonality of the two formal devices are therefore in dialogue with one another.

<sup>258</sup> James W. Ellington, Translator's Introduction, to Kant *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, in *Philosophy of Material Nature* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985), v.

where characters speak for themselves and the author has no part, the need of that voice is making itself felt.

...So to grasp the meaning of the play the chorus is of the utmost importance. One must be able to pass easily into those ecstasies, those wild and apparently irrelevant utterances.<sup>259</sup>

It took many years for Woolf to ditch the narrator of *The Waves*, to arrive at a form where the choric function of the narrator was diminished down to the tiny, but repeated word, "said."

In drama, the "characters" live in the performance; they are not a textual object. But the novel, as fictionalized prose, purports to represent a state of affairs (from which it is distinct as a textual medium). Indeed, it may be that the novel as a form risks merely reiterating the paradigm of "representation" precisely in order to create space for something new. *The Waves* risks being recognized as something previously known, in order to create an ironic distance that may or may not be registered. It is "epistemological" in the critical sense; it wonders about the costs of determinate knowledge. But if Woolf was writing a "play-poem," then why then resort to the device of "said" at all? After all, plays do not require such narrative intervention, and neither does the "dramatic monologue" in poetry (the Victorian and modernist poetic form par excellence, following after Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess"). A great deal can be gained then by exploring exactly why Virginia Woolf chooses, in her play-poem, to retain this remnant of the novelistic genre.

Interestingly, in the order of composition of *The Waves*, exactly the opposite was true. The device I am discussing here ("said" as a "speech-label") clearly appears only at the last possible moment, suggesting (as Graham notes) that it was drawn upon as a technique in order to solve a particular problem; and that it definitely was not the first choice.<sup>260</sup> Reading the holographic drafts gives us the opportunity to appreciate the dynamic movement that the quotation marks underwent before crystallizing as a form.

In the first holographic draft, for example, "said" alternates almost interchangeably with "said to herself," but is never accompanied by the monologue in quotation marks. Woolf begins the writing process, that is, with the technique of interior monologue in a line structure that is clearly poetic:

And for a moment Jinny said now I will hesitate,  
I will wait, I will make my choice very carefully;  
(Draft 1/page 196)

Rhoda vaguely remembered her. She is  
Triumphant, she said to herself;  
(Draft 1/page 197)

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<sup>259</sup> Virginia Woolf, "On Not Knowing Greek," *The Common Reader: First Series*, (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 51.

<sup>260</sup> One might say that Woolf's late modernism restores to quotation marks the instability that "speech-labels" had in the medieval period. For fascinating studies on the subject, see Colette Moore, *Quoting Speech in Early English* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Jinny “said to herself” is a formulation that recurs in both *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. Several critics, following Graham, have identified a somewhat uncanny moment both in Woolf’s drafts and in her own (long and arduous) personal process of composition, where a formal shift occurred, in the middle of the first draft, which changes the course of the novel and “solves” the formal problem that had been haunting her for almost three years:

On 3 January 1930, she began to write the dinner party scene...adding the word 'Conversation' in the margin (after having first written then deleted it in the main text). It was in the dialogue she wrote for this ‘conversation’ that the idiosyncratic style of direct reported speech found in *The Waves* – ‘said Bernard’, ‘said Louis’ – appeared at length for the first time. Woolf continued to employ passages of omniscient description from a third-person narrator, but reported speech narrative, almost always in the ‘said....’ form, was used with increasing regularity from this point onwards.  
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By the second holograph draft, after an abrupt transition that takes place while writing the dinner party scene in the first draft; “said to herself” becomes simply, “said.” Only at that precise moment do we get a series of perception-utterances, mediated by the speech labels “said.” With that, *monologue intérieur* becomes *extérieur* – but that does not mean that it is restored to the domain of real speech. Rather, I am proposing that it becomes something else entirely. In the marginal notes to her first draft one can see that Woolf refers to this portion of the text as the “phantom conversation” scene; but it becomes the form for the work as a whole.<sup>262</sup> What does it mean, though, to stage a “phantom” conversation in what is already fiction? How does introducing the semblance of “actual” speech actually release the phantoms? The term “phantom conversation” is apt; they’re not talking, but they’re also not *not* talking. The phrase both seems to make room for the dialogical nature of the text while releasing it from the expectations of verisimilitude.<sup>263</sup> What would it mean to conceive of the work as a whole on the model of a “phantom conversation”?

This solution allows Woolf to make room for the choric function, for the “wild and irrelevant utterance” that she describes in her positive valuation of the dramatic mode in the essay “On Not Knowing Greek.” One of the “clues” to the non-literal use of the word “said,” and indeed to its anti-realistic poetic: that all the different “characters” “speak” in the same, impersonally beautiful poetry. And yet the word “said” does not have the same valence throughout the work.<sup>264</sup> The recognition of this fact can be the first step towards acknowledging

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<sup>261</sup> Michael Herbert and Susan Sellers, Preface to *The Waves: The Cambridge Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2011), xlvii.

<sup>262</sup> See Julia Briggs’ description of the formal “solution to her technical problem” that Woolf finally hit upon in January of 1930: “though the narrator did not disappear altogether, the novel took a decisive step towards the kind of play-poem she had earlier envisaged. With the discovery of how to achieve the effect she wanted came a sense of release: suddenly she could ‘hardly stop making up *The Waves*.’” *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*, 253.

<sup>263</sup> As C.D. Blanton points out, this means that the structural device of the “phantom conversation,” the quasi-absent, quasi-present speech indicated by the label “said,” may be connected to the figure of Percival, who is celebrated in the dinner party scene, but dies tragically afterwards. The dinner party scene is correlated with his loss, but also amplifies Percival’s absent presence all throughout the work -- a ghostly figure who is known only through the consciousness of others.

<sup>264</sup> I thank Layla Forrest-White, with whom I taught this novel, for this and many other insights.

formal differences among different points of view that are not differences in personality. By “formal” I mean “pertaining to the conditions of appearance of an object of cognition.” Indeed, the different consciousnesses differ formally in that they do not evince the same degree of knowability.

We’ve seen that *The Waves* explodes the limits of conventional narrative by transforming the most apparently unremarkable, the most plainly referential word in the work – the constantly repeated speech-act verb “said” – into a placeholder for a missing concept by means of which consciousness might be presented adequately. I’ve argued that the paradigm of “inner speech” (Bakhtin, Denise Riley) which is highly relevant to Woolf’s earlier novels can no longer account for her experimentalism in *The Waves*.<sup>265</sup>

Why is it, I ask, that Woolf’s most formally radical presentation of consciousness relies on an empirical conceit of determinate “saying” that is simultaneously evoked and called into question (or “fictionalized”)? My claim is that Woolf’s novel evokes a “silence” made salient by the deliberate failure of verisimilitude and of the central conceit of “speech,” which suggests (like the central mind-reading episode in Poe’s “Rue Morgue”) the possibility of dialogicity without actual dialogue as central to the literary stream of consciousness. My study of the holographic drafts of *The Waves* also suggests that the experimental form on the whole can be interpreted as a “phantom conversation.” In the early drafts Woolf used this term to describe a singular, short episode, but this, I argue, became the template for the entire work as she revised it.

To read Woolf’s *The Waves* alongside Poe’s tales amplifies the critical potential of both in calling into question the impulse to control other minds and their accessibility. In both cases, we are playing at being good mind-readers. Woolf’s mode of narration on its surface appears to say, with Dupin, “yeah, you got it.” But reading *The Waves* with Poe brings out another facet of Woolf’s particular artistic strategy in launching this critique: the emotional toll of the pretense of total intelligibility. It is a strategy of assuming entirely the attitude of foreclosure, with a smile of tragic irony, and allowing the gaps to resound for themselves.<sup>266</sup> It is a way of making us sit with the achievement of transparency. The final chapter on Toni Morrison, as well as the theoretical codas below, build toward a conclusion that can answer the question: Why must the narration of consciousness embody rather than describe its object? What is involved in grasping the form of cognition? As we shall see in the next section, Woolf describes her project in the *Waves* as an effort to “embody the shapes my brain holds.” This will be related to the idea that there is a distinct mode of knowing required in order to grasp a form.

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<sup>265</sup> Denise Riley, “A Voice Without a Mouth: Inner Speech,” *Qui Parle* 14.2 (Spring/Summer 2004): 57-104; V.N. Vološinov [Mikhail Bakhtin], *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. Ladislav Matejka and I.R. Titunik (Harvard University Press: 1986); Maya Kronfeld, “Silent Addressivity in *To the Lighthouse*” (unpublished manuscript, 2013).

<sup>266</sup> See Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, 4.115. This is what he has to say about philosophy: “It will mean the unspeakable by clearly displaying the speakable.” Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. Frank Ramsey and C.K. Ogden; rev. and ed. Marc A. Joseph (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2014).

## CHAPTER 4: “THE SHAPES MY BRAIN HOLDS”: KANTIAN SPONTANEITY AND WOOLF’S *THE WAVES*

We have seen that Woolf’s productive ambivalence about the sensory “atom” makes her a constructivist impressionist, which is why this moment in modernism actually clarifies, in practice, some of the crucial questions at issue in the transition from Hume to Kant. But it is her later, and most formally experimental work, *The Waves*, where she moves beyond what I call the “empiricist conceit” of naturalistic narration; and it is here that I take Woolf’s work to be most Kantian (or at least working in the impasse between Hume and Kant). This chapter pursues the thesis that *The Waves* is illuminating for the philosophy of mind because it does not present mental contents but rather is pitched at the level of form – that is, at the internal abstractions underlying the appearance of objects. This, I argue, with Kant, requires a type of representation different from description, since what is being rendered has not yet taken the form an object. Here I am putting in dialogue a Kantian point about the awareness of form (and indeed, about form *as* awareness) with a point of stylistic technique central to modernism.

The general form of *The Waves* is a series of short dramatic utterances initially spoken by a group of six children, that turn into longer soliloquies as they grow older:

“I see a ring,” said Bernard, “hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light.”

“I see a slab of pale yellow,” said Susan, “spreading away until it meets a purple stripe.”

“I hear a sound,” said Rhoda, “cheep, chirp; cheep, chirp; going up and down.”

“I see a globe,” said Neville, “hanging down in a drop against the enormous flanks of some hill.”<sup>267</sup>

In these early pages, are the children having a dialogue, or do we have here serial monologues? For the most part, neither. Are they engaged in “parallel play” (a psychological notion developed around the same time, as I suggested in Chapter 3), or are these perception-utterances, as I call them, in some intermediary mode between soliloquy and dialogue, “trading fours” as jazz musicians do?<sup>268</sup> I have already indicated that the word “said” is used here in a very unnaturalistic sense – not necessarily performing its usual role of introducing dialogue, but still invoking that usual function. Something very strange, then, is going on in Woolf’s passage – which at the same time is something very real. To get at what is real here, note that Woolf does not shape her distinct characters according to distinct mental idiolects (as is the norm in so-called “stream of consciousness” fiction). Rather, the different consciousnesses take different stands on the conditions of possibility underlying the appearance of objects, including themselves. Here I

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<sup>267</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (New York: Harcourt, 1959), 9 (hereafter cited in text as “*W.*”)

<sup>268</sup> “Trading fours” refers to a structural activity of improvisation or “spontaneous composition” where members of a musical ensemble trade four-bar-phrases that “triangulate,” so to speak, around the common form. As we shall see in my final chapter on Toni Morrison, jazz can be used to sharpen and correct existing models of consciousness: The form, held in common and “intersubjectively” triangulated, indexes the *objective* dimension of mental spontaneity.



suggest, with Kant, that the workings of consciousness require something other than naturalistic rendering since what is being rendered has not yet taken the form of an object.

Let's revisit what this means through the consciousness that Woolf calls "Rhoda" – for whom discontinuity is a permanent condition. Although we don't yet see it in this early scene, Rhoda will not always be able to join the children's "chorus" of perception. That is, she cannot allow herself to presuppose the object constancy upon which they depend for their perception-utterances. As they all grow up, Rhoda assumes what I take to be a radically Humean position on herself and the world. She cannot make herself conform to the requirements of narrative sequence. Here's a quotation from her later on: "Nothing persists. One moment does not lead to another. The door opens and the tiger leaps. You did not see me come" (*W*, 130). Rhoda's observation about what her friends do not see does justice in the most technical philosophical sense, to the true, and tragic, nature of perception in Humean terms. For Hume, the basic facts of life expressed in phrases such as "fire warms" and "water refreshes" are fictions that pave over the gaps in our experience. Through Rhoda, Woolf imagines a painful view of reality unfictionalized, on Humean terms. And in doing so, Woolf uses the imagination of a fiction writer in ways that Hume could not account for. Rhoda goes on: "I am afraid of the shock of sensation that leaps upon me, because I cannot deal with it as you do—I cannot make one moment merge in the next. To me they are all violent, all separate; and If I fall under the shock of the leap of the moment you will be on me, tearing me to pieces" (*W*, 130). Rhoda's inability to participate in the "fictions" of object-constancy provokes a serious re-evaluation of experience itself. How can one "live in the moment," when one moment does not lead to another? The sensory impression as an epistemological unit is literally unlivable for Rhoda, foreshadowing her suicide, and Woolf's – the "perpetual flux and movement" of impressions shocks her with its unintegrated concatenations. Hence, not a "stream" of consciousness, at all.

The form of *The Waves* itself consists in a concatenated series of soliloquies whose various moments do not form a coherent sequence. What looks like a statement of modernist poetics implicit in the novel's form, however, also lays bare the very interventions of the imagination in the service of continuity which were the basis of Kantian critical epistemology (and in particular, its debt to Hume's skepticism about the continuity of experience).

The skeptical impasse to which empiricism leads, for Hume, was never stated more poignantly than by Rhoda: "all violent, all separate" (*W*, 130). And this is where, in my argument, Kant picks up precisely on the Humean problem of disaggregation that Rhoda makes so painfully clear. Here is Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason*: "if each representation were completely foreign to every other, standing apart in isolation, no such thing as knowledge would ever arise."<sup>269</sup> Here Kant acknowledges the deep epistemological problem suggested by Rhoda's Humean alienation, but Kant does not accept radical disaggregation as the final resting place in the philosophical elaboration of mental life. Rather, he makes a bold case for the unity that must be presupposed in any act of mental representation. I take as a key point of reference, for Woolf's modernist formalism, Kant's remark in the *Paralogisms*: "Now it is, indeed, very evident that I cannot know as an object that which I must presuppose in order to know any object" (*CPR*, A402).<sup>270</sup> I cannot enter here into the question of whether Kant's statement (which

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<sup>269</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1929), A97 (hereafter cited in text as *CPR*).

<sup>270</sup> This is from a passage in the *Paralogisms* where Kant's immediate topic is the self. He warns against mistaking the unity of thought for the unity of the thinker. However, I am taking Kant's statement to have a significance beyond the specific conclusion about the self that he is trying to support. Robert Pippin

he considers “evident,” and therefore analytically valid) is really as categorically true as he presents it to be, and on what grounds. But I want to foreground the distinctness that Kant affords to form. He suggests that form must be grasped differently from the objects whose apprehension form makes possible. This logic of presupposition entails that unity is “embedded” in form rather than appearing as stated content. And Woolf’s modernist aesthetics activates the capacity to conceive of undoing those very conditional structures which have been deemed necessary for experience. That undoing is a part of the imagination as well, an exercise of creativity. Indeed, to uncover the “necessary conditions of experience” may be to embrace a conditionality that is to some extent irresolvable. Rather, it is the aim of his “transcendental” method to elaborate conditions that would hold true, were knowledge possible.<sup>271</sup>

Indeed, Kant seems to take it as an analytic truth that the conditions of possibility for knowledge are known differently from the objects whose appearance they condition. Yet the preconditions for my knowledge of objects cannot just act on me; I must be acquainted with them in some way in order for the objects to show up at all. Thus the relationship between a knower and a presupposition is different from the relationship between a knower and an object. Knowledge of presupposition is different from the knowledge of the object. But why is this so? What warrants the distinctness of “presupposition” for Kant, that it needs to be treated differently, from an epistemological perspective, from the objects that it makes possible for us to experience? Woolf’s writing, in these opening scenes of childhood perception, but also throughout *The Waves*, does seem to give us knowledge of something which in a certain sense must usually be presupposed. The question is how Woolf’s quest for a radically new narrative form makes good on this promise of animating conditions of possibility without reifying them into the form of objects.

What does it mean, then, to grasp a form, rather than grasping an object? Must a form become an object in order to be thinkable? Or is there another way to apprehend it? These are questions shared by Kant’s First Critique and Woolf’s “high phase.” For both Kant the philosopher and Woolf the artist, the study of consciousness necessarily moves us beyond naturalistic descriptions.<sup>272</sup> This is part of my larger argument, that formal structures of the mind are embedded in literary form. The question of what it means to grasp the form of appearance (as opposed to grasping the objects that such forms enable, for example) is difficult and, I think, suggests that aesthetic form as such in Woolf’s *The Waves* expresses truths not yet “cognizable” in the form of a judgment.

Now let’s return to the first dramatic passage in *The Waves*:

“I see a ring,” said Bernard, “hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light.”

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also reads this same remark at A402 as part of a larger trend in Kant’s thinking whereby he “often explicitly and deliberately stresses the formal and epistemological nature of his enterprise.” Robert Pippin, *Kant’s Theory of Form: An Essay on the Critique of Pure Reason* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 14.

<sup>271</sup> In a different project I explore further the “conditionality” of the Kantian project in the First Critique and its possible implications for understanding fiction. I thank Patricia Kitcher and Sasha Mudd for their input (“Autonomy in Thought and Action: Understanding the Intersection of Ethics and Epistemology in Kant,” Fordham University School of Law Kant Conference, June 11, 2018).

<sup>272</sup> Barry Stroud, “Naturalism and Skepticism in the Philosophy of Hume” in *The Oxford Handbook of Hume*, ed. Paul Russell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

“I see a slab of pale yellow,” said Susan, “spreading away until it meets a purple stripe.”

“I hear a sound,” said Rhoda, “cheep, chirp; cheep, chirp; going up and down.”

“I see a globe,” said Neville, “hanging down in a drop against the enormous flanks of some hill.”

In this choral evocation of sensory perception, the natural world is defamiliarized through the consciousness of the children who redescribe and reconstrue it effortlessly in the very act of receiving what is empirically “given.” Contrary to the theory of ideas inherited by Hume, there may be no “simple impression” here, although this passage is often read that way. The children evince a “consciousness of creative cognitive activities,” to quote Patricia Kitcher.<sup>273</sup> They are an example of perceivers who “consciously combine.” And they’re like us.<sup>274</sup> The children are taking a stand on what they perceive; they are at some level conscious of themselves as combiners (“I see x”). I think this corresponds with Kant’s insight: an awareness of form makes possible an awareness of objects.<sup>275</sup> Woolf has come up with a new way of narrating the mind, beyond the empirical level of what appears in it; and in doing so, I argue, she has foregrounded what Kant called the mind’s “spontaneity.”<sup>276</sup>

By “Spontaneity” I mean what Robert Pippin refers to as that “enigmatic synonym for thinking” in Kant’s system. To be sure, the romantic – and then the initial modernist – revolutions in literary aesthetics often centered around a loose idea of spontaneity, for example, in Wordsworth’s famous formulation for “all good poetry” as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.”<sup>277</sup> But in focusing on the spontaneity of the understanding in Kant, and its link to apperception, I am bringing out quite a different notion from what Wordsworth had in mind as a critic (though I do think it’s compatible with his practice as a poet).<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>273</sup> Patricia Kitcher, “Kant on Self-Consciousness,” *The Philosophical Review* 108, no. 3 (Jul., 1999): 345-386. See also Kitcher, “Guyer on the Value of Freedom” in *Kant on Freedom and Spontaneity*, ed. Kate Moran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 95.

<sup>274</sup> Kitcher, “A Kantian Critique of Transparency,” in *Kant and the Philosophy of Mind: Perception, Reason and the Self*, ed. Anil Gomes and Andrew Stephenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 170.

<sup>275</sup> Hannah Ginsborg has powerfully elaborated the claim that even in mere “perceptual experience” prior to judgment, the operating of the understanding is still evident in the perceiver’s sense of the “appropriateness of their synthesis.” Thus, Ginsborg’s account secures a role for the understanding (and for spontaneity) to play in the mere presentation of experience, and a “non-trivial” reading of Kant’s Transcendental Deduction is vindicated. Hannah Ginsborg, “Kant and the Problem of Experience” *Philosophical Topics* 34, nos. 1 & 2 (Spring and Fall 2006): 59-106.

<sup>276</sup> Beyond its engagement with particular empirical contents, Woolf’s opening passage communicates a picture of perception as a creative act, and not just as passive sensibility. The way Woolf’s text itself participates in a meta-reflection on how perceivers shape representations in the process of “receiving” sensory impressions is exactly what I am calling, with Kant, the spontaneous dimension of perception. In what follows, I will have something to say about the way in which Woolf transforms sense perception into a speech act, which seems to do something more than merely report on these acts of mind and thereby transforms also the dilemma which left Hume with no way out at the end of the day but to forget philosophy in order to re-enter into the absorptions of everyday life.

<sup>277</sup> “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802), in *Lyrical Ballads: 1798 and 1802*, ed. Fiona Stafford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 98.

<sup>278</sup> Most clearly evident in “Tintern Abbey” and the *Prelude*.

The success conditions of the project of Stream of Consciousness fiction are often described in terms of the fidelity of the fictional representation to the textures of individual minds and their idiosyncratic associations; in effect, as a form of psychological realism. Of course, things are always more complicated than that, even when it comes to those literary models that became most canonical and prototypical in discussions of stream of consciousness techniques. The trajectory of Joyce's work, too, like Woolf's, speaks to an increasing dissatisfaction with the empirical model of inner *reportage*. What I'm seeking to do is to link this writerly search for new techniques with a philosophical imperative and awareness of "form" that I argue, with Kant, must issue from the empiricist impasse in order to move beyond it.

A brief note on why the literary criterion of verisimilitude is linked with philosophical empiricism may be helpful here. Verisimilitude, of which naturalism is the most extreme articulation, is the idea that literary representation of realia is possible in the form of a record of what actually happens. Verisimilitude denotes a lifelikeness that does not call attention to its own fictionality, that "veils" or "motivates" the device, in Russian Formalist terms. It does not call attention to the productive character of the technique itself. In stream of consciousness fiction, verisimilitude becomes internalized, with the idea that what is represented is psychologically veridical: *this* is how associations work, *this* is how thoughts in the mind are triggered and "occasioned" by external stimuli. In this way, the "inward turn" in romantic and modernist literature needs to be understood as cognate to philosophical "empiricism applied inwardly as well as outwardly" – with all the problems that attend this transposition. This problematic corresponds exactly, I might add, to the naturalistic dimension of Hume's project in endeavoring to develop a science of human nature. My claim is that when we turn naturalism inward, then we see most clearly the problems attending the empiricist paradigm in the first place. The problems of empiricism surface at precisely those moments when the naturalism applied to the outer world is transposed inward. It is the empiricist method that falls into question – both in philosophy, and I argue, with the literary corpus that offers the most sustained investigation of "inner realities" to date.

Woolf's new narrative strategy in *The Waves* repudiates any ideal of naturalistic verisimilitude to outer or inner realities right away, and in her opening pages.<sup>279</sup> Indeed, as many critics have noted, what child talks – let alone thinks – that way?<sup>280</sup> At the same time, the geometric abstraction of, for example Susan's "slab" and "stripe" suggests a point of

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<sup>279</sup> See Martin Jay's discussion of Hume in his *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2005), 59-60.

<sup>280</sup> "Even the most precocious children would never talk like this." J.W. Graham, *Point of View in the Waves: Some Services of the Style*. University of Toronto Quarterly, 39:3, April 1970, 194. See also David Lodge, who praises the stream of consciousness technique in "Mrs. Dalloway" but then criticizes *The Waves* for failing to meet the very criterion of verisimilitude that I argue Woolf is calling into question:

Transpose these sentences [from *Mrs. Dalloway*] into the first person, and they would sound far too literary and considered to pass for a transcription of someone's random thoughts. They would sound indeed like *writing*, in a rather precious style of autobiographical reminiscence...the interior monologues of Virginia Woolf's later novel, *The Waves*, suffer from such artificiality, to my mind. James Joyce was a more resourceful exponent of that way of rendering the stream of consciousness.

David Lodge, "The Stream of Consciousness," in his *The Art of Fiction: Illustrated from Classic and Modern Texts* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 45.

convergence between the naiveté of childhood and the deep intelligence embedded within subjectivity at the *formal* level of the conditions of perception. This is the dignity that the Kantian perspective restores to consciousness in its in-principle *possibilities* (or underlying enabling conditions), as opposed to focusing on what is empirically instantiated at any given moment. So this is why I'm arguing that Woolf – with Kant – goes against verisimilitude, against naturalistic description in her “presentation” of consciousness. The same criticism directed at the depiction of the children was directed at Kant – that to ascribe “an awareness of our own synthesizing activity” to every act of perception is to hyper-intellectualize. But then we can respond, on behalf of Kant, and on behalf of the children, that it's an in-principle awareness, not always realized empirically.

Before beginning our Humean method of gathering of sense-data, or deploying our Kantian schemas on the text, the philosophically responsible thing to say here is that reading this text philosophically does not work out very well.<sup>281</sup> The passage both invites, and frustrates an overly rigid philosophical reading – for example one that would attribute a trajectory of linear cognitive development to the children's perception, or, differently, one that would class the perceptions cleanly according to one philosophical view of mind as opposed to another.

I find it necessary to argue that Woolf's passage calls attention to cognitive potentialities that exceed empirical instantiation because critics have typically understood Woolf's experimental passage as vindicating empiricist paradigms of sensory immediacy, a kind of neutral scientific data-gathering. Ann Banfield writes that, for Woolf, “the novelist must first ‘record the atoms as they fall upon the mind’...as the painter begins with the analysis of sense-data.”<sup>282</sup> Describing the first dramatic passage in *The Waves*, Bernard Blackstone writes: “These are the first impressions, the fruit of the immediate contact of senses with phenomena.”<sup>283</sup> But

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<sup>281</sup> I am indebted to Daniel Warren, with whom I studied Kant's *CPR* at UC Berkeley over many years, for helping shape my interpretive responses to Woolf's opening pages. I also thank Warren for numerous personal discussions over many years, beginning in 2006, on the many facets of the Kantian claim that our awareness of form makes possible our awareness of objects. Specific facets of my analysis of Woolf were sharpened in dialogue with Warren on April 24, 2019.

<sup>282</sup> Ann Banfield, *The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell, and the Epistemology of Modernism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 294.

<sup>283</sup> Bernard Blackstone, *Virginia Woolf: A Commentary* (London: Harcourt, 1949), 168. Emilie Bojesen also astutely identifies this clash, formulating it in terms of a development in the passage from “entirely passive experiences” on the part of the children to the possibility of their “act[ing] on what they see or hear.” In her view, the passages move from “bluntly empirical...perceptions” to “analogies...abstracted consciousness.”

The first section of the novel begins with descriptions of almost entirely passive experiences. There is very little content to the thoughts of the children that could not be described as bluntly empirical. They see (‘a ring...a slab of pale yellow...a globe’) and hear (‘a sound...something stamping’) but they do not act on what they see or hear (Woolf, 1931, p. 4). *However, their perceptions quickly turn to analogies, allowing their empirical experiences to become a part of an abstracted consciousness:* ‘The leaves are gathered round the window like pointed ears’, said Susan (Woolf, 1931, p. 4). An overlap between internal and external experience is already apparent. Memory allows the children to make these analogies and, as external experiences multiply in number, so do the resources of memory.

then he goes on to note, quite accurately, “the word ‘said’ does not of course refer to spoken words; these are inarticulate sense-perceptions.”<sup>284</sup> Blackstone is exactly right, but he has also presented us with a quandary, or helped us to appreciate a quandary in the center of Woolf’s text: the speech verb “said” calls into question the inarticulateness of the primary impression, and the primary impression in turn problematizes the viability of the verb “said.” The problem is not that “said” violates the ineffability of the sensory impression; it is rather that you cannot fully derive what is “said” from the raw material of sensory impressions. To paraphrase Chomsky’s critique of empiricism – when it comes to accounts of language-learning, the “contributions of the child” simply cannot be omitted from consideration.<sup>285</sup>

The wonderful and almost comical clash in Woolf’s text, then, between the speech-verb “said” and the “inarticulate” sense-perceptions that follow that verb presents a formal incommensurability that captures a central quandary of philosophical empiricism: Why should Woolf’s text make us feel the clash between what is inarticulate and what is “said,” right at the moment when it delivers “the fruit of the immediate contact of senses with phenomena?” The speech verb “said” presents us with a discursive modality which, in its clash with the conceit of sensory immediacy, suggests that these very epistemological categories might be rethought in

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Emile Bojesen, “The Education of Consciousness: Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*,” *Foro de Educación* 16 (2018): 102-103, my italics.

Without naming Kant, both critics nevertheless implicitly abide by a strict reading of the epistemological dualism sometimes associated with Kant’s *CPR*— between sensible intuition and concept, with a linear progression from the concrete to the abstract; from the particular to the general. According to this implicitly developmental picture, “analogies...abstracted consciousness” arrive late on the cognitive scene, so to speak. I do think that these dichotomies, invoked by the criticism, pick up on something very real that is invoked in Woolf’s text – but I argue that Woolf’s text engages these assumptions only in order to call them into question: We may want to read the text developmentally, but we can’t. It simply does not corroborate the cognitive hierarchies that it brings to the surface. In this way, Woolf’s intense study of consciousness clarifies the limits of faculty dualism, pointing towards ways that Kant might be read in the future without capitulating to those hierarchies. See James Conant, “Why Kant is Not a Kantian,” *Philosophical Topics* 44(1): 75-125. As it concerns the duality between intuitions and concepts, Conant argues that Kant’s work *opposes* the assumption that “the capacities here in question—qua cognitive capacities—are self-standingly intelligible.” Conant’s Kant has an excellent friend in Woolf.

Indeed, one of the ironies of Woolf’s form here is that the “analogies” suggesting an “abstracted consciousness” are precisely those marshalled to create the impression or semblance of what Blackstone calls “the fruits of sensory immediacy.” That is, the simile discussed by Bojesen (“the leaves are gathered...like pointed ears”) returns us – by analogy – to an experientially rich state of affairs in which the concept has not been rigidly fully deployed, has not yet excluded what the leaves *aren’t*. But the irony is that we get to this experientially rich state of affairs via abstraction, via analogy -- via all that is excluded by the conceit of immediacy.

Perhaps there is an alternative reading of cognitive spontaneity that does not just position it as the culmination of a developmental trajectory, presupposing an unmediated “given” or sensory, passive state of affairs which spontaneity then overcomes. Rather, what looks in the beginning like mere “sense-data reports” is already itself a case of what Kant “figural synthesis.” The “pointed ears” as figurative language elaborates this possibility and frustrates expectations of a cognitive hierarchy or developmental trajectory, in just the way that it engages those expectations.

<sup>284</sup> Blackstone, *Virginia Woolf*, 168.

<sup>285</sup> Noam Chomsky, review of B.F. Skinner, “Verbal Behavior,” *Language* 35, no. 1 (1959): 26-58.

ways that are less schematic. In this way, the text displays Woolf's keen awareness of the limits of knowledge categories. Indeed, in an ironic reversal, there is almost a sense in which "saying," as a kind of shorthand, starts to stand for something more immediate, less discursive – a movement of consciousness not at all tied with verbal articulation. On the other hand, the sensory apparatus itself starts to take on the burden of conceptualization. It is not that Woolf's passages from *The Waves* abide by the dichotomy between intuitions and concepts in Kantian epistemology; rather, an acquaintance with this dichotomy brings into focus the interventions that Woolf is making by foregrounding perception as primary action in her text. The passage is interspersed with references that are both immediate and highly mediated. This produces the effect of a mixed-bag, cognitively-speaking, which is an important dimension of Woolf's resisting totalizing or overly-schematic views of consciousness. But it also produces something else – an irony, which, on some philosophical accounts, must always accompany the notion of a "first impression."

What looks like a sense-data report, appears on second glance as what Kant called "little verses" – suggesting a potential for nascent poetry in everyday cognition. Consider the first line of dialogue: "'I see a ring,'" said Louis, "'It quivers and hangs in a loop of light.'" It is plausible, on the face of it, to interpret this as a neutral report that adds nothing to what Louis immediately "sees." As with the other perception-utterances, "ring" could be read as a sense-datum, and therefore "I see a ring" as a classic empiricist report. If the ring is interpreted as an *image*, and not an object, then Louis' relationship to it is indeed one of immediate – and not mediate – apprehension. According to that reading, the text is not interested in involving us in a set of inferences about the physical world that could explain *why* Louis is getting a visual impression of a ring quivering in the light, and to what, if anything that impression refers. Rather, we are content to remain on the plane of the mental image itself, so to speak. To focus on the sense-data themselves, bracketing the existence (or non-existence) of an underlying object, is characteristic of the classic report on sense data. Philosopher Winston H.F. Barnes, writing in the 1940s against the sense-data theory proposed by Russell and others, gives the following example of what had become a recognizable philosophical idiom for that approach: "I can see a circular pinkish patch."<sup>286</sup> This is an idiom that Woolf would have been familiar with in the Bloomsbury circle. Indeed, the second line of dialogue in *The Waves* seems to echo that paradigmatic example: "'I see a slab of pale yellow,' said Susan, 'spreading away until it meets a purple stripe'" (*W*, 9). But here Susan's consciousness projects an activity, a motion, which exceeds what the empiricist would be able to ascribe to the scene. Her utterance is stretching the limits of what we might call "mere report." Woolf's passage both invokes and gradually calls into question the empiricist suppositions of a neutral record. She infuses the classic sense data report with the very creativity that it denies, incorporating the empiricist discourse into a modernist poetics of abstraction and figuration.

Woolf's opening series of perception-utterances shows that she shares the fascination of the impressionist and post-impressionist artists who make palpable the discrete, geometric strokes out of which the eye constructs the appearance of a line, or constant object.<sup>287</sup> The italicized section that opens *The Waves* just before giving way to the six children's voices

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<sup>286</sup> Winston H.F. Barnes, "The Myth of Sense-Data" [1944-45] in Robert J. Swartz, *Perceiving, Sensing, and Knowing* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, Press, 1965), 148.

<sup>287</sup> The question of whether these various phases of impressionism, starting with Monet, are "constructivist" can be posed like this: to what extent is the activity of synthesis out of which the water lily is constructed from its constituent "simple impressions" thematized within the artwork itself?

presents the same kind of geometric abstraction as the “slab” and “stripe,” but within the context of an utterly impersonal view of the sunrise that cannot serve as an exposition for introducing “characters.”

*Gradually as the sky whitened a dark line lay on the horizon dividing the sea from the sky and the grey cloth became barred with thick strokes moving, one after another, beneath the surface, following each other, pursuing each other, perpetually.  
As they neared the shore each bar rose, heaped itself, broke and swept a thin veil of white water across the sand. (W, 7)*

In this description, the “dark line” and “thick strokes” join the ontology of the sea and sky which they would seem to indicate or abstract from. Just as the dark line itself “lay on the horizon,” the sea already appears as painted, so that the target of description is not just the sea but the artistic modes of seeing it: basic perception as already imaginative creation. The sea and sky appear indistinguishable, as in Genesis, an evocation of the chaos that precedes creation.<sup>288</sup> Here in place of the God of the biblical creation story dividing the sea from sky, the “dark line” itself does the dividing, giving agency to the underlying forms of perception themselves. The developmentally primary line and circle, and all the other geometric forms and shapes that underlie perception, are rediscoverable through the appearances of nature.

Following the publication of *The Waves*, Woolf wrote in her diary:

Oh yes, between 50 & 60 I think I shall write out some very singular books, if I live. I mean, I think I am about to embody at last the exact shapes my brain holds. What a long toil to reach this beginning - if *The Waves* is my first work in my own style.<sup>289</sup>

“I think I am about to embody at last the exact shapes my brain holds” is indeed a remarkable sentence: First, there is the suggestion of overcoming an oxymoronic relation between embodiment and the mind, through the material of language. The brain “holds” shapes but does not yet “embody” them. It is as if the literary work “embodies” an abstraction that is held within the body (but which is not yet embodied by the body!) The “I” thus stands for the literary work. Second, there is Woolf’s construal of mental life not in terms of thought but in terms of geometric abstraction, the “shapes my brain holds.” Finally, putting the two together, the goal of writing is not to “represent” those shapes held by the brain, but rather to embody them.<sup>290</sup>

Woolf’s appeal to “holding a shape” suggests, with Kant, that there is a distinct mode of knowing involved in grasping a form. I think this is true for our apprehension of literary form just as it is true for the apprehension of our own form, the synthesizing activity in our own minds. And yet the structure of *The Waves* itself manages to “hold” together both the Kantian

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<sup>288</sup> “And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters/ And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so” (Genesis 1:6-7, KJV).

<sup>289</sup> *Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. 4, 53.

<sup>290</sup> The distinction between embodiment and detachment is central to Ross Posnock’s understanding of the modernist rebellion in literature. See his *Renunciation: Acts of Abandonment by Writers, Philosophers and Artists* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).



and the Humean picture together, without glossing over the differences between them. Let's test out, then, whether we can interpret Woolf's experimental form – her perception-utterances, as I like to think of them – not as represented thought but rather as techniques for embodying shapes held by the brain.<sup>291</sup> Let's return to Rhoda for another example: “‘Look at the table-cloth, flying white along the table,’ said Rhoda. ‘Now there are rounds of white china, and silver streaks beside each plate’” (*W*, 11). The conditions of appearance furnished by Rhoda as a child are mixed, cognitively speaking: we are presented with everyday objects at different phases of their consolidation by the viewer. The separate percepts get cognized as a unified “table-cloth,” only to get caught in motion again “flying white.” Just as an adverbial dimension of the object is revealed, so too is the adverbial character of thought itself: spontaneity is a way of *doing* things.<sup>292</sup>

The activation of color terms through the use of adverbs is just one of a myriad of techniques for calling attention to the conditions of the object's appearance – for calling attention, in other words, to form. Woolf is involved in a project of laying bare the forms of an object's apprehension and thereby making palpable that which has become perceptually automatized. For Victor Shklovsky, in his *Theory of Prose*, published in 1925, just five years before *The Waves*, the function of art is to deautomatize perception. For modernist artists like Woolf, calling attention to the formal conditions that make perception possible involves what Shklovsky called “defamiliarization.” Defamiliarization fosters a critical awareness that requires a certain degree of distance from what is perceptually “given.”<sup>293</sup> The importance of aesthetic defamiliarizing techniques for the modernist project is crucially linked, in my view, to Kantian epistemology in ways that are yet to be explored. If the grammar of adverbs is a microcosmic index to (or a heuristic way into) the formalism underlying literary modernisms, it may not be a

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<sup>291</sup> The citational style of *The Waves*, rather than quoting characters' dialogue, or even transcribing their thoughts, can be interpreted as a technique for embodying various shapes held by the brain. Woolf's remarks shed light on the status of “said,” the phantom speech act I wrestled with above. For the children's speech acts or “perception-utterances,” while assuming the form of assertions (“I see a ring”) do not merely report on perceptual states that could be specified independently of their mode of presentation in the speech act. Rather, the speech acts also seem to *embody* the experiences that they represent.

<sup>292</sup> Robert Pippin, “Kant on the Spontaneity of Mind,” in *Idealism as Modernism: Hegelian Variations* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989), 43.

<sup>293</sup> For Shklovsky, art is important for cognition, and in fact is defined in terms of its renewing effect on cognition, because art (like Virginia Woolf's) makes newly perceptible what was previously registered automatically. The extent to which Woolf's passage engages in defamiliarization is precisely the extent to which the work of conceptualization is thematized or made palpable in her text. In claiming that art de-automatizes perception, Shklovsky provides a theory of modernist art which is itself modernist in its assumptions. For a discussion of the concept of defamiliarization (*ostranenie*, ‘making it strange’) in Shklovsky and the other Russian formalists, see Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism* (Paris: Mouton, 1969), 176-178. See also Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Device” in his *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Elmwood, IL: Dalkey Archive, 1991), 1-14. In claiming that art de-automatizes perception, Shklovsky provides a theory of modernist art which is itself modernist in its assumptions. In addition, there are strong affinities between Shklovsky and Hume's accounts of habitual perception, by which experience becomes “abbreviated.” However, Shklovsky redresses Hume's refusal to engage fully the social dimensions of “habit” and the deadening of experience. Hume focuses on the particular habits of mind that we have; for Shklovsky it follows from habituated activity as such that it erodes experience by converting it into a kind of algebraic shorthand. I take these matters up elsewhere.

bad way of indexing certain insights of the *First Critique* either. Robert Pippin invokes the grammar of adverbs to drive home the point that spontaneity as reflective awareness, as underpinning or presupposition of object-constitution, must be grasped on a different plane, so to speak, from the field in which objects appear. He puts it this way: “No later judgment about what is the case could be said to ‘add’ apperception to my experience. One way of stressing this would be to suggest... that this apperceptive feature of experience is ‘adverbial’, that when I perceive, think, imagine, and so forth, I *apperceptively* perceive, think, imagine.”<sup>294</sup> The appeal to the adverbial mode is informed by a key Kantian insight, as Pippin expresses it: “The synthetic unity of...awareness...cannot itself be a ‘content’ that is apprehended” (45).

The “table-cloth flying white” recalls the grammatical revisionism in William Blake’s “Tyger tyger burning bright,” but also has strong correlates in French *symbolisme*. According to Françoise Meltzer, the adverbial use of adjectives was a marker of French *symbolisme* and by extension of later modernisms.<sup>295</sup> For the *symbolistes*, the tradition of using adjectives adverbially was especially marked when it came to color terms. Meltzer reads this tradition as their reaction against Lockean empiricism and its various cultural permutations. In the context of my discussion, the adverb’s intervention is slightly different: To be sure, treating color adverbially opens up the static to the dynamic; but on a formal level, it correlates predication itself with an active doing on the part of the subject.

Classically, spontaneity is defined as “an action of the mind or will that is not determined by a prior external stimulus.”<sup>296</sup> I’ll call this the “agency” side of spontaneity because it means that we cognizers aren’t wholly determined by the sensory materials that we cognize (although we are still answerable to those sensory materials). But there is another aspect of spontaneity that I’ll call the “meta-reflective” aspect. For this sense of participation in her own cognition which the cognizer enjoys is linked with her awareness of what she’s doing; that is, she doesn’t just “organize” sensory data, but is also capable at least in principle of becoming aware that she is organizing it. Kantian spontaneity treats perceivers as active, conscious participants in their own cognitive processes.<sup>297</sup>

The exercise of spontaneity does not consist in nor is essentially tied to the freedom to choose one form of synthesis over another, or to apply one concept rather than another. It is therefore not an exercise of “free will” as we often construe it – not even at the level of thought. This construal of spontaneity may be contrary to tendencies common, in the aftermath of the voluntarist tradition that according to Daniel Warren is frequently read back onto Kant.<sup>298</sup> Indeed, even in those cases where there is only one right way to do –or see – something, spontaneity is still exercised, on the Kantian account. It is exercised insofar as our deployment of

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<sup>294</sup> Pippin, “Spontaneity,” 43.

<sup>295</sup> Françoise Meltzer, “Color as Cognition in Symboliste Verse” *Critical Inquiry* 5, no.2 (Winter 1978): 253-273.

<sup>296</sup> Kate Moran, introduction to *Kant on Freedom and Spontaneity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), i.

<sup>297</sup> Note the direct contrast with Hume’s image of perception as “extortion.” Hume claimed only to be able to “receive” Woolfian shapes; he could not produce them. Or, perhaps more precisely, he claimed that he could not produce them except in the form of platitudes and clichés. While Hume complained of being held hostage by the “present view of the object,” the consciousnesses that Woolf’s text embodies do not lose their agency, but rather play an active role in the construal of the sensory scene.

<sup>298</sup> Personal conversation, August 8, 2016.

concepts involves a reflective awareness that plays an active role in the cognitive process at work.

Exactly why these two facets of Kantian spontaneity, what I like to think of as the “agency” aspect and the “meta-reflective” (or in Kantian terms, “apperceptive” aspect) are bound up with one another is controversial and difficult to say. But what we can say is that there is something like a “premonition” of freedom in Kant’s idea that “combination is not given to us” – perception is something that we consciously do *to* what we’re given – even when there’s only one right way to do it. Spontaneity holds freedom and structure together and makes possible a form of objective knowledge which partakes of both. These two elements are crucial for understanding the literary as telling us about the world and not merely about our own flights of fancy.<sup>299</sup>

Woolf goes beyond identifying thinking with spontaneity, or what Patricia Kitcher calls “conscious combining,” and beyond demonstrating the insufficiency of sensibility for knowledge— though I do think Woolf does that at moments as well.<sup>300</sup> She uses experimental literary form to foreground a nascent awareness of spontaneous synthesizing itself, an awareness enacted on the page as a co-creation of the reader and the fictional consciousness encountered by her. If Woolf’s text discloses cognitive spontaneity in action, then it also allows us, at a more general level, to glimpse the narrative operation of a key philosophical notion. And because the notion in question – spontaneity – itself elaborates what it means to “make something” of what is given, Woolf’s text also provides us with an opportunity to account for the relationship between mental structure and literary form that is different from “narrative,” traditionally construed. That is *The Waves* gives form to an active, self-conscious synthesizing; different from the narrative tendencies to weave coherence – for example, the “fictions” that Hume warned against.<sup>301</sup>

“*Combination cannot be given*” – this is Thomas Land’s pithy formula for what he regards as the key thesis underlying Kant’s notion of spontaneity.<sup>302</sup> Combination, understood as a conscious activity, cannot be derived from the sensory materials upon which it operates, no matter how exhaustively those materials are enumerated. As a rejoinder to the “given,” spontaneity is an enduring objection to empiricist models of perception, according to which sense-data could be “reported” without any intervention on the part of the perceiving subject. Kitcher, whose elaboration of a Kantian notion of “conscious combining” I have already drawn on, is a persistent proponent of the element of reflexivity in thought. She also does not shy away from illuminating the ways in which this Kantian approach runs counter to many current trends

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<sup>299</sup>I am constraining my discussion of spontaneity throughout this study very tightly – to its elaboration in Kant’s First Critique, as a property of the *understanding*. Hence my treatment of spontaneity is purely cognitive, as distinguished from spontaneity in the Second and Third Critique. The question of whether and how the different forms of spontaneity in Kant’s system are related is very fraught, and I do not broach it here. See also note 373 below, where I engage Amanda Goldstein’s recent work.

<sup>300</sup> See Patricia Kitcher for a compelling defense of “conscious combining” and an explanation of how this Kantian notion runs counter to current philosophical trends. Kitcher, *Kant’s Thinker* (Oxford: OUP, 2011), 146. See also Kitcher’s “A Kantian Critique of Current Assumptions About Self-Knowledge” (draft), available online.

[https://philosophy.columbia.edu/files/philosophy/content/Kantian\\_Critique\\_AB.doc](https://philosophy.columbia.edu/files/philosophy/content/Kantian_Critique_AB.doc)

<sup>301</sup> I thank Judith Butler for this formulation.

<sup>302</sup> Thomas Land, “Kant’s Spontaneity Thesis,” *Philosophical Topics* 34, nos. 1 & 2 (Spring and Fall 2006): 189-220.

in the philosophy of mind.<sup>303</sup> Here is how she explains the Kantian insight: “In rational cognizing subjects combine materials from different states in another state thereby making a connection across the states that they recognize as such” (10); or “the phenomenon of rational cognition involves... combining thoughts in a resultant thought that is understood as having been produced by the combining” (13).<sup>304</sup> In her “Kantian Critique of Transparency,” she writes: “that is how the cognizer understands her mediate cognition as such—as a case of cognizing something through the cognition of other things.”<sup>305</sup> While Kitcher’s examples are limited to what she calls “rational cognition” – examples like counting or deducing a conclusion from premises – “conscious combining” is still a helpful gloss for the kind of “synthesis” that Kant finds at the bottom of perceptual judgments, generally.<sup>306</sup>

Susan and indeed the other kids, too, make conscious connections among different sensory data, through language that is both figural and abstract in the way it “combines” representations with one another. This “combining power,” a power conscious of its own nascent interpretations of reality (“I see a slab of pale yellow...spreading away until it meets a purple stripe”) is a good part of what Kant’s notion of cognitive spontaneity was meant to capture. Consider the following perception-utterance: “The leaves are gathered round the window like pointed ears, said Susan” (*W*, 9). The consciousness of “doing” is here expressed through the simile “like” – where the metaphorical mapping rises to the surface of the utterance, so to speak. The device of simile (“explicit comparison,” in some literary critical traditions) thus brings the “combining power” of cognitive spontaneity to the surface of Woolf’s play-poem.

The simile maps the botanical domain (leaves) onto the zoological domain (the pointed ears, implicitly of animals). The phrase “are gathered round” is syntactically ambiguous: Either the leaves are the agents, gathering themselves; or, if Susan employs a middle voice, then the leaves “are gathered,” but we do not know by whom – by some invisible hand or eye; perhaps the eye of the observer that beholds them and construes them in relation to the window. According to this reading, the child’s eye is already intrinsically meta-poetic. If the leaves are construed as the agents, intentionally gathering round the window in an attitude of attentiveness (as if pricking their ears, idiomatically), then they have become animated by their metaphorical resemblance to the ears. It is as if the attitude of listening is inscribed on the leaves by the affinities and resemblances that accumulate around their “pointed” shape. The “gathering” in question is thus proper both to the leaves, and to the consciousness that construes them in such a novel fashion.

The simile illustrates Susan’s capacity for conceptualization and the way that she structures her sensory impressions. Here the figurative language is not only marshaled to describe a primary appearance, it *is* the primary appearance; and therefore may not be so primary at all. Note that according to this interpretation, figurative language does not merely adorn, rhetorically amplify, or make concrete some reality which is distinct from the language

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<sup>303</sup>She adds: “Nor is the cognition distinctive of humans widely recognized as requiring conscious acts of combining or synthesizing.” Kitcher, “A Kantian Critique of Current Assumptions,” 9.

<sup>304</sup> “Kant rejected the Lockean hypothesis of inner sense as an adequate explanation for rational cognition because it involved only the passive receipt of information and not active combining” (13).

<sup>305</sup> Kitcher, “A Kantian Critique of Transparency,” 167.

<sup>306</sup> For a related criticism of Kitcher, see Hannah Ginsborg: “For we cannot understand Kant’s thinker without considering her also as a perceiver, given that thought, for Kant, is operative not only in self-consciously rational judgment but also in perceptual experience.” Hannah Ginsborg, “Kant’s Perceiver,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 87, no. 1 (2013): 221.

employed. Rather, the simile is *part of the experience*.<sup>307</sup> It both approximates Susan's experience and may be built-in to it. Thus Woolf uses figurative language as a proper image for perception itself. The line does not merely give us simile as a way of refreshing our perception, and it does not give us Susan's point of view; it gives us Susan's perception *as* simile.

Woolf's presentation of sense-perception in terms of figurative language makes plain not only a "real" dimension of perception but the dimension by which it can make objective claims on reality: Spontaneity as structuring form. For Woolf, form works in such a way as to disclose that the process of perception is never complete. When we look at *The Waves* as a whole, the constant renewals of language (the co-referentiality but non-equivalence of the different metaphors appositionally positioned) suggest that perception is not fully determined by its materials.<sup>308</sup> One corollary of this is that we may never finish knowing or experiencing phenomena.

Following Kant, we have been discussing everyday (non-poetic) cognition in terms of spontaneity. Just as everyday cognition can blend into poetry, so too can poetry blend into everyday cognition. The point is to view metaphor and simile (poetic cognition) less as a departure from ordinary knowledge mechanisms and more as a paradigmatic case of thought proper. This makes it easier to see how metaphor (poetic cognition) really does give you more of that which is thought real, that is, of what's really there in the objects of appearance but is not noticed until someone comes along and "thinks together" the shapes of the leaves with the shapes of the ear, and the attitude of attentiveness that the background idiom "pricked-up" ears sheds on the notion of pointedness. What is "really there" in the object, is there *relationally* – when the representation of the plant is combined with representations of something else. But a "relational understanding" of perceptual experience is no more and no less than what we would expect from objectively valid knowledge of appearances.<sup>309</sup>

The account of spontaneity in *real objective* judgment can explain why metaphor, and fiction generally, is really not just *anything* goes. That is, there is really at least one aspect of leaves that is made plain by seeing it through and with the image of pointed ears. Knowing one in terms of the other enhances the knowledge of the leaves. And that is because this is how concepts work, on the spontaneity account – by the thinking of things together.<sup>310</sup> Understanding the deeper account of determinate judgment as an exercise of spontaneity sheds a great deal of light on the workings of metaphor as proto-conceptuality – as the "thinking of things together."

There are modes of combination that are particular to fiction, and these may illuminate Kantian spontaneity, even though they take place in fiction. I must stress that Kantian

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<sup>307</sup> To name some common views about metaphor that have been challenged.

<sup>308</sup> Compare Paul Feyerabend's sweeping criticism of empiricism and sense-data reports in particular: "Phenomena cannot determine interpretations." Paul K. Feyerabend, "An Attempt at a Realistic Interpretation of Experience" in vol. 1 of *Realism, Rationalism and Scientific Method: Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 28.

<sup>309</sup> See Daniel Warren's interpretation of Kant's restriction on knowledge, related to the distinction between "things in themselves" and phenomena: "our knowledge is restricted to the relational features of things." Daniel Warren, *Reality and Impenetrability in Kant's Philosophy of Nature* [1994 Harvard PhD Dissertation] (New York: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>310</sup> For more on figurative language as conceptualization, see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980); see also Eve Sweetser & Barbara Dancygier, *Figurative Language* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015). Note that "metaphor" in cognitive linguistics is a general explanatory category comprising simile, as in this case.

spontaneity is not especially linked with the “figurative” construed as the non-literal; on the contrary, Woolf’s text seems to suggest how very “literal” the figurative character of everyday cognition may be. It may very well be objected that there is a peculiar dissonance between Kantian spontaneity as I have elaborated it here and the modality of fiction. Kantian spontaneity is supposed to underlie everyday cognition, but I have paired Virginia Woolf’s art with Kant’s account of “real” judgments – not with the *as-if* of aesthetic judgment. Nevertheless, the modes of combination that are particular to fiction illuminate the spontaneity that underlies real judgment. Indeed, the modes of “conscious combination” embedded in so-called “figurative language” do not so much re-invent the wheel, as far as perception is concerned, as they strip back the mechanisms that underlie the ordinary work of conceptualization, exposing the creative modes of combination that underlie everyday perception.

The notion of “form” in question can be derived by revisiting the empiricist picture and figuring out the limitations of that picture that the idea of form was designed to redress. The critique of empiricism can yield a sense of form in philosophy that parallels the emergence of literary form in Woolf’s literary modernism. Let’s therefore revisit for a moment what I have called the prototypical empiricist tale, or the tale that is forced to bend the rules of empiricism because of the paradoxes to which it leads. We have examined in Chapters 1 and 2 the “sensation tale,” where a first-person narrator, in a pseudo-scientific mode, tries to make a complete list of his/her sensations at a given moment. The impossibility of completing that first-person record suggests a paradox in empiricism whose literary iterations goes back to *Tristram Shandy* but is put into satirical and nightmarish relief in this nineteenth-century version. In an uncanny anticipation of similar results at the turn of the twentieth century in analytic philosophy, the sensation tale shows that you can enumerate all the sensations as completely as you want, but that a list of empirical contents of the mind is never going to provide a full picture of what consciousness is.<sup>311</sup> That is the case not for some mystical, emergent wholeness that the mind exercises over and above its constituent parts. The issue here is not holism (which is sometimes cited as an alternative to atomism). Rather, literary form captures the awareness of cognitive form that makes possible an awareness of objects. If one shaves off the sensation’s mode of presentation– that is, the modalities through which it is being considered, then one misses an essential part of what one wanted to understand about consciousness in the first place.

Kantian spontaneity is the so-called “active” form of knowing that both complements and overrides the “passive receptivity” of sensibility – and by extension, of the empiricist picture.<sup>312</sup> In Chapter 3, I called attention to Hume’s invocation of present-tense, “immediate” perception – the empiricist scene *par excellence* – as a scene of extortion. In that scene, reduced to helplessness before the all-powerful object, Hume is not only exhibiting the knowing subject’s “passive receptivity,” but dramatizing a state of total surrender: perception without agency. Far from an understanding of perception and other mental acts as giving a nascent or incipient instance of full-blown agency or freedom, the Humean scene is one of helpless passivity. In *Les lauriers sont coupés*, Dujardin’s founding experiment of *monologue intérieur*, for example, “the “passive” element in cognition is comically emphasized. It is interesting that the empiricist account of “stream of consciousness” fiction tends to identify that process with receptivity: while “spontaneity of mind” is often identified as an important feature of stream of consciousness fiction, in practice much of the paradigm for what stream of consciousness is (perhaps influenced by automatic writing?) emphasizes more the receptivity rather than spontaneity in the Kantian

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<sup>311</sup> Lewis Carroll, “What the Tortoise said to Achilles,” *Mind*, 4, no. 14 (1895): 278–280

<sup>312</sup> See discussion of Kant’s interrogation of “the given,” below.

sense. Without spontaneity it would be harder to formulate the idea of conscious thought as not fully determined by its sensuous occasions: not “extorted by them,” in Hume’s parlance – and yet, directed at something real. This perspective on what I argue are the “origins” of stream of consciousness fiction, in contesting the empiricist report, allows for a new theorization of the indispensability of form both as an aesthetic notion and as a cognitive one. And I maintain, somewhat against the grain of *The Waves*’ reception that precisely this fictional work which is “all thought,” as Bernard Blackstone puts it, displays the form of real-world judgments.<sup>313</sup>

Let us now take a look at the conditions of appearance that Neville’s consciousness make plain. Neville’s perception-utterance begins, seemingly, by asserting the finished objectness of the object: “‘I see a globe,’ said Neville...” – there’s nothing blurry about that statement. It thematizes an awareness of perceptual construal (“I see”) that is already spontaneous. But after the comma is where the sentence begins to wear its implicit spontaneity on its surface: “‘I see a globe,’ said Neville, “hanging down in a drop against the enormous flanks of some hill.” Again, we see the recurrence of the developmentally primary geometric image-schemas of the “circle” and the “line” in the shape of the globe and the vertical trajectory of its “hanging down.”<sup>314</sup> But the point is less to identify any particular “forms” than to show how Woolf’s modes of presentation dovetail with an awareness of cognitive form. Something happens to the globe, after the caesura, that propels it vertically. It is an image of an object world that is set in motion but also a mind that is set in motion through the process of perception and representation. What kind of *doing* happens here? Hannah Ginsborg notes that perceptual synthesis can be thought of as a kind of “image-formation,” a process that Kant himself likens to “drawing.” If Kant sometimes makes cognition into a semblance of art-making, then Woolf makes art-making into a semblance of cognition.<sup>315</sup>

The fictional consciousnesses presented by Woolf exhibit a spontaneity that would have been denied according to a strict empiricist account of reality. However, to stop here would in a sense be to replicate the merely thematic treatment that I’m arguing does not suffice either for our account of literature or our account of consciousness: That is, we cannot simply examine what goes on “inside” the minds of Rhoda, Susan, Jinny, Louis, Bernard and Neville; rather we must investigate the form under which those minds appear – and this is where the examination of novelistic form comes to meet, so to speak, the account of cognitive form that I have been pursuing.<sup>316</sup> If form is all we are given, then we need to account for how that form is given to us.

Our challenge as readers then is to clarify how the presentation of these six as “spontaneous” knowers – how the appearance of spontaneity “in them” (or the spontaneity that

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<sup>313</sup> See again the early Wittgenstein, who in a Kantian vein, notes that the *form* of propositions cannot be “said,” but only shown.

<sup>314</sup> George Lakoff, *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990).

<sup>315</sup> But the spontaneity that Woolf thematizes is not constrained to the “content” of the representations. Indeed, the children *have a unique form for expressing their present-tense perception* in the form of a speech act. That is, we can say, that the “drawing” continues at the level of their apperceptive awareness; however, it is an awareness that to some degree must be *fictionalized*, or adapted through literary form, since it is not just a determinate object that could be added to the content of the representation. Woolf turns perception *into* a speech act rather than seeking the right kinds of speech act that would be “adequate” to the mental process represented. You cannot represent form and keep subject and object distinct.

<sup>316</sup> The Russian Formalist argument would be that novelistic form becomes palpable in Woolf’s text through her violation of it.

they exhibit) – relates to the writerly techniques that Woolf uses to present or frame these consciousnesses in the first place. In other words, we need to show how the transcendental (in the Kantian sense) “form of the understanding” relates to the question of literary form. It should be noted, however, that to some degree what I’m calling “our challenge” is actually very often the goal of literary criticism, though it is not always put in these terms. That goal is to recover something not yet paraphrasable embedded in the form of the artwork – something which now (and perhaps *only* now, as of the moment of the work’s occurrence) becomes expressible, determinate, “synthesizable.” This new, conceptually determinate material gleaned precisely from the indeterminacy of the artwork can furnish the critic with new, non-fictional statements that may be true about the world and not only about the work of art. To put it more succinctly, the art work expresses what there are not yet concepts for; but there might in the future be concepts for what the artwork expresses.<sup>317</sup>

Let us go back to Rhoda’s “table-cloth, flying white”:

“Look at the table-cloth, flying white along the table,” said Rhoda. “Now there are rounds of white china, and silver streaks beside each plate.” (*W*, 11)

Abstraction predominates in the image again as variations on the two developmentally primary shapes of the line and the circle: The unnamed forks appear as “silver streaks” (does that mean they are “still being cognized,” or that on the contrary, they have been cognized so thoroughly that only abstraction is left?). And yet, the “round china” flanked by the abstracted silver streaks of silverware reflects a very advanced level of empirical perception. No *a priori* category could tell you that you are looking at china. It goes beyond geometry to incorporate a whole history of British imperialism and table manners! It is interesting to note that in the same sentence where the “table-cloth” and “round china” are fully identified as objects, the silverware remain as “silver streaks” – a culmination in conceptual abstraction, yet one which returns us to a pre-conceptual state of affairs where the impressions have not yet fully been cognized. The degrees of abstraction of the “embodied shapes” of the mind, therefore, even within Rhoda’s point of view, remain utterly mixed. The writing does not respect cognitive hierarchies, either by giving a static developmental picture of one individual consciousness at a given developmental “stage” or by shaping distinct consciousnesses according to distinct idiolects (as is the norm in so-called “stream of consciousness” fiction).

The “simple impression,” made palpable again through the consciousness of the child thus performs, ironically, the basic work of defamiliarization – one of the key functions of art. Woolf makes perceptible again for the adult reader the layered processes by which everyday objects are formed. The kinetic blurriness of the “silver streaks,” then, operates as a kind of metaphor for the deeper level of doing—the activity that is involved in the construction of the image. This Kantian process of construction is appreciated by Woolf’s text, revealing the underpinnings of objectivity, without, however, and this cannot be overstated, implying that “anything goes.”

Unlike a Humean object, the table-cloth, for example, is not exhausted by the enumeration of its constituent parts; nor has it been ossified into the fixed form of an enduring substance, a falsifying “fiction” in Hume’s sense. Rather, something else is going on that makes it a table-cloth. But that “something else” is not really a something at all – it is rather the

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<sup>317</sup> This resonates with the Kantian insight that the artwork expresses a form of “objectivity” that does not take the route of determinate cognition



unifying activity of an understanding that brings all these sensory elements into spontaneous relation with one another. Indeed, one of the chief responsibilities that Kant assigns to our spontaneity is the activity of synthesis:

The combination (*conjunctio*) of a manifold in general can never come to us through the senses...for it is an act of the spontaneity of the faculty of representation, and, since this faculty, to distinguish it from sensibility, must be entitled understanding, all combination – be we conscious of it or not—... is an act of the understanding. To this act the general title ‘synthesis’ may be assigned. (*CPR*, B130)

Spontaneity is closely linked with the capacity for thinking things together. As Robert Pippin emphasizes, this is bound up with the capacity for taking the world to be such and such.<sup>318</sup> Ginsborg uses the example of perceiving a green cube to address what she sees as a crucial debate in the interpretation of Kant and the controversies around the proposal that the understanding is necessary not just for making judgments about perceptual objects, but for having perceptual experience at all. This interpretation of Kant, Ginsborg argues, “seems on the face of it to cut against the empiricist view that I can come to have ideas of colour and shape, and more generally perceptual images, through the operation of my sensory faculties alone.”<sup>319</sup> These considerations bring out the salience in Woolf of the form of narration that she employs to “present” the contents of the children’s consciousness. “I see a ring” looks like a thematization of the role of the understanding in everyday perception, a demarcation of the line beyond which sensibility cannot reach. For as Kant writes, describing the “act of spontaneity of the faculty of representation”: “we cannot represent to ourselves anything as combined in the object *which we have not ourselves previously combined*” (*CPR*, B130, my emphasis). But then we are back with the problem that attends both readings of Kant and of Woolf: isn’t she making the child into a kind of hyper-intellectual creature, a consciousness that cannot merely “experience” the cube, but is actively constituting it at every moment, with a reflective self-awareness? The whole point anyway was to make room for the possibility that the categories of the understanding “apply to the objects that are perceptually given to us in advance of our thinking about them and judging them.”<sup>320</sup> This is in fact what I’m arguing, that Woolf presents a semblance of the form of judgment without any claim whatsoever to be realistic, not even within the fictional world of *The Waves*. For who is the “I” in the passage, and through what mouth does it speak? Woolf’s narrative form, I argue, reveals the spontaneity of a mind that makes something of what is given – but without reifying that spontaneity into a determinate object.

As the semblance of a Kantian object, Woolf’s verbal constructions show us the object in the process of being constituted; her fiction presents the disparate sensory elements or “impressions” but also reveals the forms according to which these are spontaneously synthesized together. This spontaneous synthesis is an expression of freedom suggesting, in principle (even if

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<sup>318</sup> To what extent this spontaneity, this “taking-as” involves full-blown judgment is a matter of controversy. What is crucial, both for Kant and for Woolf, is an element that Pippin brings out in his discussion of spontaneity --that this synthesis, this ability to “think together” different perceptual events is bound up with an “inherent reflexivity in consciousness.” Pippin, “Kant on Spontaneity,” 40.

<sup>319</sup> Ginsborg, “Problem of Experience,” 64.

<sup>320</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

this possibility is not realized) that the same sensory elements could be conceptualized differently but without sacrificing their objective character. As Pippin puts it,

Kant appears to believe it is criterial that we must be implicitly aware of our having ‘taken’ the world to be such and such, and thereby of its possibly not being such and such. The veridicality of, say, our sensory perceptions must be able to be, at least in some weak sense, held open, in cognitive consciousnesses, and that feature of such consciousness requires, Kant appears certain, that consciousness be apperceptive.<sup>321</sup>

The reflexive awareness of what we are doing when we synthesize representations together also makes it possible for us to understand ourselves as getting the world wrong, when we do, and that’s what makes objectivity possible. Pippin is pursuing here an interpretation of Kant that begins to tease out the nascent threads of freedom that inhere in the purely epistemological dimensions of Kant’s account of spontaneity. I do not wish to enter here into the dense thicket of whether premonitions of “freedom” are to be found in Kant’s purely theoretical account of spontaneity (that is to say, spontaneity of the understanding), and what that freedom consists in. The problem of how to relate epistemic spontaneity to practical spontaneity remains very hazy.<sup>322</sup> The present discussion is confined to epistemic spontaneity, and even that in a limited way; but my justification for this is that Woolf’s literary modernism is itself focused on epistemology, and sometimes ruthlessly so.<sup>323</sup> Daniel Warren argues persuasively against reading later voluntarist notions of freedom back into Kant’s account of spontaneity both on the ethical front *and* the purely theoretical front, connecting freedom with contingency, the possibility of things being otherwise. So it should be emphasized that the “holding open” I am finding here, with Pippin, has more to do with the possibility of self-checking, than with a more voluntarist idea of “freedom in perception.”<sup>324</sup> Pippin’s interpretation, linking spontaneity and apperception so closely together, reminds us about the importance of both for objectivity. It may even suggest that there really is something “critical” about the *Critique of Pure Reason* — and that form might really be worthy of the name “critical” in the sense of capable of being reflective on its own limitations in ways that are generative for knowledge.

I have been examining spontaneity as an operation of the *understanding* – that is, without invoking the complicated ethical or teleological dimensions in other of Kant’s works. Pippin’s is a very interesting reading, I think, because it points up a link between self-consciousness, objectivity, and the “holding open” of our sensory perceptions. It implies that the reflexive dimension of thought for Kant is not some height which thinking can attain, but rather the banal underlying condition of representing any object at all. This means that being able to attend to the

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<sup>321</sup> Pippin, “Kant on the Spontaneity of Mind,” 42.

<sup>322</sup> See Moran, Introduction to *Kant on Freedom and Spontaneity*, 2.

<sup>323</sup> See Brian McHale’s notion of an “epistemological dominant” in literary modernism, in his *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987).

<sup>324</sup> Neither does the relevant sense of freedom here involve the freedom to construe a given set of sensory particulars either one way, or another way. For example, it may be tempting to imagine Kantian spontaneity as the freedom to employ a different set of concepts (whether a priori or empirical), which could yield a different set of *objective* representations, by “sorting” the data differently, but still along objective lines, as it were. But such an idea, on this view, would *not* be authorized by Kant’s notion of spontaneity.

status of one's representations *as* representations is a necessary condition for having representations at all – or more specifically, for having the kind of representations that we ostensibly have, namely, representations that amount to “thinking about” the world.<sup>325</sup>

Let's return to the somewhat astonishing formulations that are ascribed to the consciousnesses Woolf calls Jinny, Susan, Bernard, Louis, Neville and Rhoda. When Woolf has Rhoda say, “I see a ring,” she has her express the background apperceptive awareness of her point of view *as* a point of view, the awareness that Kant argues is a necessary condition for having a point of view at all. But it is crucial to the interpretation of Rhoda's expression that it not be taken literally as an utterance. Above I spent some time demonstrating that the word “said” throughout Woolf's corpus does not always refer to speech, but rather redraws the line between thought and speech, calling into question the forms of articulation that are proper to both. Now we can say that Woolf's formalism here highlights the formalism of the Kantian standpoint – that is, the *conditionality* of the knowledge claim: Rather than asserting the presentation of a ring, Rhoda's statement embodies the conditions under which the experience of the ring becomes possible by expressing a silent, impersonal organizing consciousness behind it.

*The Waves* is deeply epistemological but also requires an analysis of discourse, in part because of Woolf's astonishing use of direct discourse (“said”) that is not to be taken directly. What complex interplay of perception, thought, and speech can be theorized on the basis of Woolf's narrative form in this text? There are a number of puzzles, when we consider both the “speech act” that the children are engaged in, and the intentional states (i.e. the visual and auditory experiences) that those speech acts purportedly express. Is “I see...” an assertion about the occurrence of an act of perception or is it rather the *expression* of an act of perception, with which it may be intimately bound up? If the latter is true, then this troubles the distinction between a statement, and the conditions of satisfaction that would make it true.<sup>326</sup>

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<sup>325</sup> That self-consciousness is the “highest” condition of possibility for knowledge does not imply that this condition is ever met. It only means that it would be met, were knowledge possible.

<sup>326</sup> I'm using the technical term “conditions of satisfaction” from John Searle's *Intentionality*. Conditions of satisfaction are the external conditions under which a statement is true, a perception is veridical, etc. Searle's theory of intentional states, like visual experiences, and his speech act theory, linked as they are, help to sharpen the strangeness of Woolf's intervention in “stream of consciousness” writing but also bring out the degree to which her thought is saturated with the philosophical problematics of propositional form. John Searle accounts for intentionality (in a Kantian vein, though he would abhor the comparison!) by claiming that *whole propositional contents* are latent within all visual experience, if they are to count as real *seeing*. Thus,

all seeing is seeing *that*. Hence, ‘I see a station wagon *in front of me*’ becomes, if we want to make the content of the visual perception *explicit*, ‘I see *that* there is a station wagon in front of me.’ Visual experience is never simply *of* an object but rather it must always be *that* such and such is the case. Whenever, for example, my visual experience is of a station wagon it must also be an experience, part of whose content is, for example, that there is a station wagon in front of me.

But Searle then goes on to address the worry that in insisting on this propositional structure inherent to visual experience, he is demanding too high a degree of self-reflection on the part of the perceiver: “When I say that the content of the visual experience is equivalent to a whole proposition I do not mean that it is linguistic but rather that the content requires the existence of a whole state of affairs if it is to be satisfied.” John Searle, *Intentionality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 40. It follows from

Another way of looking at this is that what Rhoda's utterance expresses is not the content of Rhoda's thought, but rather that which is presupposed by her thought – in other words, it is the *form* of the thought. This means that the relationship of Rhoda's "assertion" to its propositional content is not the conventional relationship usually assumed between statement and belief according to the model of "disquotation" in the twentieth century.<sup>327</sup> Rhoda's quoted utterance does not commit her to a belief in the statement inside the quotation marks: She does not need to believe that she sees a ring; her consciousness just *does* see it (in addition to being able to construe itself *as* seeing it), and the fictional speech act that Woolf has crafted *embodies* that seeing; it does not represent it. But Rhoda's consciousness of the ring does involve a consciousness of herself as a spontaneous combiner of sensory materials; perceiving involves a consciousness of doing. Indeed, Rhoda's utterance looks as if it is an assertion, but its conditions of satisfaction are not those of an assertion: the force of an assertion is felt, and yet the "I" is in question.

Kant holds, famously, that "the mind could never think its identity in the manifoldness of its representations... if it did not have before its eyes the identity of its act" (A108). This is a startling formulation, as it asks us to imagine "eyes" belonging to the mind, which are presumably not the same as the eyes which we see when looking in the mirror. But we don't always have to be actively attending to the representative aspect of our thought, on Kant's view, since this would amount to an absurd degree of hyper-vigilance on the part of the perceiving subject, and would surely prevent the possibility of those experiences of absorption in one's objects that are such an important part of conscious life and arguably constitute our happiest moments. Indeed, what if you're so absorbed in the object of your contemplation that you "lose yourself"? On the Kantian perspective, that is exactly what you do – and yet the self as appearance is never beyond recuperation because it is a construct to begin with. This is where the as-if character of the perception-utterance becomes crucial: The question of whether or not Rhoda "actually," within the imaginary world, asserts out loud, or in her mind, that she sees a ring is besides a point; the point is rather the synthesis that pervades every layer and degree of articulation. In this way, the metafictional moment in Woolf's literary modernism is already built into the structure of consciousness as such, at least if we conceive of the mind the way Kant does. Rather than spinning us out into a vertigo of self-reference, the ability to attend to the constructedness of our representations gets us to something very grounding and primary.

Let's now return to Neville's "globe," and his terse subject-predicate formula: "I see a globe." The globe is not passively registered by the subject, despite the relatively straightforward application of the concept, and the terseness of the subject-predicate formula: "I see a globe." On the contrary, such "judgments," as Kant calls them, are the characteristic exercise of spontaneity as such. In *The Waves* the globe appears first in the consciousness of Neville as a child, but is then transferred intersubjectively between and among various consciousnesses, suggesting a dispersed awareness of the very problem of their interrelation. The globe motif recurs numerous times throughout the work, and its meaning horizon widens.<sup>328</sup> In the process it

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this interpretation that when Bernard says he sees a ring, he is making a real claim on the world (correct or not).

<sup>327</sup> See Saul A. Kripke, "A Puzzle about Belief," in *Meaning and Use*, ed. A. Margalit (Boston: Reidel, 1979).

<sup>328</sup> Does the "globe" name a geographical model of Planet Earth, or does it name another object altogether, whose *globular shape* has been abstracted? The ambiguity between the realistic registering of an object whole and the deployment of an abstract category (spherical shapes) suggests that the work of

becomes more *formal*, coming to stand for the possibility of spontaneous synthesis in general. Andrew Brook, in his commentary on Kant uses the term “global representation” to capture this tendency toward unity in the construction of experience. On this view, what Neville calls “globing” would on the Kantian picture be involved both in the construction of individual experiences, and in their unification into “one experience.” There is even a suggestion, on some interpretations of this notion of “global representation” that intersubjectively, we may all be part of “one and the same universal experience.” Here is Kant: “There is only one experience, in which all perceptions are represented as in thoroughgoing and lawlike connection [...] If one speaks of different experiences, they are only so many perceptions insofar as they belong to one and the same universal experience” (*CPR*, A110). In *The Waves*, the “globe” looks like it’s just one object of representation among a catalog of others, but in fact “globing” is a pretty good metaphor for – and a metareflection on – what it means to “unify experience at all.”<sup>329</sup>

The representation of spontaneous “doing” is reflected not only in the use of “globe” as a noun; it appears as a verb in the lexicon of Woolf’s speakers. The verb “to globe” or “globing” recurs in *The Waves*, suggesting a metareflective awareness of what it might have taken to arrive at the globe-noun (or any other object of perception) in the first place: “‘I see a globe,’ said Neville.” In a later scene, Woolf’s six consciousnesses have reached adulthood and are meeting at a restaurant, for a rare moment of literal (and not just formal) convergence of first-person perspectives. Note the reappearance and recontextualization of both Susan’s ring and Neville’s globe in the later episode, when the children have long grown up into adults and are now reuniting in a London restaurant:

“Now once more,” said Louis, “as we are about to part, having paid our bill, the circle in our blood, broken so often, so sharply, for we are so different, closes in a ring. Something is made. Yes, as we rise and fidget, a little nervously, we pray, holding in our hands this common feeling, ‘Do not move, do not let the swing door cut to pieces the thing that we have made, that globes itself here, among these lights, these peelings, this litter of bread crumbs and people passing. Do not move, do not go. Hold it forever.” (*W*, 145)

The passage emphasizes the fragility of what is created intersubjectively between them; the “something that is made” can by dint of its very constructedness be “cut to pieces,” and may even have begun that way, in a state of fragmentation. We were presented with the “ring” on page one of *The Waves* as something that is immediately apprehended (“‘I see a ring,’ said Bernard”); but here we see that the “ring” is no primary impression at all but rather refers to an activity of closing a broken circle (“the circle in our blood, broken so often...closes in a ring”). Far from being perceptually “given,” the ring must be constructed – or, better, *reconstructed*, by putting together what is “broken.” Interestingly, one could say that it is precisely by highlighting

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abstraction may be an essential part of all object recognition, an expression of active spontaneity. The question is whether we just grab the object of cognition or abstract it as part of receiving it. To quote Lanier Anderson, “the rules of cognitive synthesis... operat[e] under the aegis of a principle aiming at the maximal unity of possible experience.” R. Lanier Anderson, “Neo-Kantianism and the Roots of Anti-Psychologism,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 13, no. 2 (2005): 312.

<sup>329</sup>Quite apart from its imperial, or perhaps anti-imperialist implications, which Jane Garrity demonstrates in “Global Objects in *The Waves*,” in *A Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. Jessica Berman (Miley, Ma.: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 121-137.

the originary state of fragmentation from which object constancy proceeds that Woolf's text does *not* take for granted the atomistic disaggregation presupposed by Hume. Louis imagines a common feeling, or "imperative" held in common among his friends, in the form of a unified sentence: "Do not move, do not let the swing door cut to pieces the thing that we have made, that globes itself here." As it did for Rhoda earlier on, now for everyone, time itself cuts up the "thing that we have made," threatening to return common objects to a state of disaggregation. The fact that the idea "globes itself" here, introducing a new reflexive verb, echoes the reflexive, spontaneous component of the Kantian picture. Woolf seems to insist on the intersubjective dimension of this spontaneity. However, it is crucial that this intersubjective component be understood not psychologically but formally. Woolf herself denied that the six voices are "characters" at all, and her engagement and critique of stream of consciousness rejects emphatically any claim to psychological verisimilitude. This means that it is equally plausible to read the form of spontaneity that *The Waves* endorses, if indeed it does so at all, as an expression of *intrasubjective* synthesis as it is to read it as an expression of an intersubjective synthesis. Woolf in her letters suggests that she would be happy if Bernard, Louis, Rhoda were read all as parts of one mind – but, of course, such a reading would only provoke the problem of cognitive synthesis, rather than resolving it.<sup>330</sup> Indeed, when Kant remarks that spontaneity must overcome the "foreignness of representations to one another," he is referring to a foreignness that must be overcome within a *single mind*. It takes just as much synthesis to become "I" as to become "we."

The model of spontaneity retains a polyphonous quality whether it is construed intersubjectively or intrasubjectively. For Kant, the idea of spontaneity as self-conscious, synthesizing form was recruited to resolve the question of how to gain a "consciousness of the whole" without falling into those falsifying delusions that Hume called "fiction." But this strategic move has a truth value: Kant works very hard to try to explain how experience can be "unified" without "fictionalizing" ourselves, in Hume's sense, for the sake of unity. The result is skeletal. Indeed, with what right do I say "I," if all I am is a synthesizing activity?

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<sup>330</sup> See Sarah Copland on the "one-mind" as opposed to the "six-minds" reading of *The Waves*. "Conceptual Blending in *The Waves*" in *Blending and the Study of Narrative: Approaches and Applications*, ed. Ralph Schneider, Marcus Hartner (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2012), 253-279. Woolf's text is systematically ambiguous between these two interpretations and I am arguing that the ambiguity itself is philosophically generative. See also Woolf's letter to Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, appreciating his reading of *The Waves*.

What you say you felt about the Waves is exactly what I wanted to convey...I did mean that in some vague way we are the same person, and not separate people. The six characters were supposed to be one. I'm getting old myself...and I come to feel more and more how difficult it is to collect oneself into one Virginia; even though the special Virginia in whose body I live for the moment is violently susceptible to all sorts of separate feelings. Therefore I wanted to give the sense of continuity, instead of which most people say, no you've given the sense of flowing and passing away and that nothing matters. Yet I feel things matter quite immensely...I'm annoyed to be told that I am nothing but a stringer together of words and words and words...How one longs to have done something in the world.

Vol. 4 of *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (New York: Harcourt, 1982), 397-398.

One of the key Humean challenges taken up by Kant is the fact that the picture of “consciousness as aggregate built up from smaller units” became no longer tenable. Kant illustrates the problem with the “aggregative model” by arguing as follows: “Representations that are distributed among different beings (for instance, the individual words of a verse) never constitute a whole thought (a verse)” (*CPR*, A 352). The fluidity with which Kant moves between the unity of thought and the unity of the poetic line bespeaks a relationship between cognitive form and literary form that may run deeper than mere analogy; that is, the two domains may be more interconnected than previously thought. This anti-psychologistic strain in Kant, tending towards a merely formal notion of unity, is fiercely re-opened on the eve of modernism.

<sup>331</sup> Indeed, William James further fleshes out Kant’s thought experiment (and metaphorical mapping between thought and text), in a passage which became highly influential in Kant studies: “Take a sentence of a dozen words, and take twelve men and tell to each one word. Then stand the men in a row or jam them in a bunch, and let each think of his word as intently as he will; nowhere will there be a consciousness of the whole sentence.”<sup>332</sup> James’ twelve homogenous men replicate one another as they passively read out a sentence over which none of them has a sense of “ownership,” and relatedly, which none of them can render into a whole meaning.<sup>333</sup> James and Kant’s passages are a kind of “shadow-text” for Woolf’s *The Waves*, which takes six voices, male and female, and poses the problem of synthesis kaleidoscopically, at multiple levels as an intersubjective problem, to be sure, but also, as we have seen, as an intrasubjective one.<sup>334</sup> The point is not to resolve whether the children’s “little verses” do or don’t amount to a synthetic whole; rather, they show us what it means to “grasp” a form with an awareness that does not freeze or reify its object. The significance I find in Kant and James’ example is quite general: grasping the form of a thought is different from grasping the contents of a thought, analyzable as the latter might be into component parts.<sup>335</sup>

Woolf’s motif of “globing” as intersubjective or intrasubjective form, resonates with what I call Kant’s “skeletal” notion of spontaneity; at the same time, “globing” names a possibility for synthesis that is more provisional, more precarious. Mourning the death of their friend Percival in the episode following the dinner party scene, Neville is walking through the

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<sup>331</sup> Anderson, “Neo-Kantianism,” 298.

<sup>332</sup> James, *Principles*, 160. See Norman Kemp Smith, *A Commentary to Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 459.

<sup>333</sup> This brings out the intimate link between the two aspects of spontaneity I have named, above, the link, that is between nascent agency (something coming from us) and nascent awareness of what we are doing as we are doing it.

<sup>334</sup> The notion of a shadow text belongs to C.D. Blanton. See *Epic Negation: The Dialectical Poetics of Late Modernism* (Oxford, OUP: 2015). See also Chana Kronfeld on this “negative form of intertextuality” in *The Full Severity of Compassion: The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016). I thank Michael Gluzman for pointing out the pertinence of this notion here.

<sup>335</sup> Similar Kantian problematics were explored by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* and taken in a different direction. I thank Daniel Warren for these insights. “Grasping the form” of Woolf’s text sheds light on what it means to “grasp the form” in our own minds, a mode of acquaintance which for Kant is quite primary, and which Kant sets apart from other forms of knowing, for example the mode of knowing involved in grasping an object. Indeed, if modernist fiction is self-conscious about form, the link with the Kantian notion of mental forms in the mind can stand to be explored further. Specifically, “form” for Kant is linked with apperception: An awareness of form makes possible our awareness of objects. The form of our cognition does not only “act on us,” but it is something that we have a sense of participating in, and being aware of.

National Gallery, looking at art and processing his grief when he says: “Behold then, the blue madonna streaked with tears. This is my funeral service. We have no ceremonies, only private dirges and no conclusions, only violent sensations, each separate” (*W*, 157). In this passage, Neville suggests (with a degree of emotional ambivalence) that “ceremony” synthesizes and brings an order to, possibly making more bearable (and more conventional, less searing) that “violent” separateness of sensation. But what’s spontaneous about ceremonies? Ceremonies are institutional structures, not designed by the individuals who experience grief in their “private dirges” with “no conclusion.” They are the reified congealment of experience. Here, to go beyond the “violence” of disjointed sensation is either to participate in a numbing fiction, in Hume’s sense, or to “subsume” oneself under a deadening concept, if we take Kant’s picture. The “conclusion” (operation of the understanding, over and above sensibility) that goes beyond the “separateness” of sensation is not lauded here as a synthesizing power but on the contrary, regarded with suspicion; the “conclusions” really abandon the “separate sensations” from which they derive, rather than containing and incorporating them into a meaningful and “articulate” structure. I have argued here for a sustained dialogue in *The Waves* between a view of the mind that is sometimes called Kantian spontaneity (but doesn’t have to be) and a view of the mind captured by Hume’s notion of “fiction.” What is at stake for Woolf, and in a way for Kantian thinkers to this day, is whether an affirmative (non-deadening) function can still be claimed for the work of conceptualization. We must remember, when reading this passage, that when Neville says, “only violent sensations, each separate” (*W*, 207) he is engaged in intratextual allusion which may even be tantamount to intersubjective dialogue, and thus to bridging separateness. For Rhoda is the one, as we have seen, to whom the idea of “violent sensation” most profoundly belongs: “I cannot make one moment merge in the next. To me they are all violent, all separate” (*W*, 130). For her, experience in time lacks cohesion, and indeed, all attempts to override that discontinuity are empty “ceremony” (and not spontaneous synthesis). At the same time, the very appearance of Rhoda’s private sensation in Neville’s consciousness holds them together in something possibly other than “ceremony”; something like that fragile and temporary “globing” that pieces together that “circle of blood, broken so often” – the common circulation which may be all we have.

Here, on this picture, what Kant termed spontaneity seems to regress more to the Humean picture with its resentment about “fictions” and, specifically, their power to pave over the discontinuity and rupture that is proper to experience as it comes to us. Indeed, in this allegory of epistemology Neville rejects the “shorthand” of ceremony for abbreviating the particularity of experience, and yet, he cannot rest with mere sensation, recognizing its insufficiency:

‘I am titillated inordinately by some splendour; the ruffled crimson against the green lining; the march of pillars; the orange light behind the black, pricked ears of the olive trees. Arrows of sensation strike from my spine, but without order.’

‘Yet something is added to my interpretation. Something lies deeply buried. For one moment I thought to grasp it. But bury it, bury it; let it breed, hidden in the depths of my mind some day to fructify. After a long lifetime, loosely, in a moment of revelation, I may lay hands on it, but now the idea breaks in my hand. Ideas break a thousand times for once that they globe themselves entire. They break: they fall over me ‘Line and colours they survive, therefore . . .’” (*W* 157-158)



Like the word “conclusion” in the grief passage quoted earlier, Neville here self-consciously reflects upon the incursion of “interpretation” into his stream of consciousness. The Kantian dichotomy between sensible “intuitions” and discursive “concepts” can help us draw attention to the alien quality of the repertoire of the understanding, with its conclusions and interpretations, to the domain of sensation. But this was exactly the gap that Kant tried to bridge by making both modalities indispensable for cognition, by making in fact cognition into an integration of the two. The caesura separating the paragraphs thematizes the force of a “Yet” that underscores the unbridgeable gap between “conclusion” and “sensation,” but also suggests the sudden onset of an act of mind that is actually incommensurate with both models of knowing. This new turn in Neville’s consciousness can neither be accounted for on the painfully skeptical, empiricist picture of “violent, separate sensation” nor on the model of “ceremony” and “conclusion” from which the sensorium becomes alienated. This new turn – the form of thought expressed grammatically through “Yet” – can thus be accounted for neither on the reductive empiricism of mere sensation, nor on its skeptical rejoinder: “Something is added to my interpretation. Something lies deeply buried.” Of course, we could overdo the allegorical reading, with its one-to-one correlations (as I may already have been guilty of doing) and identify the “something” that “lies deeply buried” as *a priori* structures in the mind, for example: “the shapes my brain holds.” But I’m less interested in that homology than in the idea that what is “added to interpretation” for Neville is figured simultaneously as prior and belated: “Ideas break a thousand times for once that they globe themselves entire.”

The “globe” looks like it’s just one object of representation among a catalog of others, but in fact “globing” in its reflexive form is the metaphor for – and the meta-reflection on – what it means to “unify experience at all.” The images are not necessarily interchangeable among the speakers, but the *image-schemas* are. For Bernard, the consciousness into which all the other consciousnesses are subsumed (since the work ends with his soliloquy), the “globing” is itself maintained under the sign of an “as-if.” In this final soliloquy he says: “But to return. Let us again pretend that life is a solid substance, shaped like a globe, which we turn about in our fingers. Let us pretend that we can make out a plain and logical story, so that when one matter is dispatched – love for instance – we go on, in an orderly manner, to the next” (*W*, 251). The globe as an image in Woolf’s fiction moves back and forth between *object* and *form of spontaneity*, animating precisely the problematic that I think is at stake in Kant’s vigilance against “hypostasizing the form.” One problem with talking about “intersubjectivity” in the *Waves* is that such a designation implies that the consciousnesses are separate in the first place; which is almost certainly not the case. If I were to say that these are intersubjective relations in the work, I would be presupposing that they are distinct persons. Indeed, the question of spontaneous, perceptual synthesis in Woolf’s passages simply cannot not be posed intersubjectively. The globe is the spatial visualization of that intersubjective dimension, but the process of “globing” is constantly being done and undone, far from a determinate starting point, or something discoverable in or as nature.

While there are many powerful reasons for identifying Kant’s philosophy with the reign of bourgeois individualism, it also seems fair to Kant to acknowledge the ways in which his project radically upends (and renders provisional) any unity that could be claimed on behalf of the subject from within. With what right do I say “I,” if all I am is a synthesizing activity?

It doesn’t really matter if we construe Susan, Jinny, Rhoda, Bernard, Louis and Neville as distinct “persons” or not in naturalistic terms because the point is that even within a “single” person the process by which the thing “globes itself” involves elements which would be “other”

to themselves if it were not for this synthesizing function. There is a polyphonous quality to the model of spontaneity, whether it is construed intersubjectively or intrasubjectively.

I should stress that this is not the empirical intersubjectivity that Woolf portrays so brilliantly in novels like *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, which as I have shown in Chapter 3, involves something akin to an interior dialogue. There, fragments of talk and imagery (empirical contents) show up in the mind, so that there is a tremendous amount of what Bakhtin would call “dialogicity” even where actual dialogue does not happen. Here, however, the intersubjective dimension is not empirical but formal. Woolf poses the question of what conditions need to be met in order for objects to be shared at all – indeed, in order to have knowledge that is “objectively valid.” What is at stake in *The Waves* is thus not showing the public character of “private association” but rather laying bare the *a priori* contributions that make representations communicable.

For Kant, an important way that spontaneity expresses itself in consciousness is through its synthesizing function. But this unifying function cannot be used as a basis for guaranteeing the existence of a unified self. Hannah Ginsborg shows that the First Critique differs consequentially from other texts by Kant in its treatment of spontaneity:<sup>336</sup> The First Critique, Ginsborg writes, treats the ‘I’ of apperception as if it were a “disembodied locus of spontaneity.” Indeed, “to represent the I is simply to represent the spontaneous activity of thought.”<sup>337</sup> While this formalism proves problematic for those wishing to explore to what extent we are entitled to consider ourselves empirically –that is, as real, spontaneous organisms, it is not necessary to go beyond this formalism to appreciate Woolf’s philosophical dimension; in fact, I’m arguing that it is important not to go beyond it.<sup>338</sup> Woolf’s peculiar form of narration corresponds very closely to Ginsborg’s characterization of the First Critique and its “disembodied locus of spontaneity.” For the voices to be dispersed in such a way that even a synthesizing function fails to resolve them into a determinate unity characterizes equally a set of distinct, fully-articulated characters in fiction and a single consolidated consciousness in critical philosophy. To quote George

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<sup>336</sup> Ginsborg’s article does the work of distinguishing Kant’s treatment of “spontaneity” in the First Critique from the inevitable and difficult larger question of human spontaneity conceived of as empirically real. Hannah Ginsborg, “The Appearance of Spontaneity: Kant on Judgment and Empirical Self-Knowledge,” in *The Normativity of Nature: Essays on Kant’s Critique of Judgment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>337</sup> Ginsborg, “The Appearance of Spontaneity,” 205.

<sup>338</sup> For a powerful criticism of Kantian spontaneity in its teleological application in the Third Critique, see Amanda Jo Goldstein, “Sweet Science: Romantic Materialism and the New Logics of Life,” PhD Dissertation, University of California Berkeley, 2011. Following Goethe, Goldstein argues that ‘Kant’s celebrated epistemological modesty... screens a more significant hubris’ (2). She rightfully notes that ‘the Kantian and Coleridgean ideal of “organic form” has overshadowed our critical understanding of what the late Enlightenment poetics of life might have sought to do’ (34). For a recent abbreviated discussion of this issue, see her book by the same title (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2017), 124-130. I have isolated the notion of the spontaneity of the understanding –which works quite differently, as I hope to have shown, from the notion of an “organic whole” – in part because it has not been similarly absorbed by Kant’s reception in literary studies. In this way, I hope, that my project, focused on the First Critique, and Goldstein’s rejoinders to the Third Critique, can actually complement one another. Conversation with Amanda Jo Goldstein, *Comparative Literature Graduate Reunion*, May 4, 2019.

Herbert Mead's estimation of a tension that is central to the Kantian moment, "it is a self that must be constantly postulated and that cannot be known."<sup>339</sup>

The disconnected "little verses" in Woolf's text make intelligible the absence of a binding or ordering narrative sequence that could define the relationship they have to one another, and to the whole. Is this something which comes with adulthood? In fact, yes. As I have shown above, *The Waves* will culminate with various forms of proposed "binding" – from Bernard's red carnation [discussed in Chapter 3] to the skeptical renunciation of binding with Rhoda's leaping tiger – and the two juxtaposed in one passage. Synthesis is going on within each viewpoint, but also meta-synthesis, questioning how we synthesize all these utterances together. This is a formal question that the work holds open. Indeed, *The Waves* invites critical reflection on the form of intersubjective binding, or synthesis, precisely by not letting our synthesizing faculties complete their conceptualizing work. The book intensifies our awareness of spontaneity precisely to the degree that it does not allow us to cognize it as a determinate object.

One of the striking features of Kant's account of cognitive spontaneity is the way in which it links the formalism of reflexive awareness with the agency of doing. But in Kant's "skeletal" account, in no way does this consciousness of doing guarantee the existence of a doer. This positions Kantian spontaneity really at the opposite end of the "self" from the one sometimes claimed on behalf of Romantic (Wordsworthian) spontaneity. It is true that for Kant the consciousness of spontaneity is a kind of acquaintance with what one does, but Kant also says that "the consciousness of self is thus very far from being a knowledge of the self" (B158). Recall that, "[i]f each representation were completely foreign to every other, standing apart in isolation, no such thing as knowledge would ever arise" (A97). This suggests that a consciousness of this combining power in me is a precondition for "some such thing as knowledge" to "arise" in me. And yet my consciousness of this precondition cannot itself amount to knowledge. In this way, the very preconditions for knowledge in some way disrupt the procedures of knowledge, pointing to an underlying mode of acquaintance that differs from knowledge as it is usually construed. Kant goes so far as to argue, rather astonishingly, that a reflective awareness of this combining power in us is really all that can be claimed on behalf of a "self" at all. He writes, and in the first-person no less: "I exist as an intelligence which is conscious solely of its powers of combination" (CPR, B159).

I have argued throughout that *The Waves* does not present mental contents but rather is pitched at the level of form; that is, at the internal abstractions underlying the appearance of objects. The challenge now, for the explanatory notion of *spontaneity* – as well as for our reading of Woolf – is to show how such internal abstractions, the shapes held by the brain, in Woolfian terms, can be construed as points of departure for creativity rather than as rigid structures that reduplicate experience according to a prior model.

In the section of *The Critique of Pure Reason* titled "Transcendental Logic," Kant draws a parallel between understanding and sensibility, but also suggests a radical difference between these two cognitive capacities. Only one gets called a "faculty" in this section, for example. Back in the "Transcendental Aesthetic," we learned that sensibility has a "form," which is a way of saying that an innate structure of the mind sets sensory limits and conditions on possible experience. And so now, similarly, in the "Transcendental Logic," Kant turns to intellectual conditions. Kant's famous opening passage from the "Transcendental Logic" gives us a

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<sup>339</sup>George Herbert Mead, "Kant and the Background of Philosophical Romanticism" in *Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Merritt H. Moore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936), 67.

collection of dualisms whose salience for the philosophy of mind, whether we accept them or not, cannot be underestimated:

Our knowledge springs from two fundamental sources of the mind; the first is the capacity of receiving representations (receptivity for impressions), the second is the power of knowing an object through these representations (spontaneity [in the production] of concepts). Through the first an object is given to us, through the second the object is thought in relation to that [given] representation (which is a mere determination of the mind). (A50, B74)

Kant’s introduction here may look like a “faculty psychology,” and indeed it is sometimes labeled a “faculty dualism” – but is that really so? Is Kant making an empirical claim about a bi-partite structure existing within the brain?<sup>340</sup> Most important for my purposes here, rethinking Kant with Woolf and modernist fiction generally, is the idea that spontaneity captures a logical distinction between being imprinted by sensory impressions and making something of them.<sup>341</sup>

Kant’s distinction in this famous passage, between two different kinds of knowing, is expressed in multiple ways that are interrelated: When objects are “given” to our sensibility, the process is characterized in terms of our “passive receptivity” (see left column). Indeed, the receptivity is encoded in the passive syntax that Kant uses here (*durch die erstere wird uns ein Gegenstand gegeben*). On the other hand, when we “think” those objects, this is characterized as an operation of an active, “spontaneous” power in us (see right column).

Being given an object	Thinking an object
Receptivity	Spontaneity
Passive	Active
Sensibility	Understanding
Intuitions	Concepts

Kant identifies the two sides of the dichotomy as the “two fundamental sources” from which “knowledge [*Erkenntnis*] springs,” and yet only the column on the right qualifies as “knowing [*erkennen*].” The classical distinction between “passive and active” modes of knowing seems to provide a meta-language for the passage: it defines the distinction between sensibility and understanding. Couldn’t it be protested, however, that both sensibility and understanding make an “active” contribution in the sense that both faculties have a “form”? Indeed, the sensibility no less than the understanding, sets *a priori* limitations on knowledge, delimiting the shape of possible appearance (for example, as having “shape” at all). No matter what comes in, experience is going to have some necessary features, simply by virtue of the fact that we are limited biological creatures with certain cognitive abilities and not others.<sup>342</sup> It must be the case, then, that something other than mere abstract “activity” is meant by the notion of spontaneity.

<sup>340</sup> For an interpretation of Kantian receptivity and spontaneity as “two sides of a single capacity,” see Andrea Kern, “Spontaneity and Receptivity in Kant’s Theory of Knowledge” *Philosophical Topics* 34, nos. 1 & 2 (Spring and Fall 2006): 145-162.

<sup>341</sup> This logical distinction, as C.D. Blanton has pointed out, may also be a perspectival one.

<sup>342</sup> That is, “unless we’re angels,” as Noam Chomsky likes to put it. See *The Science of Language: Interviews with James McGilvray* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 133. For more on the interrelated ideas of cognitive scope and cognitive limits, appealing to an explicitly Kantian framework,

It may be advisable *not* to re-entrench any metaphysical thesis whatsoever (whether Kant endorses one or not) about the distinctness of these two modes; but rather, to emphasize the logical distinction that Kant makes between the two. Noting that there is no “independent discussion” of spontaneity in the First Critique, despite its numerous mentions, Robert Pippin writes:

This contrast appears to commit Kant to the claim not only that our intellectual faculties cannot be receptive (no Aristotelian *nous pathetikos*) but that there is some kind of necessary discontinuity between the receptivity of sensation and the activity of *thinking about* sensory matter: “Sensory impressions,” it would appear, cannot be said simply to engage the mind in the sense of producing representations, with these representations subsequently producing or giving rise to ‘ideas.’ We (any thinker) produce something ‘from ourselves’ and it is this initially somewhat metaphorical notion of spontaneity that Kant introduces so casually.<sup>343</sup>

The first of the two “sources” of knowledge, the modality of receiving representations, is a recapitulation of the Humean, empiricist model: The world is passively imprinted on the retina, following the metaphors of a wax seal. For Kant, such an account of the way knowledge works is necessary but not sufficient. For it is only through the second “source” of knowledge that an object is “thought.” This suggests, provocatively, that receiving sensory impressions is not sufficient for thinking an object. What Hume describes, in other words, is something other than thinking (a conclusion, which in his despair, Hume may very well have agreed with). Being impressed by an object is not the same as thinking it. To be given an object, or to have an object be “given” is not the same as to think the object. To “think” the object requires an active capacity, performed by the understanding. This is opposed to the sensibility, which as we have seen is a receptive capacity.

We might wonder why Kant sets such a strict criterion for what counts as “thinking.” Doesn’t the way he describes “thinking an object” sound an awful lot like “thinking *about* an object”? But then, do we really need to be *thinking about* an object in order to be *thinking it* properly? Even here we can see that “spontaneity” involves a modicum of self-consciousness, which Kant somewhat astonishingly associates with the possibility of thought, or knowing an object.

Ginsborg animates some of the central difficulties in the inheritance of empiricism: exactly what is preserved, what is disregarded? The question is whether there remains in Kant – or should remain for us, having ingested Kant’s intercession on empiricism – a category of “experience” which is independent of the operations of the understanding; whether a form of experience exists which is not, in other words, tantamount to knowledge. The stakes are clear, and ambivalent: the question is whether we as perceivers are being “conceptual” – engaged in thinking – at the most basic level of our sensuous interaction with the world. To answer in the affirmative involves what Ginsborg calls the more “radical” claim “that we require understanding in order for objects to be presented to us perceptually” (61).

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see Akeel Bilgrami and Carol Rovane, “Mind, Language and the Limits of Inquiry,” in the *Cambridge Companion to Chomsky*, ed. James McGilvray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 181-203.

<sup>343</sup> Pippin, “Kant on the Spontaneity of Mind,” 453.

However, this radical claim also brings with it potential costs: “The idea that experience requires understanding is rightly regarded as a fundamental insight of Kant's view. But its centrality to Kant's thinking, and its consequent familiarity to Kant scholars, should not blind us to a seeming paradox it presents” (60). The “seeming paradox” according to Ginsborg, which her careful account of spontaneity in perceptual synthesis is designed to redress, is this: if even basic perceptual experience requires what Kant calls “understanding,” then how do we understand the traditional, empiricist model of “experience” as something on the basis of which we might make conceptual judgments, but which is itself distinct from conceptual thought? Ginsborg gives voice, but ultimately rejects, one classic way of construing the Kantian rejoinder to this traditional empiricist view of experience. On this view,

Experience should not be identified with the perceptual impressions through which objects are given to us but rather with the empirical judgments we make on the basis of these perceptual impressions. In other words it should not be identified with what we might intuitively think of as my ‘perceptual experience’ of, say, a green cube in front of me – the visual impression which is made on me by the green cube – but rather with the perceptually based judgment or recognition that there is a green cube in front of me. (61)

Yet for Ginsborg this is not satisfactory either, since if understanding is involved only in full-fledged judgment, we have sacrificed the whole force of Kant’s argument that the understanding is involved in the very *presentation* of objects, and not merely in the judgments that we make about them through higher-order operations of the understanding. The point that I want merely to mark here is that this technical problem in the reception of Kantian epistemology, which requires at times very technical solutions, has enormous – though admittedly, more “fuzzy” – implications for the role that “thinking” plays in daily life. In particular, I take it that the “jury is still out,” so to speak, about whether what we call “thinking” is an obstacle to experience or rather an enabling condition.

The binary opposition that Kantian problematics both animate and problematize – between thinking about an experience and actually having it – remains all too salient today; in fact, as far as theories of knowledge go, it has become a commonplace pervading the culture of everyday life. To pursue the cultural point, for a moment, the omnipresent Nike slogan “Just do it” comes to mind.<sup>344</sup> That slogan is one particularly extreme example that demonstrates the cultural availability of a discourse in which thought has acquired a bad name. In such an environment, the desire for an acquaintance-based knowledge seeks to recuperate for knowledge something akin to the unmediated contact with reality that agents “know” – and does so with controversial results.<sup>345</sup>

Perhaps I can be accused of romanticizing, or reading metaphorically, what is really only a technical problem about the role of understanding in perceptual synthesis. After all, Kant’s epistemology was crucial for the development of later notions of an historical *a priori*, which his own system emphatically does not permit. But if I am guilty of such a metaphorical elaboration

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<sup>344</sup> See my Epilogue, Section 1 below for a fuller discussion of the Adornian elaborations of this Kantian problematic.

<sup>345</sup> Russell’s notion of “knowledge by acquaintance” is one important example. In another project, I pursue similar Kantian problematics through a comparative reading of Russell’s distinction and T.S. Eliot’s “The Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”: *Oh do not ask what is it/Let us go and make our visit.*

of experience's "possibility," then so were the Romantics with implications for much contemporary art. I cannot fully enter into this here, but it should be noted that from Walt Whitman to Jimi Hendrix, the notion of "experience" in twentieth-century art has largely sided with empiricist notions of experience: the visual perception of the green cube in front of me, and not the judgment that it is there. The importance of "experience" for being able to see beyond the norm, and literally for seeing new things at all relies exactly on the idea that "experience" does not replicate categories that already exist. Another way to put this is that raw "experience," aesthetically re-valued, is supposed not so much to involve understanding but rather to produce new forms of understanding which would simultaneously call into question the restrictive definition of understanding as Western thought has claimed to know it.

And we can see this in the technical point that Ginsborg makes, when she acknowledges the appeal of empiricist notions of experience:

Objects are given to us in experience, and while experience can thus serve as a basis for forming a judgment about how those objects are, that judgment involves an active exercise of mind which goes beyond the mere reception of data which characterizes experience itself. To the extent, then, that Kant intends to maintain this traditional conception of experience, it is hard to see how he can also take it to require understanding. For that would seem to imply that experience involves actively committing ourselves to how things are, as opposed to passively registering impressions which might or might not serve as a basis for committing ourselves through an act of judgment.<sup>346</sup>

It is difficult for a Kantian to give up on the idea that perceptual experience presupposes modes of thought, at least minimally. For that reason, it is also difficult for a Kantian to maintain the empiricist notion of experience as merely "raw material" for judgment. Ginsborg's solution, meticulously argued, is to emphasize the different forms of synthesis that operate at various cognitive levels – but all are properly described as operations of spontaneity (and hence identified with the understanding). All this supports the central idea that some understanding is required "for us so much as to have the experience through which the green cube is given to us." That is not to say that all perceptual experience is full-blown judgment, but rather that forms of spontaneous synthesis, an operation of the understanding, are common to both:

The exercise of understanding is required not just for my judgment that there is a green cube in front of me, or that the cube in front of me is green, but for the very perception through which the green cube is presented to me. And this point seems intended on the face of it to cut against the empiricist view that I can come to have ideas of colour and shape, and more generally perceptual images, through the operation of my sensory faculties alone. (64)

The ramifications of this epistemology go beyond the technical point in analytic philosophy, and in fact form a cornerstone of critical theory. What I am suggesting about Kantian spontaneity, via Ginsborg, is that the caricature of conceptuality as rigid pre-determination (though rightly earned, given the terror and violence sometimes associated with "rationality" in human history) may nevertheless not do justice to *all* the potentiality embedded in the understanding.

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<sup>346</sup> Ginsborg, "Problem of Experience," 61.

Woolf's elaboration of a sense perception saturated with understanding is cognate with Ginsborg's interpretation of Kant, despite the incommensurable modes in which they argue. If both disclose conditions of possibility for experience, the shared artistic and philosophical problem becomes, how do you make a condition of possibility palpable? Woolf's work with perceptual form suggests that novelistic form can "hold" or embed modes of spontaneity that are negated in everyday life – either by social numbness, or because they are lost, submerged so deeply at the *a priori* level.



## INTERLUDE: JAZZ, KANT AND THE “SPONTANEOUS COMPOSITIONS” OF THE MIND

### 1. PUTTING IT TOGETHER

In the last chapter I proposed that Woolf’s text embeds the conditions of possibility for thinking in its own experimental form. *The Waves* lays bare a structural creativity that underlies the workings of everyday acts of understanding. This underlying synthetic creativity necessarily exceeds the bounds of naturalistic description, because it makes naturalistic description possible in the first place. Now, taking the interconnections between spontaneity and form even further, the interlude below prepares the ground for my discussion of Toni Morrison’s novel, *Jazz*. In the first half of the interlude, I suggest affinities between the modes of active construction privileged by Kantian form and the knowledge practices that are implied in jazz performance. But this means that jazz amplifies precisely the capacity for “thinking things together” – in other words, for knowledge – against which it was pitted, on the primitivist paradigm. In the second half, I go on to highlight some of the ways in which jazz makes good on the possibilities of non-coercive, *truthful* conceptualization that are increasingly ruled out in majoritarian spaces.

It is striking that Robert Pippin illustrates the intimate link between spontaneity and awareness of one’s own representing capacities by giving the example of listening to drums:

I can not only be aware of, say, drums and then a noise produced with them; I can also be aware, from another point of view, of the empirical events that occur in my mind in such awareness – the *sight* of the drums and the *hearing* of noise (i.e., I can date, catalogue, and perhaps causally relate these contents of inner sense). But I can also *think together* these events (“spontaneously”) in thinking *that* the drums produced the noise (or that the sound followed the sight in my experience). *This* cannot just be a passive awareness of a state or doing of my mind, conceptualized in judgment, since it is a thought made possible by my active understanding in the first place.<sup>347</sup>

Pippin’s hypothetical first-person account moves from an awareness of disparate representations to an awareness of what Kant calls “inner sense.” However his account does not end with inner sense, but makes a brief stop there in order to move on to what Pippin considers to be full-blown spontaneity, on Kant’s account. This brief stop at inner sense is meant to distinguish the passive self-awareness referred to as inner sense from spontaneity.<sup>348</sup> Kant’s early view, which he later rejected and revised, did not allow for a notion of self-consciousness beyond inner sense. That is one reason why Pippin stresses the subtle distinction between inner sense (noticing what one is perceiving) and apperception. Kant writes in the *Anthropology* that pure apperception is “consciousness of what we are *doing*” and that inner sense is “consciousness of what we *undergo* as we are affected by the play of our own thoughts.”<sup>349</sup> What Kant calls

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<sup>347</sup> Pippin, “Kant on the Spontaneity of Mind,” 45.

<sup>348</sup> See Kitcher, “Locke’s Internal Sense and Kant’s Changing Views,” in *Kant’s Thinker*, 15-26.

<sup>349</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. and ed. Robert B. Louden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 53 [“On Inner Sense”].

“thinking” always involves the active component; hence in the same passage he says that only apperception, not inner sense, “belongs to the power of thinking.” Inner sense for Kant is already a rich cognitive landscape, but not yet, according to his revision of empiricist models, one that amounts to an active doing. For in inner sense, we are still wholly affected by what arises in us. The word “that” in Pippin’s account, then, marks a pivotal turning point in the emergence of spontaneity out of other various internal processes: “But I can also think together these events (“spontaneously”) in thinking *that* the drums produced the noise” (my emphasis). To understand what Pippin is bringing out of Kant’s account, it’s important to bear in mind that it does not matter what particular judgment about the drums follows the word *that*. Rather, it’s the *that* that counts. Recall that William James claimed, in his *Principles of Psychology* (“The Stream of Consciousness”) that there is a “feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*,” but he does not say a there is a feeling of “that.” If he did, he would risk collapsing the possibility for knowledge back into an undifferentiated stream of mental phenomena.<sup>350</sup>

I want to say a word about the developmental trajectory that is vaguely implied or rather inevitably invoked by such an account. The aims of Pippin’s passage are clearly explicative and not developmental: to show what mental acts do and don’t suffice for spontaneity. Still, there is no way around the fact that any explication of Kantian spontaneity itself relies on an idea of a cognitive state of affairs, considered more “primitive.”<sup>351</sup> Indeed, the primary disconnected and disaggregated flux of disordered perceptions that is stipulated (if not celebrated) on the Humean paradigm is exactly what Kant tries to get beyond: “I can not only be aware of say, drums and then a noise produced with them”: This is Pippin’s way of invoking Rhoda’s “the swallow tips and the tiger leaps on the other side of the world”; that is, Hume’s substitution of mere conjunction for causation. The noise is produced “with” the drums but not by them; or, if the noise is produced by the drums, this is not actually available to our consciousness as an experience.<sup>352</sup> Pippin is right to suggest that Kant’s account invokes the possible experience of radical disintegration in order supersede it. Kant wants to show that, contra Hume, this is not all that we do when we perceive. But it is also part of Kant’s account, as with much reductive romanticism and its philosophical afterlives, that the radical sensory disconnection embraced by Hume as real gets relegated to a developmentally primary primitive of what Kant calls “babes

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<sup>350</sup> Spontaneity brings about what in late-nineteenth/early-twentieth century parlance might be called a “propositional structure” in the mind (reading back linguistic structures into structures of thought without always marking the transition) but I am more comfortable saying that spontaneity can be translated into the form of the proposition. It is somewhat defamiliarizing to appraise this Kantian account from the perspective of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and from the vantage point of the “linguistic turn” in particular. That is, in the twentieth century it was more common to talk about *propositional form* than about the conceptual judgments that supposedly are expressed through the form of a proposition. [the conceptual judgments for which the form of a proposition is supposedly the most characteristic expression]. See, again, Wittgenstein’s claim, in his *Tractatus* about the awareness that puts us in touch with the *form* of a proposition as such: it is an example of something that can only be “shown,” not “said,” and therefore presumably part of what must be “passed over in silence” (4.1212).

<sup>351</sup> Even if the notion of a cognitive “primitive,” as in contemporary philosophy parlance, is heard as meaning “nothing more than” developmentally prior, the racist connotations of the primitivist construct are nevertheless immediately at hand, since they belong to the same paradigm.

<sup>352</sup> If drums are perceived from sufficiently far off – the possibility of distant perception being part of their social function and aesthetic power – then one can very easily have exactly the Humean experience that Pippin describes: Since the speed of light travels faster than the speed of sound, one can be aware of drums “and then” a noise produced with them.

and beasts”<sup>353</sup> It is easy to see how, on this reductive account, the realization of thinking itself would bring with it a terrible loss of aliveness, as if thinking were not part of nature. I have tried to show that Woolf’s presentation of consciousnesses in *The Waves* moves beyond the reductive romanticism that pits “childish” cognition as a (glorified and exoticized) foil to full-blown knowledge, and therefore also disqualifies spontaneity from having intellectual value. I have tried to show that cognitive spontaneity, especially as it is elaborated in Kant’s First Critique, does not necessitate – and in fact, can be reconstructed in opposition to – this reductive move.

Pippin’s drum example illustrates how the mind operates over and above its own sensory contents (and even its own “inner sense”) – to end up, somehow back on the other side – the side of the object and its richness. Spontaneity for Kant is what must come into play for someone to be a knower.<sup>354</sup> It enables a full grasp of the object and its richness, which is at the same time full of its own subjectivity. There is something about the drumming which engages Pippin in question of synthesis, just as Woolf was provoked by the sensory particulars of a street scene to ponder the question of “mental unity.” Perhaps it is no accident that art is the test case for perception, in Pippin’s example. For Pippin, hearing the drums means knowing the drums; but it also means knowing something other than the drums. That is, there is also a sense in which the drums themselves are a mode of knowing; they open up onto another reality to be known.

Even the basic activity of taking the drums to have produced the noise; or taking the noise to be drumming, Pippin suggests with Kant, is an act of “spontaneity”; it is not a passive recording of sound, but a way of *taking it to be something*.<sup>355</sup> To return to Thomas Land’s formula for spontaneity: “Combination is not given.” This means that what I take the drums to be is in excess of the drums themselves, and simultaneously allows me to know them. Drumming may not be a random example of Kantian judgment but rather exhibits a potential relationship among philosophy, literature, and music based on the idea of spontaneous combinatorial practices. There is a relationship to be explored between drumming in the philosophical thought experiment by Robert Pippin, an American Kant scholar, and the fictionalized drumming in Toni Morrison’s novel *Jazz*, where the drums serve as the paradigm case for a cognitive act of synthesis that is gestured toward but never fully realized. And yet, it is no accident that in the United States drumming might serve as the paradigm for “putting it together,” in Elvin Jones’ terms.<sup>356</sup> Indeed, in both cases drumming and the drums are an important and underacknowledged model for judgment – for the acts of mental spontaneity that underlie the

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<sup>353</sup> Some aesthetic and philosophical movements will embrace the minimalist sensory paradigm of “drums and then a noise produced with them” and the heighten modes of attention and attunement that are fostered by such an attentiveness to “what is,” without fabrication or embellishment. But then the worry is that they do this at the expense of sacrificing any claims to knowledge.

<sup>354</sup> Robert Pippin, personal conversation, September 21, 2016.

<sup>355</sup> This means that spontaneity underlies the “aboutness” or “directedness” that phenomenological traditions referred to as “intentionality.” For Kant, conscious, active combination – putting the different pieces of experience together, consciously – is essential if my thought is going to be “about” anything at all; but this also means that the proper “object” of my thought cannot be specified independently of my activity of combination

<sup>356</sup> Elvin Jones Trio, *Puttin’ it Together*. Blue Note, 1968. The cover art depicts each of the three trio members (Elvin Jones, Joe Farrell and Jimmy Garrison) as pieces of a puzzle, suggesting one way in which music completes the picture of reality. <https://www.allmusic.com/album/puttin-it-together-mw0000194406>

possibility of viable knowledge.<sup>357</sup> As metaphor and metonymy for judgment, drumming both models judgment and exemplifies it. At the same time, this suggests the enduring centrality of black cultural forms, acknowledged or not, for the future construction of any viable universal categories of the mind. The philosophy taught by jazz musicians through and about their work includes the insight that the drums perform conceptual work – but not at all in a way that adheres to the binary opposition between life and thought.

Like Kant in Pippin's elaboration, Morrison also stresses the element of active construction in the production of knowledge. In art, according to Morrison, it is an open secret that the listener must contribute his/her subjectivity (a mix of understanding and imagination) to the scene that she takes in. In my view, this becomes a metonymy for the workings of perception generally; or for the potential of spontaneity that is latent in the understanding, in part through its debt to imagination. On this Hume and Kant are of one mind with another. See a particularly rhapsodic Hume, who ends his discussion "Of the ideas of space and time" by writing: "This is the universe of the imagination, nor have we any idea, but what is there produced."<sup>358</sup> The point for us, then, is that what the reader does reflects something larger about what it means to be a knower; to impose one's own form while still being answerable to what one encounters.

In my next chapter, I will engage a scene from Toni Morrison's novel *Jazz* which uses drumming to engage a problem of understanding, in a situation where the possibility of "thinking things together" is in question. Morrison stages a problem of synthesis in the form of an antinomy between what conventional language "says" and what the drums "mean." She uses drums to frame the possibilities of knowledge as such. If thinking is "uniting representations in a consciousness," then in Morrison's novel the drums not only think; they frame the possibilities of knowledge as such. They think in an environment where the possibilities for spontaneous thought have all but been ruled out.

## 2. SPONTANEOUS COMPOSITION

On February 15, 2013 the master saxophonist Gary Bartz, then 73, put up a public posting on his Facebook page:

How many of you improvise, because I don't. Let me give you some definitions of improvise. IMPROVISE = offhand, spur of the moment, unplanned, unpremeditated, unprepared, unrehearsed, unstudied. These are a few.  
//Everything I play I mean to play. The only time I improvise is when I make a mistake. Then I am improvising, because I did not mean to play that. *We are*

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<sup>357</sup> The United States is perhaps unique in having criminalized not only literacy, but drumming as well, bespeaking the link between the two. Drumming was a central linguistic device, one might say, in eighteenth-century slave rebellions to communicate to other enslaved peoples that an insurrection was afoot. The outlawing of drumming presupposes its communicative potential as language and subversive relationship with knowledge. On the outlawing of drumming following the Stono Rebellion of 1739, see Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counter-Point: Black Culture in the Eighteenth Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

<sup>358</sup> Hume, *Treatise* 1.2.6, 68.

‘*Spontaneous Composers.*’ At least that is what I call it. From Mozart to Beethoven to Louis to Prez to Bird to Monk to Trane. All great composers and not improvisers. They/We plan, prepare, rehearse, study and meditate. When everything is right, some of the greatest music ever heard is created spontaneously.<sup>359</sup>

Bartz both expresses a problem that spontaneity might redress: a set of strict binary oppositions, between what is premeditated on the one hand, and free on the other; between what is rational and deliberative on the one hand and imaginative on the other. As Bartz shows, these binary oppositions make it difficult to think possible, let alone theorize, a form of meaningfulness that is of the moment. Bartz’s programmatic statements here and elsewhere merit a close-reading because they are not as idiosyncratic as they may appear; in fact, they reflect a very important counter-strain to the dominant “critical” discourse on jazz.<sup>360</sup> Bartz’s comments make us feel the force of a dichotomy which in some ways must be dispensed with if the aesthetic practice which artists are engaged with on a daily basis, sometimes up to eight, ten, twelve hours a day, and for decades of their lives, is to show up at all in the discursive imagination. Just as the “conscious combining” that Woolf’s consciousness evinces in *The Waves* is more than mere child’s play, it would be a grave mistake to confine Bartz’s worry about the difference between “spontaneity” and “improvisation” to the question of artistic practice alone. For are we all not quite literally engaged in “spontaneous composition,” if Kant is right, or at least in-principle capable of being so engaged?<sup>361</sup> The way that jazz musicians relate to musical form tells us something about the mind’s form when it puts different elements of its world together in novel ways that are not confined to the “content” assembled. These implications themselves are consciously celebrated in jazz music. And what about Kant’s claim that such “spontaneous composition” is the basis of knowledge as we know it? To return to Pippin’s example, the model of “spontaneous composition” suggests that we are like the drummers when we as hearers put the different elements of the drums together into one sound, or when we coordinate the sound of the drums with their sight; the drums are like us in its own fashion of putting things together. Indeed, the drums themselves are not so much a single instrument as a spontaneous integration of separate actions on separate drums with different limbs (whether within one drumset or across different drummers playing single drums). Spontaneity, like “jazz,” names the possibility of “putting it together” non-reductively, a form of thought that remains answerable to those fissures forestalling the complete unification of experience.

“What “improvisation” clumsily names, then, is surely a form of thinking too, but one which is often disqualified under present binary categories. Bartz puts his finger on one conceptual node in particular which may be especially difficult to locate within the limited epistemology that he diagnoses. It is the philosophical equivalent of a new harmonic voicing or rhythmic syncopation; i.e., something difficult to think under existing concepts and yet instantly made conceivable the moment it is articulated. That dissonant, or funky conceptual articulation is

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<sup>359</sup> Gary Bartz’s Facebook Page. <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100003520385976> emphasis added.

<sup>360</sup> See also Gary Bartz, “Jazz Musicians Aren’t Improvisers: They Are Composers.” Tribute to Yusef Lateef, December 28, 2013. Video. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_18uQq38zvY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_18uQq38zvY).

<sup>361</sup> It is helpful to strip away the connotations of “composition” that pertain to the social distinctions accorded to the “work of art.” Rather, I am using “composition” in the sense of its etymological meaning: *componere* –something that is put together.

that what is “created spontaneously” can also be “meant.” It is not merely that jazz pushes past limited epistemologies in particular ways; jazz is also one of the most powerful exemplifications of critical thinking as such.

But the paradigm against which Bartz writes, and which he claims has permeated our language, is one according to which *thought* itself is opposed to freedom and the capacity to be in the moment. This is a dangerous state of affairs, and one which, I argue, with Bartz, jazz musicians have always militated against – since if real thinking is possible, it must surely be able to adapt to the moment, rather than bringing pre-meditated categories to bear on ever-changing circumstances.

Another musician (also very distinguished) replies to Bartz’s account in a digital comment: "Interesting, Gary. Are you saying that everything you play is premeditated? Planned out in advance?" And so the misrecognition of spontaneous abstraction continues. Where is the place for our structured spontaneity? It is as if something in the colonial tongues (not to mention the official intellectual cultures) through which many Americans must speak makes it difficult to specify an intermediary position between “premeditated” behavior on the one hand and the merely subjective play of “anything goes” on the other. If “anything goes,” then all is permitted within subjectivity; nothing is excluded. But the music sometimes called “jazz” shows that one can speak, play, or think in a structured manner in the moment; that rational deliberation itself happens “in the moment” and therefore makes use of spontaneous cognitive productions. Indeed, we must deploy structures of our own in order to probe or test out what, if any, structures we might be encountering in the world at a given moment, and this too is an expression of spontaneity. In Bartz’s formulations, the term “spontaneity” emerges from within the space between the two binary poles that create a serious impasse for reflecting theoretically on artistic practice – and by extension, for reflecting on consciousness as well. Indeed, we may very well *be* “Spontaneous Composers” – this is an appellation that I think Kant would agree with, and he wouldn’t just be talking about jazz musicians. At the same time, the idea that black cultural forms could be an essential point of reference from which to theorize neglected dimensions of cognitive spontaneity in Kant’s philosophy is an affront to Kant’s racism.<sup>362</sup>

The problem is something like this – how is it possible to build a representation that is objectively “valid” without making its validity something totally trivial. Does consciousness always arrive on the scene, with the music already written, so to speak? And when it does not, can it make something meaningful of its surroundings, rather than fitting everything it encounters into a pre-existing script?

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<sup>362</sup>Recent debates on Kant and blackness, or on the validity of Kant’s critical philosophy vis-à-vis his own writings on race, include: Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, “‘Theorizing in a Void’: Sublimity, Matter, and Physics in Black Feminist Poetics,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 117, no.3 (July 2018): 617-648; Frank M. Kirkland, “Kant on Race and Transition” in *The Routledge Companion to the Philosophy of Race*, eds. Paul C Taylor, Linda Martin Alcoff and Luvell Anderson (Taylor and Francis: 2017), 28-42; Charles Mills, “Kant and Race, Redux.” *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 35, no. 1–2 (2014): 125–157; R. Bernasconi, ‘Kant as an Unfamiliar Source of Racism’, in Julie Ward and Tommy Lott, eds, *Philosophers on Race* (Blackwell, Oxford, 2002), 145–66; Robert Bernasconi, "Will the Real Kant Please Stand Up: The Challenge of Enlightenment Racism to the Study of the History of Philosophy," *Radical Philosophy* 117 (Jan/Feb 2003): 13-22; Paul Gilroy, *Against Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 2000; Thomas E. Hill and Bernard Boxill, ‘Kant and Race’, in Bernard Boxill, ed., *Race and Racism* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001): 448– 71; Meg Armstrong, “‘The Effects of Blackness’: Gender, Race, and the Sublime in Aesthetic Theories of Burke and Kant” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54, no.3 (Summer, 1996): 213-236.

“Spontaneous Composition” has been a term of art for some jazz practitioners who affirm the value of theorizing musical practice from within. It is a term closely aligned with the black avant-garde in the 1960s (poet A.B. Spellman uses the term to describe John Coltrane’s *Ascension* in his liner notes to that album), but the term itself is rarely given a source or discussed systematically in the academic literature on music. One exception of great importance is the 1990 PhD dissertation by composer, flutist and saxophonist Karlton Hester, titled “The Melodic and Polyrhythmic Development of John Coltrane’s Spontaneous Composition in a Racist Society.” Hester affirms the importance of both the formal and the contextual elements of the music, while the notion of “spontaneous composition” resonates throughout his study:

Rather than evaluating the music of spontaneous composers on its own terms, for example, European musical standards, are imposed upon an African-American art form which has its own musical values (that are often diametrically opposed to many of the tenets of the former system). Instead of asking African-American composers and performers to define and discuss their musical creations, European-American laymen have often arrogantly assumed the position of spokesperson for those denied the freedom to comment on and evaluate their own ideas and music. Although most of the world openly acknowledges the value of the artistic contributions that spontaneous African-American composers such as Coltrane have made to twentieth-century music, no educational or cultural institutions have been established for the preservation and perpetuation of their viable art music within African-American communities.<sup>363</sup>

In contrast to “spontaneous composition,” the ubiquitous term “improvisation” is rarely used by the so-called improvising musicians themselves, even when they don’t seem to mind it as a term of art.<sup>364</sup> I am most interested, however, in the particular storehouse of categories that create this impasse between merely “offhand” creativity as opposed to “pre-meditated” deliberation; that makes musicians’ silence about improvisation almost guaranteed to be more truthful than speaking.<sup>365</sup> Questions about improvisation put to musicians after shows by well-meaning listeners are painful because it would take so much work to undo the presuppositions that inhere in the question “were you improvising when you did that?” To say yes would be to capitulate to the assumption that jazz is a form of non-structured magic where anything goes; to say no would be to give in to the contrary assumption that it’s all planned out in advance. According to this

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<sup>363</sup> Karlton Hester, “The Melodic and Polyrhythmic Development of John Coltrane’s Spontaneous Composition in a Racist Society,” PhD Dissertation, The City University of New York, 1990.

<sup>364</sup> Of course the term “spontaneity,” just like the term “improvisation,” can – and has, on numerous occasions -- hardened into its opposite

<sup>365</sup> I think it’s very important to stress that those silences on the part of artists that do occur do not necessarily reflect a reticence to theorize, or otherwise reflect critically on their practice. Rather, in my view, they reflect a deeply acknowledged assessment of a problem of knowledge under particular existing conditions. Another way of putting this (though not entirely equivalent) is that codified musicological discourse in the West, especially when it comes to discussion of black music has often had a thinly disguised colonizing function.

logical bind, the structuredness of the artform is intelligible to people only on the assumption that it is pre-meditated. But how did we get here?<sup>366</sup>

Again, Hester's indictment of jazz criticism reveals the artificial double-bind imposed by the racism and limited epistemological schema that predominates in musicology:

Furthermore, it was seen that such writers have definitions for musical elements in jazz (such as melody, for instance) that contrast sharply with the jazz performer's musical concepts. Current musicological studies go so far as to develop tendencies (in thought and analysis) to create hypotheses, theories, and analytic systems using scientific and mathematical language (including information theory, set theory, and computers) to approach modern jazz music. Based upon a projection of their own conformist perception and mentality, these researchers try to superimpose their own value system upon the intuitive realm of collective jazz improvisation, a musical process that is based on an opposing value system."<sup>367</sup>

But Hester also criticizes the other side of this disastrous coin – the presupposition that the “intuitive realm” has no structure and is therefore beyond critical evaluation:

On the other hand, other scholars (who have apparently arrived at the same conclusions as the progressive ethnographer working with musical cultures that are beyond his/her social orientation) argue that spontaneous composition cannot be analyzed [he quotes a musicologist]:

‘We accept the desirability of studying internal formal and structural relationships in a human product which is obviously systematic, yet we have no tools for approaching the intuitive human activity that controls the decision making in spontaneous composition.’ (28)

The awareness on the part of jazz practitioners and the people close to them about the discursive shortcomings of the concept of “improvisation” is well-worn. James Baldwin's intimacy with the music is evident in his witty rejection of the very idea of improvisation in a 1979 essay, written in response to jazz criticism: “Go back to Miles, Max, Dizzy, Yardbird, Billie, Coltrane: who were not, as the striking – not to say quaint – European phrase would have it, ‘improvising’: who

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<sup>366</sup> Some call it the “dialectic of enlightenment,” a condition in which the most basic acts of creative agency, even those presumed to be built into everyday acts of sensory perception, can appear as if foreign and wild. This is a difficult situation for thought to be in, indeed. In their critique of the “dialectic of enlightenment” Adorno and Horkheimer hold open the in-principle *possibility* of genuine spontaneity<sup>366</sup>, but become gravely disillusioned about whether we live in a world where this possibility can ever be realized. The artistic practices and critical reflections on those practices that have been fostered by black American and other musicians working with the tradition sometimes called “jazz” have persistently refuted the limitations *for thinking* that are posed by the dialectic of enlightenment, even when institutional limitations often proved immovable.

<sup>367</sup> Karlton Hester, 17-18.



can afford to improvise, at these prices?”<sup>368</sup> Robert Glasper (born 1978), a greatly influential pianist for a much younger generation under tremendous neo-liberal pressures jokingly invokes the same well-known problematic in an Instagram post: “Jazz musicians...we have to stop improvising our careers...save that for the stage...have a plan...think ahead.”<sup>369</sup> Baldwin’s and Glasper’s joke is clear: There is a very great gap between the notions of creative agency that are elaborated on the bandstand, and those that are possible in real life. The nuance with which spontaneity is treated by the musicians has always eluded the essentializing connotations that are imposed both on the poles of rational deliberation and of imaginative play.

As a pianist, I have never been told by another musician, on or off the bandstand, to improvise.<sup>370</sup> On the other hand, I have on several occasions been urged to “Play!!”, where “playing” denotes both the musical act itself and an aesthetic valuation of that act: playing something of substance. I think this is telling given that a non-essentializing notion of spontaneity, one that underpins *objectivity*, is presupposed by the very notion of playing, just as the ability to express in the moment something structured which is answerable to unforeseeable realities is presupposed in the very notion of saying. It is taken for granted that a valuable musical utterance requires acts of thought that transcend the dialectical divide between the arbitrary and the pre-meditated, renewing hope in turn in the possibility of meaningful speech ; if it is not both free and evincing a spontaneous structure, it does not count as playing; by the same token neither a *fully* pre-scripted utterance in a living situation nor a “merely” associative stream of consciousness would count as “saying something.”<sup>371</sup> By “free” I mean not fully determined either by the composition being played, or by one’s own history of preparation and practice; by “structured” I mean recognizable precisely in its dialogue with, supersession, or ironic quotation of, or deliberate return to, existing forms.

The idea of creative perception that is not fully determined by the materials it draws on lies at the heart of spontaneity in Kant’s First Critique, his theoretical account. But here it must be re-iterated that Kant is at pains to distinguish this spontaneity from liberal or voluntarist ideas of freedom — the “anything goes” of contingency, or freedom of the will. It is on this point that I think a Kantian perspective can be mobilized in support of those who want to protect jazz from its appropriation into discourses of freedom as “anything goes.”<sup>372</sup>

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<sup>368</sup> Baldwin’s late essay, “Of the Sorrow Songs: The Cross Redemption,” began as a review of James Lincoln Collier’s *The Making of Jazz*, and is an indictment of and meditation on its claim, among others, to be “*A Comprehensive History*,” as its subtitle asserts.

<sup>369</sup> Robert Glasper, Instagram Page, June 13, 2017 <https://www.instagram.com/p/BVrLgz7gB0w/>

<sup>370</sup> The exception is in multi-modal collaborative contexts of dance or musical theatre, where the term “improvisation” may be more current, and different theoretical vocabularies and nomenclature are deployed simultaneously, producing wonderful incongruencies.

<sup>371</sup> I am alluding to Ingrid Monson’s book-length study of jazz from the point of view of its practitioners, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>372</sup> Hannah Ginsborg offers a reading of Kant’s Third Critique according to which “imagination can be ‘lawful,’ or ‘conform to rules,’ yet without being governed by any rule or concept in particular.” Those (like me) who grapple with the Kantian notion of aesthetic judgment can gain much elucidation from the way jazz musicians theorize their own practice: At Smalls Jazz Club in New York City I recently overheard a musician describing what happens when jazz improvisation is successful: “it’s not predictable, and yet that sh\*t is right.” A philosophically nuanced position in which one must play *correctly* what could never be formulaically prescribed – this is exactly the challenge that “spontaneous composition” seems to pose to existing critical categories. See Hannah Ginsborg, ‘Lawfulness without a

Stressing the possibility for error, Dizzy Gillespie, describing to drummer Arthur Taylor a drum book Gillespie was preparing to write, remarks that “a drummer can do so many wrong things. It’s the same thing as a trumpet. There are certain rules that always hold true in our music, I don’t care where you’re playing or with whom.”<sup>373</sup> As Gillespie points out in the same interview, the term “jazz” is a “misnomer only when it is identified with white musicians” like Stan Kenton (“they thought he was greater than Duke Ellington,” despite the fact that “that motherfucker couldn’t keep time”); but what Gillespie calls “history” is stronger than the tradition of misnomer and confused reference that he attributes to white markets. In contrast to Kenton’s inability to keep time, which did not stop him from being worshipped in mainstream media as the “king of jazz,” the clichéd conceptual distinction between what is “structured” on the one hand, and what is “free” on the other is rendered moot by a 100+ year history of recorded forms, structures and voicings: “our documentation is so strong now with all our records that they can’t get it,” says Gillespie, “we’re documented in records, and the truth will stand. History will tell you what it is about” (127).

This is the basis for what is an awkward, but I believe generative, affinity between “jazz” aesthetics—a distinctly black American philosophy of art and knowledge, with interracial implications—and those aspects of Kantian philosophy which actually refuted the reductive models of knowing through which the enlightenment in some cases went on to make a name for itself. The circulation of “spontaneous composition” as a critical notion moves from musicians who borrowed it from poets, to poets who borrowed it from musicians. To the extent that discussions of “spontaneous composition” appear in literary criticism, they often either focus on the beat generation writers, or attribute it to the scene of composition in Romantic poetry. When beat generation writers – or twentieth-century critics of romanticism – used the term “spontaneous composition,” the results did not always do justice to the mutual imbrications of spontaneity with form, but in fact in many cases have reiterated the same binary oppositions that Bartz calls attention to. In her essay, “Spontaneity, Immediacy, and Improvisation in Romantic Poetry,” Angela Esterhammer writes, “[a]ccording to the Romantic ideal, the poetic genius creates poetry naturally, without long labor or study. Figures and scenes of spontaneous composition populate the Romantic canon; they can be found in Blake’s Introduction to *Songs of Innocence*, in Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan,” and at the outset of Wordsworth’s *Prelude*.”<sup>374</sup> In Jack Kerouac’s “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose” (1957), he claims to model his prose poetics on jazz, but his idea of spontaneity anticipates Esterhammer’s idea of poetry created “without long labor or study,” more than Bartz’s. Here is Kerouac:

Not ‘selectivity’ of expression but following free deviation (association) of mind into limitless blow-on-subject seas of thought, swimming in sea of English with no discipline other than rhythms of rhetorical exhalation and expostulated statement, like a fist coming down on a table with each complete utterance, bang! (the space dash)-Blow as deep as you want-write as deeply, fish as far down as

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Law: Kant on the Free Play of Imagination and Understanding’, in *The Normativity of Nature: Essays on Kant’s Critique of Judgement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 55

<sup>373</sup> *Notes and Tones*, 125.

<sup>374</sup> Angela Esterhammer, “Spontaneity, Immediacy, and Improvisation in Romantic Poetry,” in *A Companion to Romantic Poetry*, ed. Charles Mahoney (Malden, Ma.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 321-326.

you want, satisfy yourself first, then reader cannot fail to receive telepathic shock and meaning-excitement by same laws operating in his own human mind.<sup>375</sup>

Kerouac champions what he calls “blowing (as per jazz musician) on subject.” The word “blowing” purports to be an insider term, one that takes soloing on wind and brass instruments as the prototype for improvisation generally, perhaps even facilitating for the writer a resemblance with the human breathing necessary to recite his prose. But Kerouac’s pronouncement in 1957 of what jazz musicians do, what writers ought to do, and therefore of what spontaneity is in the first place, when it comes down to its epistemology, does not stray very far from the primitivism that Okiji describes in the first wave of jazz commentary in the 1930s and 40s. His love for jazz notwithstanding, Kerouac’s view of spontaneous writing, or “blowing” as non-selective, limitless, lacking discipline, does not comport with Bartz’s. In fact, the rhythmic structure of Kerouac’s own prose in this passage belies the understanding of spontaneity that his words assert.

By contrast, fellow beat poet Allen Ginsberg’s notion of “spontaneous composition” is much closer to Bartz. Indeed, though “spontaneous composition” is frequently cited as “Ginsberg’s and Kerouac’s principle,” Ginsberg himself says differently in a 1993 interview in the volume *Race and the Modern Artist*:

Through Kerouac’s hearing [jazz] and admiring those rhythms and trying to write them in prose you have a lineage of African-American influence on American poetry toward open form...Plus the notion of spontaneous composition, which is an ethnic mix in various ways; there is the oriental influence, Milarepa, and the nonliterate poets that improvised, the American Indian influence, the African-American influence, all of them involving spontaneous mind, spontaneous utterance, improvisation. So the whole world of American Indian dance and song, and African American influence, and Eastern thought – all involve improvisatory forms, oral forms also, and the awakening of the mind to present circumstances rather than imitating previous literary forms.<sup>376</sup>

In this moment, Ginsberg acknowledges that the notion of spontaneous composition is itself a nonwhite, international poetics, and one that is totally racially de-centered. In this moment, Ginsberg makes good on the Kantian wager that the spontaneity underlying conceptuality may not itself be a unified concept.

But jazz itself is a critique of categorization because it calls out when categorization is deployed too rigidly and repressively (imposing itself on reality, paying no mind to what is there, the sound; confusing a theoretical description with the sound that it models) and *thereby* leaves

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<sup>375</sup> Jack Kerouac, “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose” in *The Improvisation Studies Reader: Spontaneous Acts*, ed. Ajay Heble and Rebecca Caines (London; New York: Routledge, 2015), 207.

<sup>376</sup> Ginsberg goes on to identify the African-American literary and musical canon as *the* major source for the beat movement (he mentions James Weldon Johnson Langston Hughes, LeRoi Jones, Ornette Coleman), and then freely acknowledges his ignorance of that same canon. “When All Met Together in One Room: Josef Jafab Interviews Allen Ginsberg,” in *Race and the Modern Artist*, ed. Heather Hathaway, Josef Jafab and Jeffrey Melnick (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003), 255-281.

room for productive (“spontaneous”) uses of conceptuality.<sup>377</sup> Conceptuality in this instance could take the form of a rhythmic concept (a certain way of dividing the beat) that must be practiced until it is no longer “shaky” or a harmonic concept (a certain way of hearing chord changes, or using voice leading) that must be developed so it can be applied in diverse circumstances. In this way, jazz is explicitly a practice of learning to think without overtaking the phenomenon that one is thinking about; and of using conceptual tools in a responsible way. This applies on a micro level to different aspects of musical competence but also to jazz itself – and most broadly, contains a lesson about the imposition of (often, white supremacist) categories on music.

Jazz traditions clarify to high degrees of precision the bounds of conceptuality -- describing in-principle limitations, but also setting prescriptive boundaries on discursive thought. *Critique of Pure Reason*, indeed! In this way, there is a warning in the music about categorization as such, which is why a case can be made for the kinship between jazz and critical theory, Adorno’s failure to see the connection notwithstanding. Unfortunately, much academic music theory, even and especially when dealing with jazz, tends to proliferate what Adorno called “pre-stamped” categories without inviting the critical exploration of categorization which is part of the music. Such instances of conceptualization are the *opposite* of what Miles Davis (and others) mean by the term “category,” for example in the following statement, which animates with nuanced inflection specific to American racism the central thesis of Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: “I always hated categories. Always. Never thought it had any place in music.”<sup>378</sup> The critique of inappropriate or overly vehement categorization makes room for the importance of theory (music theory, philosophy, history, aesthetics, etc) once the distinction between the theoretical account and what it models is respected.

Bartz and Baldwin give voice to the sense that something is unavailable in present language: a notion of freedom as something *other* than as arbitrary and capricious, the “anything goes” of personal liberty. Incidentally, the same baggage that burdens improvisation also burdens spontaneity. Recent work by Fumi Okiji at the intersection of jazz and critical theory engages the “difficult conversation” with Theodor Adorno that previous commentators have avoided having.<sup>379</sup> Okiji notes furthermore that “the term *individual*...has largely escaped interrogation within jazz studies” and cites as one example the “fetishization of the solo” (7). She offers with great precision a long-overdue clarification of what she calls “individualism and liberty in jazz commentary” (27). For Okiji, for example, the catchphrase “Jazz is America,” demonstrates a refusal, especially among jazz’s most vocal celebrants, to hear the music as anything but an affirmation of arbitrary personal liberty. Those tendencies, cramming spontaneity into the rigid box of individualism, that are themselves concomitant with the jazz age itself continue up to the

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<sup>377</sup> The parallel that I pursue with Kantian “critical” epistemology is that setting limits on reason allows for the possibility of viable knowledge based on the present moment (rather than knowledge that is antecedently pre-determined). This negotiation is constantly made in jazz when considering the appropriate – and inappropriate – place for music theory; a “critique of reason” that jazz musicians make with astounding precision, but which by many accounts is not yet reflected in jazz pedagogy programs at the university level.

<sup>378</sup> Miles Davis, *Miles: The Autobiography: Miles Davis with Quincy Troupe* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011), 205.

<sup>379</sup> Fumi Okiji, *Jazz as Critique: Adorno and Black Expression Revisited* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2018), 19.

present day.<sup>380</sup> Quoting recent jazz commentators who praise the music for “incarn[ating] liberty,” Okiji writes that they are “as deaf to the clanging contradictions of coupling jazz with liberty as elected upholders of the Constitution were as they voted in the Fugitive Slave Act.”

A final turn of the screw, though of course not one unfamiliar in the history of colonial discourses, is the fact that “alongside, and often interlaced with, the undeniably astute critical insight [that ‘jazz was a remedy to the degradation inflicted on people by capitalism’] was a quasi-religious enthusiasm that, at times, revealed casual racism (15).<sup>381</sup> Here is Okiji: “Jazz, interpreted as a manifestation of freedom from intellectualized approaches to creative expression, is understood by the primitivists to come from a people with direct access to a primal human essence all but lost by their European counterparts.” The notion of “spontaneity” is bound to crop up in such a discussion, as it does in Okiji’s. Jazz is continually reified into either pole – it is either “hyper-intellectualized” and therefore lacking in spontaneity, or pure, unreflective feeling. As Okiji puts it, “Jazz is hollow under the eggshell-thin surface of its “subjective expression,” toward which improvisation and its rudimental descendant, syncopation, are considered prominent tools. . . . Marked as spontaneity and innovation, [the music] in fact betrays an adherence to a law of the market that calls for work to ‘constantly remain the same while at the same time constantly simulating the ‘new,’ a demand that ‘cripples all productive power” (19).<sup>382</sup> Robert Witkin accurately sums up the discourse which was routinely imposed upon the music, echoing the role that jazz played and continues to play in the white imagination “a quality of ‘liveness’ and spontaneity had always been prized among jazz musicians and their audiences. Indeed, many would argue that spontaneity, improvisation and the uniqueness of every live performance of a piece is the *sine qua non* of true jazz of any kind.”<sup>383</sup> He continues: “This emphasis on the improvisatory possibilities in the primacy of the living performance over the abstracted account of composition could also be seen as progressive in the modernist context” (161). We can see that Witkin’s remarks uphold in a much more nuanced form the same disjunction that Gary Bartz contests: the opposition, for example between abstraction and life. Furthermore, the idea that jazz was deemed “progressive in the modernist context” reduces its progressive force to its high-brow reception (by those who determine the progressive modernist code). It may be argued, however, that, historiographically, jazz helped *launch* global modernism by disqualifying more decisively than any other artistic form the reductive epistemological schemes that artists in other media were no longer finding tenable. I can imagine Edgar Allan

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<sup>380</sup> In my article “The Philosopher’s Bass Drum: Adorno’s Jazz and the Politics of Rhythm.” I take the particular case of the Art Blakey/Benny Golson composition “Blues March” to illustrate how these impositions (and their rhythmic analogues, the “military march”) were playfully, subversively, and virtuosically incorporated into the structure of Art Blakey’s most commercially successful recording, while maintaining the highest level of virtuosity and deploying a polyrhythmic framework that both ironizes march rhythm and masters it to the highest technical degree, redefining for all future drummers who must now grapple with Art Blakey what a snare drum sounds like. See Maya Kronfeld, “The Philosopher’s Bass Drum: Adorno’s Jazz and the Politics of Rhythm.” *Radical Philosophy*, Summer 2019

<sup>381</sup> See Hugues, Panassié, *Hot Jazz* (Paris: Editions R.-A. Corrêa, 1934).

<sup>382</sup> In my previous chapter on Woolf on Kant I related this caricatured notion of intellect to the ridicule of Kantian apperception as “constant self-awareness.” See recent trends in what is colloquially known among musicians as “math jazz” or “schoolboy jazz.” The latter category only is linked to hegemonic jazz

<sup>383</sup> Robert Witkin, *Adorno on Music* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 161.

Poe's detective, C. Auguste Dupin, trying to run after the mental sequences of Charlie Parker, to no avail.<sup>384</sup>

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<sup>384</sup> I have referred to Charlie Parker in this instance (rather than, say to John Coltrane) precisely because Parker still operates within an associationist logic of his own, as C.D. Blanton points out. Working within the paradigm of determinate and linearly progressing chord changes, unlike his heirs in so-called "free jazz," Parker seemed to deploy spontaneity in such a way that would have *invited* Dupin to trail him; that is, his musical vocabulary seems both to engage slyly, and to elude, in the manner of a virtuoso, the specter of predictability. But though I have been stressing continuities between musical and cognitive spontaneity, it is essential to make space for the fact that Charlie Parker and Coltrane, for example, imagine and practice spontaneity quite differently from one another. Indeed, if Coltrane seems like a more fitting candidate for eluding Dupin, it may be because Coltrane has simply changed the subject (of predictability) altogether. As we saw with his colleague Elvin Jones' *Puttin' it Together*, perhaps Coltrane works with a notion of transcendental form that is more cognate with the Woolfian/Kantian moment I am working through here.

## CHAPTER 5: SPONTANEOUS FORM: TONI MORRISON'S *JAZZ* AS A THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

### 1. INQUIRY

The Kantians and the jazz musicians that I have provisionally put in dialogue in the interlude have been at great pains to bring out the distinctness of spontaneous form in an intellectual climate not always congenial to it. For Toni Morrison, that spontaneous dimension by which the mind actively constructs its knowledge is indispensable. Her novel *Jazz* points up both the pitfalls and the victories of a seemingly inexhaustible mind that is perpetually in excess of its materials. Morrison's critical writings and interviews around the publication of *Jazz* (1992) stress the problem of knowledge. In an interview, she states: "*Jazz* was my attempt to reclaim the era from F. Scott Fitzgerald, but it also uses the techniques of jazz – improvisation, listening – to ask questions that I want to ask myself."<sup>385</sup> The historiographical point is pertinent, given that, as Robert Witkin accurately notes, "to many people the most distinctively modern music of the first half of the twentieth century was jazz. The modernity of certain figures in American literature – F. Scott Fitzgerald, for example – was identified with a style of interpersonal relationships and social life that was summed up with the label the 'jazz age.'" Morrison's fiction redresses the co-optation of the jazz age – but, she brackets that historiographic corrective as less important than the capacity "to ask questions that I want to ask myself." Her narrative process in *Jazz* leads to certain questions but also seems to engage the question form itself.

Morrison's work as a critic persistently affirms the crucial role that art plays in making knowledge possible. Morrison's fiction affirms the contributions of art and rescues a possible future for knowledge untainted by worn out clichés (at best) and violent classification (at worst). In a 1996 interview with Sheldon Hackney, she clarifies: "But the mind is designed for that alone – problem solving, the acquisition of knowledge. That's all it does."<sup>386</sup> Morrison often frames her novelistic composition as a process of *inquiry* – as a knowledge project, defined in contradistinction to omniscience: "If it's not your brain thinking cold, cold thoughts, which you can dress in any kind of mood," she writes, "then it's nothing. It has to be a cold, cold thought. I mean cold, or cool at least. Your brain. That's all there is."<sup>387</sup> At the same time, it is precisely Morrison's valuation of inquiry that registers her abhorrence of the pretension to adopt a totalizing view: "*Jazz* was my attempt to take down the omniscient narrator."

That Morrison's "cold, cold" rationalism – with its critique of omniscience – should arise in the context of her discussing her novel *Jazz* is no surprise. In the reception of jazz music, a cliché which must constantly and diligently be swept away (and swept away again) is the one in which the spontaneity represented by music-making disqualifies any claim to rational deliberation. Yet Morrison's novel *Jazz* peels away the clichés attending the music, as well as the figures of inquiry against which so-called "spontaneous" expression was pitted. It is not so much

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<sup>385</sup> Toni Morrison, *Conversations*, ed. Carolyn C. Denard (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 204

<sup>386</sup> Morrison, interview with Sheldon Hackney, 1996, in *Conversations*, 137.

<sup>387</sup> Morrison, interview with Elissa Schappell, 1992, in *Conversations*, 90.

a matter of inquiring *into* jazz, as of attending to the possibilities for inquiry that the music renews.

## 2. RE-ENGAGING “THE ANYTHING-AT-ALL”

Morrison’s *Jazz* revolves around a love triangle in Harlem in the mid 1920s between Joe Trace, his wife Violet, and the teenaged Dorcas. But, as critics all note this plot is quickly dispensed with in the novel’s first few sentences:

Sth, I know that woman. She used to live with a flock of birds on Lenox Avenue. Know her husband, too. He fell for an eighteen-year-old girl with one of those deepdown, spooky loves that made him so sad and happy he shot her just to keep the feeling going.<sup>388</sup>

As critics and Morrison herself often point out, the narrator presents the plot the way the jazz musician introduces a melody – by simultaneously foregrounding and radically bracketing its importance. Note that the statement of the melody/plot, first of all, involves the narrator showing how well she “know[s] it.” Similarly, the narrator identifies the eighteen-year-old girl’s [Dorcas’] love as “*one of those deepdown, spooky loves*” (emphasis added), asserting her command of the genre, just as a jazz musician might present new melodic material in the self-conscious form of a well-worn blues idiom.

In unpublished portions of an interview with Claudia Brodsky, Morrison makes the analogy between plot and melody explicit by recalling the experience of listening to her favorite pianist, Keith Jarrett:

In *Jazz* I think I returned to something that I did before with the *Bluest Eye*, where I just wrote the whole plot on the first page...and it seemed a suitable technique for *Jazz* because I thought of the plot, really of *Jazz* – the threesome – as the melody of a piece, and it would be perfectly fine to sort of follow the melody, or feel the satisfaction of recognizing the melody, whenever the narrator returned to it, but that the real interest for me, the art of the enterprise for me, was bumping up against that melody, seeing it from another point of view, seeing it sort of afresh each time, and having that play back and forth. And I know, you [Brodsky] and I sat, not too long ago, listening to Keith Jarrett, remember? And then he played “Old Man River,” and there was this enormous wonder of that selection and you could feel the delight and the satisfaction when we heard the bits but part of that delight was not because we were hearing the melody of “Old Man River,” but because of when it surfaced, and when it was hidden, and when it went away, and then all the echoes and shades and turns and pivots around it. So that the

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<sup>388</sup> Toni Morrison, *Jazz* (New York: Plume Books, 1993), 3.



melody got -- we owned it in a sense, *more* because he *played* it: he played *it* and played *with* it.<sup>389</sup>

Morrison's final remark suggests the interconnection between "*playing* the melody" and playing "*with*" the melody. But there were – and still are – dangers associated with this form of play. In the following passage, the narrator invokes (and also expresses wariness about) the primary formal problem of the novel – narration as improvisation, by linking it with a loss of sanity: "Long before Joe stood in the drugstore watching a girl buy candy, Violet had stumbled into a crack or two. Felt the anything-at-all begin in her mouth. Words connected only to themselves pierced an otherwise normal comment" (23). The portmanteau "the anything-at-all" dangerously condenses a wayward narrative tendency into the form of a definite compound noun – a figure for dissociative fabrication that has hardened into a reality of its own. At the same time, "the anything-at-all" is a verbal artifice, a "hyphenated state" which can happen only in writing (and by means of punctuation marks), and which by being written down already alters the consciousness expressed therein. The hyphenated text, connected by the narrator, thematizes visually the idea of "words connected only to themselves," an agency proper to language getting carried away that will become the figure for musicality in the novel. But it begins here, in the threatening and seductive guise of madness – an interruption or "crack" through which a different kind of truth emerges. Indeed, the narrator can identify with Violet's urges: "Maybe everybody has a renegade tongue yearning to be on its own," the narrator abruptly intervenes, concatenating her own linguistic yearnings with Violet's. If language can be responsive to itself, then it is not clear where this will end. Violet's "renegade tongue" is thus linked with the narrator's own vagaries as a mediator of point of view, and as a stand-in for the verbal artist crafting language.

Morrison's mode of narration plays with the clichés that attend representations of "associative thinking" (the stream of consciousness) and *links these with* the stereotypical conceptions about jazz improvisation: the "anything-goes" which, as the case of Violet illustrates, is not just a mark of irrationality but of all-out madness. The spontaneity of consciousness hangs in the balance with the spontaneity of jazz.

Much early literary criticism on *Jazz* from the 1990s, reckoning with the challenge of how jazz and fiction might be related, ends up framing the problem in terms of the very dichotomy that the music supersedes: Morrison's novel is seen either as an example of spontaneous "riffing," or as partaking of a formalism that "is structured" and "rehearsed."<sup>390</sup> But Morrison's narrator both participates in *and* reflects critically on the "superabundance" that has been associated with "stream-of-consciousness" narration and with jazz alike.<sup>391</sup> Morrison's

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<sup>389</sup> "Interview of Toni Morrison with Claudia Brodsky." Toni Morrison Archives, Princeton University. Other portions of this interview were published as Toni Morrison, "The Art of Fiction No.134" (Interview with Elissa Schappel, with additional material from Claudia Brodsky) *Paris Review* 28 (1993):128-134.

<sup>390</sup> On the side of "structure," see Alan Munton, "Misreading Morrison, Mishearing Jazz: A Response to Toni Morrison's Jazz Critics." *Journal of American Studies* 31, no. 2 (Aug., 1997): 235-251. On the side of "riffing," see Alan J. Rice, "Jazzing It Up A Storm: The Execution and Meaning of Toni Morrison's Jazzy Prose Style," *Journal of American Studies*, 28 (1994), 423-32. Pelagia Goulimari addresses this issue by pointing to the fact that the novel itself "distinguishes between two modernisms." Pelagia Goulimari, *Toni Morrison*, Routledge Guides to Literature (London: Routledge, 2011), 94.

<sup>391</sup> Anne Fernihough, "Consciousness as a Stream" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Modernist Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 65-81. The notion of "superabundance" belongs to

passages here suggest that this superabundant “anything-at-all” must be engaged critically – even superseded – in order to ask real questions of the music, and to interrogate whatever autonomy or freedom might be claimed on behalf of it. In her interview published in the *Paris Review* as “The Art of Fiction,” Morrison describes the process of writing the novel through an analogy with jazz composition. She emphasizes the possibility for error (and for error *taken as such*) is central to the music, and therefore to the narrative practices that the novel enacts and describes: “*Jazz* predicts its own story. Sometimes it is wrong because of faulty vision. It simply did not imagine those characters well enough, admits it was wrong, and the characters talk back the way jazz musicians do.”<sup>392</sup> “*Jazz*” in italics refers to the novel, but also to the narrator that Morrison in a 1992 interview with Salman Rushdie calls the “book-voice.”<sup>393</sup> So in fact, it is the jazz musician, and the novelist-cum-jazz musician, who *checks* her own “renegade tongue” by making the possibility for revision central to her practice. Note that the very concept of “error” (which is also invoked by Dizzy Gillespie, see below) presupposes a criterion of objective knowledge as well as a rule-governed structure that undergirds spontaneous “improvisation.”

With its penchant for rhapsodic asides, the “book-voice” risks losing its grip on reality and therefore risks capitulating to the worst charges of arbitrariness and caprice that were launched at jazz’s spontaneity. At the very last moment, however, this improvising narrator recuperates the possibilities for knowledge by reflecting critically on the ways in which she may have denied her own characters the spontaneity that they really possessed. At the end of the novel, the book-voice laments:

I missed the people altogether. I thought I knew them and wasn’t worried that they didn’t really know about me. Now it’s clear why they contradicted me at every turn: they knew me all along. Out of the corners of their eyes they watched me. And when I was feeling most invisible, being tight-lipped, silent and unobservable, they were whispering about me to each other. They knew how little I could be counted on; how poorly, how shabbily my know-it-all self covered helplessness. That when I invented stories about them – and doing it seemed to me so fine – I was completely in their hands, managed without mercy. (220)

I have elected to use the pronoun “she” to describe Morrisons’ narrator, the “book-voice,” in her critical parlance, but all third-person pronouns seem unsatisfactory given that only at the end of the novel does the narrator come to the realization that he/she has been “seen” by the characters she purported to know completely. Her realization that she was not “unobservable” unseats her as the all-seeing “I” and simultaneously launches her into an erotic address to the reader, in the second-person: “Look where your hands are. Now” – the last sentence of the novel (229). Interestingly, the erotic relationship between narrator and reader presupposes the reader’s acknowledgment of the constructedness of the text: an erotics of form.

The narrator realizes her feigned sense of control over her characters’ consciousness was really just an erroneous substitute for knowledge, one in which the category pre-empts the

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Henri Bergson, who used it in his preface to William James’ *Pragmatism* to describe James’ view of consciousness: “La réalité, telle que James la voit, est redondante et surabondante.” Henri Bergson, introduction to *Le Pragmatisme*, by William James, trans. E. Le Brun (Paris : Ernest Flammarion, 1918), 2.

<sup>392</sup> Morrison, “The Art of Fiction,” 29.

<sup>393</sup> Morrison, *Conversations*, 53

experience, and where the knower describes only in order to experience her own capacity to know:

So I missed it altogether. I was sure one would kill the other. I waited for it so I could describe it. I was so sure it would happen. That the past was an abused record with no choice but to repeat itself at the crack and no power on earth could lift the arm that held the needle. (220)

Morrison mobilizes the specter of mechanical determinism (“the arm that held the needle”), activating the *pejorative* connotations of the record’s repetitive “groove.”<sup>394</sup> History, under this knowledge regime, appears now as a “broken record,” bound to repeat itself. Through the re-appearance of Violet’s “crack” on the surface of the record, the jazz music previously associated with “anything-at-all” (an erotic promiscuity of possibility), now shapeshifts into its nightmarish opposite – an “abused record with no choice but to repeat.”

Staking her claim somewhere between the “renegade tongue” and the “broken record,” *Jazz*’s narrator aspires to a form of spontaneity that avoids both pitfalls. This is most poignantly expressed through her awareness of her own temptation to deny that spontaneity to others in the name of authorial authority. Perhaps the quandary of knowledge presented in *Jazz* can be positioned against the backdrop of a literary-critical term Morrison makes use of much earlier, before she becomes a novelist. Here is Morrison in her 1955 Masters thesis (written under her given name, Chloe Ardellia Woford), titled “Virginia Woolf’s and William Faulkner’s Treatment of the Alienated”:

What Virginia Woolf means by ‘life’ is not always clear, but the values she prizes within it are made very plain. There is, she is convinced, a certain respect due to people in relationships between them. Mrs. Woolf tells us repeatedly, in this novel and elsewhere, that there is a sanctity in people and an unknowableness that should not be violated. But only the alienated characters in the novel, Clarissa and Septimus Warren, see this.<sup>395</sup>

Morrison’s narrative strategy certainly does model the possibility of getting thought started without having an end in sight; but she also makes clear the importance of setting limits on what William James called “all this imponderable streaming.” In this way *Jazz* makes good on the imbrications of spontaneity and form that are not available according to the explanatory framework of “stream of consciousness” as we know it. Epistemic limits are most salient when it comes to the “sanctity in people...an unknowableness that should not be violated.” *Jazz*

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<sup>394</sup> In “The Philosopher’s Bass Drum: Adorno’s Jazz and the Politics of Rhythm,” I point out that musicians have employed the term ‘groove’ to redress the serious gaps in critical discourses on rhythm. “Groove” celebrates the possibility of non-compliant, and yet rigorously structured rhythm. But Morrison here engages precisely the sinister reading of rhythm that was hurled at jazz by critics from Adorno on: On this sinister view, jazz’s rhythmic repetitions are nothing but *Gleichschaltung*, the standardization of political, economic and social life. This predicament is linked with a form of instrumental reason that, just like Morrison’s narrator, eagerly subsumes new realities under pre-conceived categories: “I waited for it so I could describe it.” Thus, Adorno argued “jazz can easily be adapted for fascism.” See Kronfeld, “The Philosopher’s Bass Drum,” 37.

<sup>395</sup> Morrison [Chloe Woford], *Virginia Woolf’s and William Faulkner’s Treatment of the Alienated*, 7.

reevaluates and remakes Woolfian “stream of consciousness” writing as technique and as theoretical model by linking jazz improvisation (what Morrison calls “playing along with the voice”) with the narration of thought; but the novels also suggests that the agency of the knower is enhanced through the enforcement of epistemic limitation.<sup>396</sup>

Like Morrison’s book-voice in *Jazz*, the consciousness called Bernard in Woolf’s *The Waves* is left alone at the end of novel to encompass all the other voices non-omnisciently, but questions whether his talent for “making phrases” really gets at anything like their point of view. I imagine Morrison’s book-voice and Bernard as joined in a choral response to the C. Auguste Dupins of the world. That is, in claiming to follow the sequence of other’s thoughts, they foreground the capacity of being wrong. Therefore, such narrators who re-engineer the literary “stream of consciousness” are not just engaged in self-critique for its own sake. By foregrounding the narrative capacity to be wrong, they bring out one of the key features of consciousness in the first place – the possibility of error, and therefore by implication, of “synthesizing” the world correctly.

### 3. NOTES AND TONES, SOUND AND NAME

In the last section I suggested that the possibility of error, of getting it all wrong, that the distressed narrator faces at the end of *Jazz*, is crucially linked with the novel’s musical aesthetic. From its opening sentence onward, (“*Sth*, I know that woman”), the novel constellates the problem of knowledge together with the problem of sound. But the various majoritarian cultural and intellectual discourses that have appropriated jazz routinely make it seem far-fetched that sound could be a form of knowing. Contrary to this trend is Arthur Taylor’s 1977 landmark book, *Notes and Tones*.<sup>397</sup> Taylor, himself a legendary drummer, interviews jazz greats from Dizzy Gillespie to Betty Carter. One recurring topic is the philosophy of naming that the practitioners of sound are involved in. Here is an excerpt of Taylor’s interview with Gillespie, with Taylor’s questions in italics:

*Where did the term be-bop come from, and what are your feelings about it?*

Duke Ellington once told me: ‘Dizzy, the biggest mistake you made was to let them name your music be-bop, because from the time they name something, it is dated.’

*They who?*

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<sup>396</sup> For a groundbreaking, and also narratively experimental piece of criticism, addressing Morrison in the second-person to broach the question of her relationship with Woolf’s fiction, see Barbara Christian’s essay, published the same year as *Jazz*: “I will rely primarily on your words and Virginia’s in the charting of my invention. I am inspired by your and Virginia’s different, yet related projects – layered rhythms I call them.” Barbara Christian, “Layered Rhythms: Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 39, no. ¾ (Fall/Winter 1993): 484.

<sup>397</sup> Though the book is indeed monumental in value and importance, it is a sad fact that it is considered “revolutionary” in music criticism simply because it was written by a major musician who interviewed major musicians about the art. Arthur Taylor, *Notes and Tones: Musician-to-Musician Interviews* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1977).

Whoever named it; I don't remember who named it. I think it came from when we were on Fifty-second Street. We didn't have names for all our tunes, so I would say: "De bop da du ba di baba de bop," and they thought I was naming a tune or something like that.

*Bop ba ba di ba do di la ba de bop*

Yeah. That was the introduction to "Max Is Making Wax." That's funny. I hummed the introduction, and you started the chorus. I guess it just happened from the way we used to hum things instead of saying the name of a tune. Say you play a number that goes be-bop. It just developed into that. I never thought of the term be-bop, and I'm sure Yard, Monk and Kenny [Clarke] never thought of the term be-bop. (126)

Sounds and names shapeshift one into the other, just as in the book's title, *Notes and Tones*, each word an anagram of the other. If "note" (musical note, but also note-taking) is an allusion to a written transcript, whether verbal or musicological, the equivalent of alphabetic analysis, then the book itself is an effort to take note non-reductively of something whose mode of being is tone.

The irony of using "bebop" as a rigidified name for an artistic movement is that the utterance "bebop" (in the context in which it was used) is precisely the *opposite* of a name. Indeed, it is a *non-arbitrary* signifier: the musical composition is called "the tune that goes like this..." There is no separation between word and thing – but this is because the thing is itself made out of language. In referring to the tune, you begin to sing it; and indeed this is what happens in the interview. The reference to the music instates the music itself ("That's funny. I hummed the introduction and you started the chorus.") Taylor and Gillespie are referring to and instantiating "Max is Making Wax," a blues at breakneck speed, extremely difficult to hum let alone play, and written for the drummer Max Roach in the virtuosic musical idiom invented by Dizzy Gillespie and the other musicians he names (Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, Kenny Clarke). Why try to invent new language for what is itself language? To try to define "bebop" may be a category mistake, not because it is "ineffable" but rather because "bebop" itself was a counter-definition. Indeed, merely to collapse "name and thing" here would be to misunderstand that forms and structures can take hold in ways that are deeper and more sophisticated than the form of a name or label: For though the verbal transcript of what goes on between Gillespie and Taylor may say "De bop da du ba di baba de bop," the *form and structure* of what is said and shared is located somewhere other than on the page. The music does not require transcription in order to have a form.

To periodize jazz under fixed names like "bebop" is to miss the critique of naming and of reductive categorization that is part of what the music does. Since Amiri Baraka's groundbreaking work (as Leroi Jones) on "Swing: From Noun to Verb," poets and philosophers have continued to register the music's critical edge in the medium of scholarly discourse. Angela Davis, in her study of the blues, ties "blue notes" to the power of "naming."<sup>398</sup> In "Other: Noun to Verb," Nathaniel Mackey, following Baraka, elaborates a critique of the white appropriation

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<sup>398</sup>Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 33.

of black music that is rooted in the grammaticality of naming.<sup>399</sup> This scholarship makes clear that jazz is not a “problem” for naming but rather an aesthetic tradition that problematizes naming.<sup>400</sup>

If the innovators of “bebop language,” like the consciousnesses in Woolf’s *The Waves*, look backwards (or ahead) to modes of articulation that are no longer available in what is conventionally “said,” it is not because they have not yet learned to speak, as racist tropes would have it. On the contrary, Gillespie’s recourse to sound is a linguistic intervention stemming from a direct reckoning of and mastery of the limits of existing language.

The primitivist discourse that was imposed on jazz’s modernism persistently obscures this fact.<sup>401</sup> In turn, the cottage industry that is now academic bebop pedagogy persistently dissociates the so-called “bebop” scale from the “syncopated rhythmic inflection” and other contextual elements (including harmonic context, rhythmic context, and social context) that make bebop a language.<sup>402</sup> The case of bebop is a very good example of Chana Kronfeld and Daniel Boyarin’s thesis that texts are not canonized unless they are deemed too dangerous to be left unappropriated.<sup>403</sup> Indeed, bebop in the twenty-first century has been “named” to a degree beyond even Gillespie’s wildest dreams, through the complicated embrace of its supreme academic canonization— which is to say, ironically, that its power as a language has been nearly effaced. Furthermore, by turning Charlie Parker’s and Dizzy Gillespie’s virtuosic mathematical abstractions into pat formulae, one distorts the mathematical character of the music, as well, since the whole point of a mathematical structure is that it is instantiated differently every time. The concern of many has been that such a bifurcated model of mind not only does injustice to the felt aspects of art-making; it gravely shortchanges the possibilities of theoretical thinking.<sup>404</sup>

Now let us return to the opening sentence of Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*: “*Sth*, I know that woman.” The opening sound is an invitation in miniature for the reader to engage in the imaginative participation that lies at the core of understanding.<sup>405</sup> It forces the reader to “consciously combine” the letters “s,” “t,” and “h” but in a way that is not the sum of its parts (that is not produced through aggregation), but rather brings to the foreground forms in the mind of the reader: for the consonant cluster “sth,” like a good piece of musical notation, will mobilize the multiple frames of reference available to the performer. Mendi Lewis Obadike writes: “The word ‘sth’ has been read as the sound of sucking teeth, often made in judgment on some person or event in African American communities. This word has also been read as fanfare – the first

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<sup>399</sup> Nathaniel Mackey, “Other: From Noun to Verb.” *Representations* 39 (Summer, 1992): 51-70; LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York, 1963).

<sup>400</sup> I use “problematize” in Foucault’s sense: turning it into the form of a question.

<sup>401</sup> Here Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s ironic problematization of “origin” vis-à-vis the dialectic between language and musicality is a useful reference. Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Johann Gottfried Herder, *On the Origin of Language*, trans. and eds. John H. Moran and Alexander Gode (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1986).

<sup>402</sup> See Nicholas Payton, “Dissertation on Bebop and Hiphop” <https://nicholaspayton.wordpress.com/2011/08/16/dissertation-on-bebop-and-hiphop/>

<sup>403</sup> Chana Kronfeld, *The Full Severity of Compassion: The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), Chapter 1.

<sup>404</sup> For an important counter-strain to institutional bebop, see the theoretical system developed by one of the innovators themselves: the Barry Harris Jazz Workshop conducted in New York City for the general public, ongoing to this day [http://www.barryharris.com/jazz\\_workshop.html](http://www.barryharris.com/jazz_workshop.html)

<sup>405</sup> See Carmen Gillespie, *A Critical Companion to Toni Morrison*, 78.

sounds a musician (particularly a horn player or percussionist) makes to announce that he or she is to take over the next solo.”<sup>406</sup>

The sound “means” by way of the concrete scenes of interlocution that it indexes, the response to a prior utterance that it shadows. But it is also the indeterminacy of the sound that counts along with its contextual meanings. The power of “sth” to engage the imagination lies not in its verisimilitude, but quite the opposite: it is an artifice, one that respects the distance between the skeletal structure suggested by three letters and what the reader may be capable of supplying with her own active participation in the realization of the composition.<sup>407</sup> The resulting sound that is suggested by “sth” is not necessarily produced by aggregating these three component sounds in the consonant cluster.<sup>408</sup> The units of transcription are not fundamental to the sound.<sup>409</sup>

In a way, to start with the semblance of sound as Morrison does in the opening sentence of *Jazz*, is to amplify, but not at all steer away from, the imaginative participation that is required by all language, but which the deadening (or surgical) tendencies of the “name” as label hide from view. In an interview with Pam Houston, Morrison illustrates the importance of imaginative participation on the part of the reader, by talking about the difference between a pornographic film and a love scene in a novel (“this has something to do with leaving space, I promise,” she laughs. Indeed, the power of language is precisely that it provides “less” than what the cinematic medium imposes on the viewer:

When I do sexual scenes-which I hope are very sensual-but the reason they are is because the metaphors come from some other place, so you can place your own sensuality, your own sexuality in that place, which is always the sexiest. I mean, after all, it *is* yours. So watching somebody else seems to be like watching somebody in love, or on an operating table-very clinical. But I think it is useful, maybe, because people don't think in images anymore. They may have frail imaginations, and this kind of film fills it out for them. But in text, if everything is out there for you, all the information is given, then you don't have any work to do...

I was raised on radio where you listened and you had to pick it up-the action, the scene-and the books I like are those that don't shut me out by giving me everything there is. So (a) that is the kind of writing I like, and (b) I think it is good for the active imagination. It is not just being fed information; it is producing it, along with the author. It is harder too, and I like that.<sup>410</sup>

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<sup>406</sup>Mendi Lewis Obadike, “Music,” in *The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia*, ed. Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu (London: Greenwood Press, 2003), 229. This “dental click” is also very common across a variety of Middle Eastern and African languages to express sorrow, disapproval, criticism, or simply negation.

<sup>407</sup> I am indebted to Stephen Best and in particular to his course on dialect literature and its theorization.

<sup>408</sup> In her audiobook reading of *Jazz*, Morrison pronounces it “tz” (a sound I can better approximate to the letter צ, *tzadik*, in Hebrew, than to any English letters).

<sup>409</sup> This is one possible affinity between the critique of empiricism that William James came to at the turn of the century, and the African-American musical art forms that developed around the same time.

<sup>410</sup> Morrison, *Conversations*, 243.

While it may or may not be true of pornography that it leaves nothing to the faculties of the viewer, Morrison describes how the literary object, apart from other media, may be counted upon to be co-constituted by the reader's imagination. We are given an evocative sound on the one hand and an assertion of knowledge and personal acquaintance on the other: "*Sth*, I know that woman."<sup>411</sup> The two are juxtaposed and we are invited to imaginatively provide the link. In the same way that the reader supplies the sound that is incompletely indicated by the ink marks on the page, the reader's imagination also infers the question to which the "opening" sentence responds (with its anaphoric reference, "that woman"). Thus the first sentence is no first sentence at all, but rather like the sound "sth," looks backwards at a provocation that has not been supplied.

But the narrator, or book-voice is not merely on the "supply" side of this transaction. Rather, the book-voice is itself caught in a spontaneous act, in claiming to know "that woman": "She used to live with a flock of birds on Lenox Avenue," the voice tells us. The seemingly arbitrary selectivity of the consciousness who picks out the "flock of birds," silencing an innumerable number of other more realistically expected details about Violet's apartment, can be acknowledged without undermining the fact that this idiosyncratic description gets something right about Violet ("that woman"). Later in the opening paragraph, the book-voice explains: "When the woman, her name is Violet, went to the funeral to see the girl and to cut her dead face they threw her to the floor and out of the church" (3). The most troubling and violent part of the sentence is moved through quickly (the funeral is of Dorcas, Violet's husband's lover, which explains the fit of rage and attendant violence with which she enters the church). It is as if "to see the girl" leads logically to "to cut her dead face," and the fact that the face is already dead already "undercuts" the violence described, but makes the sequence of verbs even more bizarre, a seemingly surreal image sequence that is only later corroborated as literally true. Just as Violet's own "renegade tongue" sometimes "pierces an otherwise normal comment," here the narrator's language mobilizes a conventional idiom in order to disrupt it. Even in the phrase "they threw her to the floor and out of the church," the word "threw" acts a pivot between two idiomatic phrases. In this instance of zeugma, it is almost as if language itself may be shaping the action and not the other way around.

As we have seen above with Dizzy Gillespie, the "namers" of bebop treat the music as essential sound data that need to be organized, and they therefore miss the ways in which bebop itself was already a language. In this sense, Morrison's novel *Jazz* is like bebop, refusing to pit sound against language. Launching this concern with sound as a cipher for the workings of language *tout court*, while simultaneously interrogating the claims for knowledge that might be made on behalf of sound's immediacy, is the ancient gnostic poem that serves as the epigraph to *Jazz*. This mysterious poem is at once rhapsodic in its knowledge claims and yet, in the context of Morrison's novel, seems also to poke fun at the grandiosity of the first-person "I," the narrator function who purports to inhabit all contradictory positions simultaneously from a position of privileged knowledge:

I am the name of the sound  
    And the sound of the name  
I am the sign of the letter  
    And the designation of the division"  
        "Thunder, Perfect Mind," *The Nag Hammadi*

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<sup>411</sup> Morrison, *Jazz*, 3.



Morrison's chosen epigraph comes from the *Nag Hammadi*, a collection of early Christian scriptures, part of the Gnostic gospels, which were banned and buried in Egypt and discovered in 1945. According to Elaine Pagels, the poem "Thunder, Perfect Mind" "contains a revelation spoken by a feminine power."<sup>412</sup> Pagels notes that this Gnostic poem joins a number of other Gnostic, Talmudic and Greek sources that contain androgynous creation stories, or feminine images of God that "are among those not included in the select list that constitutes the New Testament collection" (57). The voice's transgression of gender boundaries is central to its radical claims to knowledge (and marks the difficulty of assimilating these claims into subsequent orthodoxy). The divine feminine speaker employs her "I am" beyond the modality of description. The "I am," a feminine echo of and retort to the Hebrew Bible's "I am that I am" (אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה) is rather a performative speech act. The claim functions as its own corroboration. In fact it may be only through the power of the speech act "I am" that sound becomes name and name becomes sound; that is, that the disparate aspects of language that have been drawn asunder (name, sound, sign, letter) can be integrated and mutually refracted through an unifying act of language that presupposes that very integration: "I am the name of the sound/And the sound of the name." An unchecked power of linguistic creativity spills over its own boundaries, through the divine medium. But is it all just talk, another case of the "renegade tongue?"

Pagels writes:

Like circles of artists today, gnostics considered original creative invention to be the mark of anyone who becomes spiritually alive. Each one, like students of a painter or writer, expected to express his own perceptions by revising and transforming what he was taught. Whoever merely repeated his teacher's words was considered immature. Bishop Irenaeus complains that

Every one of them generates something new every day, according to his ability; for no one is considered initiated [or: 'mature'] among them unless he develops some enormous fictions!

He charges that 'they boast that they are the discoverers and inventors of this kind of imaginary fiction,' and accuses them of creating new forms of mythological poetry. No doubt he is right: first- and second-century gnostic literature includes some remarkable poems, like... 'Thunder, Perfect Mind.' Most offensive, from his point of view, is that they admit that nothing supports their writings except their own intuition.<sup>413</sup>

Morrison connects the music called "jazz" to this un-canonized, late antique Judeo-Christian model of renegade creativity. However the capacity for "generat[ing] something new everyday...enormous fictions!" brings it with the danger of an utterly contingent expression, with no relation to reality ("nothing supports their writings except their own intuition"). This danger is directly thematized by Morrison's novel, through what the narrator names as "the-anything-at-all." *Jazz*, with its gnostic epigraph, has been read as an affirmation of knowledge by direct

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<sup>412</sup> Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, 55.

<sup>413</sup> Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, 65.

acquaintance or experience, an alternative to scientific or rational knowing that is made available in the banned early Christian text. Pagels thus notes that “[t]he Greek language distinguishes between scientific or reflective knowledge (‘He knows mathematics’) and knowing through observation or experience (‘He knows me’), which is *gnosis*” (xix), a distinction echoed when Vincent A. O’Keefe suggests that “the narrator’s opening of *Jazz*, ‘Sth, I know that woman’...echoes this gnostic claim.”<sup>414</sup> Indeed, in an Anglophone tradition that runs together both forms of the verb “to know,” there is a very great need to carve out a form of knowing that departs from scientific paradigms – starting with what it means to say “I know that woman.” But while it may be tempting to identify *Jazz*’s embrace of sound, as O’Keefe does, with gnosis – that is, with knowledge by “direct experience” – the narrator’s own lamentation and confession of non-omniscience at the end of the novel calls this reading into question. Indeed, in the course of the novel, *Jazz*’s narrator becomes a jazz practitioner precisely by revising her own initial knowledge claims, and in this way may depart from the gnostic epigraph and its oracular feminine voice.

#### 4. “I’M NO ACCIDENT”: WHAT SPONTANEITY ISN’T

The notion of spontaneity in jazz writing was not always exactly inspiring, even when (especially when) it was used favorably. The primitivist discourse on jazz, as we have seen, does violence to *the subjective mode per se* by excluding from it all structure and epistemic value.<sup>415</sup> One can begin to see in the discourses outlined by Okiji and Witkin how the white appropriation of black music indexes an appropriation of cognitive spontaneity itself, engendering its dissolution into cliché. In fact the clichés attending the perception of spontaneity in consciousness and spontaneity in jazz may be independent: The racialized reduction of spontaneity to the anything-goes of mere “improvisation” brings with it a rather sinister view of the possibilities of thought, generally – a view whose crass empiricist origins I have tried to trace through Edgar Allan Poe’s ironic treatment of it.<sup>416</sup>

On the side of jazz and spontaneity, we have already seen that James Baldwin sounds a note of caution by re-engaging the problem of linguistic reference that always surfaces when it comes to the “naming” of jazz (“who can afford to improvise, at those prices?”)<sup>417</sup> Baldwin’s evaluation of this disconnect echoes a statement Miles Davis made in a French TV interview -- “I’m no accident” -- as well as Davis’ tireless insistence, in public interviews, on countering such

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<sup>414</sup> Vincent A. O’Keefe, “From ‘Other’ Sides of the Realist Tracks: (A)gnostic Narratives in Toni Morrison’s ‘Jazz,’” *The Centennial Review* 41, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 334.

<sup>415</sup> Mainstream refusals to write about, or let musicians teach in a musical conservatory setting, jazz’s formal structures in relation to their contextual meanings (i.e. their meanings) are just the other side of the primitivist coin.

<sup>416</sup> Fumi Okiji, *Jazz as Critique: Adorno and Black Expression Revisited* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2018). See especially her first chapter “Jazz, Individualism, and the Black Modern,” 11-30.

<sup>417</sup> “Of the Sorrow Songs: The Cross of Redemption” (1979), quoted in Ed Pavlic. *Who Can Afford to Improvise? James Baldwin and Black Music, the Lyric and the Listeners* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).

racialized “protective sentimentalism” by reminding viewers of the grueling (and somehow culturally invisible) process of *practicing* one’s horn -- the deliberative work that is the obvious precondition for “improvisation.”<sup>418</sup> And yet it is precisely the spontaneity of improvisation that itself is also misunderstood: one is either “making it all up as one goes” or doing art according to formulae.

In his recent memoir *Possibilities*, Herbie Hancock describes his first experiences as a child listening to jazz recordings. His description of his transition from classical to jazz music as a young pianist is fascinating for laying bare the underlying epistemic assumptions that can render art illegible: “Because of the way my mind works, I noticed patterns. I’d play a phrase, write it down, and think, *Wait a minute – he just used those same notes in another phrase earlier in the song*. I didn’t know how jazz was constructed, so I had to figure it out as I went along. To me, improvisation sounded like stream of consciousness. But at the same time I knew it couldn’t be, because it was so organized.”<sup>419</sup> Hancock’s remark not only invokes the tradition of linking jazz with literary or poetic practice (whether taking place orally or committed to paper), but also reveals some of the limitations of popular understandings of the stream of consciousness that blend the mental phenomenon with the literary technique. Hancock, highlighting the creative curiosity associated with “analytic” methods in the elaboration of “possibilities,” gives expression to-- but also calls for the revision of – an influential binary opposition in the popular imagination, according to which the “stream of consciousness” excludes what is “organized.”

Morrison’s critical reflection on the writing of *Jazz* directly challenges the impasse suggested by Hancock and others:

*Jazz* was very complicated because I wanted to re-represent two contradictory things -- artifice and improvisation, where you have an artwork, planned, thought through, but at the same time appears invented, like jazz. I thought of the image being a book. Physically a book, but at the same time it is writing itself. Imagining itself. Talking. Aware of what it is doing. It watches itself think and imagine. That seemed to me to be a combination of artifice and improvisation -- where you practice and plan in order to invent (my underscoring).<sup>420</sup>

Morrison’s image of the book that “watches itself think and imagine” re-animates the deep and curious links between self-awareness (what Kant called apperception) and spontaneity. Morrison’s reflections on jazz get to the heart of the way jazz is “constructed” and “organized,” to use Hancock’s terms, as a necessary part of its spontaneity. But her narrative device in this novel, the self-conscious “book-voice,” with its apperceptive susceptibility to revision, also overcomes the opposition discerned by the young Hancock, between the “stream of consciousness” and its “organized” constructions.

Later in the same interview, Morrison refutes exactly the facile equation of spontaneity with lack of structure that we saw in the interlude (above).

I thought of myself as like the jazz musician: someone who practices and practices and practices in order to be able to invent and to make his art look

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<sup>418</sup> *Miles: Noir sur blanc* (Jacques Goldstein). Youtube video, 9:10, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JxjGnyUSA14>

<sup>419</sup> Herbie Hancock, *Possibilities* (New York: Penguin, 2015), 22

<sup>420</sup> Morrison, *Conversations*, 85.

effortless and graceful. I was always conscious of the constructed aspect of the writing process, and that art appears natural and elegant only as a result of constant practice and awareness of its formal structures (82).

Morrison's novel makes it possible to strip back the clichés that have impeded the registering of subversive sound in the American historical imagination.<sup>421</sup>

## 5. DRUMMING AS A FORM OF JUDGMENT: THE SILENT PROTEST PARADE IN MORRISON'S *JAZZ*

Not much jazz music is played in the novel *Jazz*. In fact, the only sustained “dramatic situation” in which live music is found occurs in Morrison's “Fifth Avenue March” scene, a fictional re-writing of the 1917 Negro Silent Protest Parade. The 1917 Protest Parade, one of the most important events in African-American (read: American) history, and what James Weldon Johnson called “one of the strangest and most impressive sights New York has witnessed,”<sup>422</sup> was organized by the N.A.A.C.P in response to an explosion of white racist violence against blacks in St. Louis; it is not usually considered part of “jazz history.” And yet a whole epistemology of jazz—a theory of knowledge, musical and otherwise—could be gleaned from Morrison's rendering of the scene, and her focus on the drumming, despite the fact that no “jazz” happens in it. Indeed, we seem to find “jazz” just where it is nowhere to be found. Instead, what we find in Morrison's scene (and in this she follows Johnson, as I show below), poses the question of form: the form by which knowledge comes to us. As I hope to show, the drums in the Fifth Avenue March scene model what it means to hold the fragments of reality together, without falsification.<sup>423</sup>

Morrison's novel disqualifies ideas of authenticity that are persistently projected onto black American musics and their representation. The competing modes of understanding (including modes of understanding musical experience) that are inhabited in *Jazz* by its various characters, while distinct and sometimes painfully segregated from one another, do not thereby

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<sup>421</sup> See Stephen M. Best, “On Failing to Make the Past Present,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 73 no.3 (2012): 453-474. Best shows how *A Mercy* radically defamiliarizes the concept of race by returning to a moment in time when the concept was not yet fully consolidated. Perhaps Toni Morrison's *Jazz* performs a similar function but begins at a moment when the concept of “jazz” had not yet been fully recruited to bring about the music's erasure.

<sup>422</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* with a new Introduction by Sondra Kathryn Wilson (Boston: Da Capo, 1991) 236

<sup>423</sup> 1917 is the year of the first “jazz recording,” made by the “*Original Dixieland Jazz Band*” (emphasis added), a white ensemble from New Orleans. But this, like much official historiography, is invalid. See Nicholas Payton for critical commentary on the “original Dixieland Jazz Band” and why the music whose origins are sought by jazz historiography would have been called at the time not “jazz” but rather “blues” or “ragtime.” See <https://www.mercurynews.com/2013/10/03/nicholas-payton-speaks-about-jazz-and-bam/> See Ted Gioia's *A History of Jazz The History of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), the current textbook for Jazz History at the prestigious Manhattan School of Music: “Inevitably, this zeal in promoting the ODJB [Original Dixieland Jazz Band] as pioneers of the music—no less than the ‘Creators of Jazz,’ as their public billings proclaimed—created a fierce backlash within the jazz world, as would their success in securing a recording contract at a time when so many African American artists were ignored. Yet few bands of that period did more to expose the wider public, at home and abroad, to the virtues of this new music from New Orleans” (37). See again Okiji's critical commentary on the long history of recruiting jazz for such “virtues.”

gather around racial or cultural essences that would guarantee their internal coherence. The various musical traditions that are woven both thematically and formally throughout the novel do not sit comfortably or coherently under the banner of the *term* "jazz," itself an infamous and long-criticized product of the historical moment Morrison is describing, and whose signification falls into question most pointedly from the perspective of Alice Manfred, a perspective that cannot be identified with Morrison's or the "implied authors."

The "Fifth Avenue march" is described from the point of view of Alice, a church-going, morally conservative woman of the older generation in charge of the orphaned Dorcas, whose parents (we learn through a series of re-tellings that only belatedly crystallize into historically perspicuous fact) were murdered during the 1917 massacres in East St. Louis. Alice is involved in a complex and narratively-elaborated inner battle to make sense of the sounds she hears, and in particular to sort out the jarring juxtaposition between the "lowdown," "below the sash" music she disapproves of and the differently-valenced drums that have accompanied the protest on Fifth Avenue. As for the low down music,

There had been none of that at the Fifth Avenue march. Just the drums and the Colored Boy Scouts passing out explanatory leaflets to whitemen in straw hats who needed to know what the freezing faces already knew. Alice had picked up a leaflet that had floated to the pavement, read the words, and shifted her weight at the curb. She read the words and looked at Dorcas. Looked at Dorcas and read the words again. What she read seemed crazy, out of focus. Some great gap lunged between the print and the child." (58)

What has an "explanatory" function (to the "whitemen in straw hats") is already known, from the point of view of the "freezing faces." Indeed, the narrator does not bother to specify the contents of the leaflets. The leaflets, precisely because of their "explanatory power" remain as blank pages from the point of view of the reader. Precisely this omission (not specifying what Alice is reading) sets into relief the real charged absence within the passage, from Alice's point of view, which does not so much concern the leaflet and its out-of-focus letters, but rather the *relation* between the leaflet and the child whose own traumatic immediate past, scarcely bearable, the leaflet is "about."

This is not the first time that one of Morrison's characters has offered wry focalized meditation on semiotic theory right at the moment of political engagement. The march scene in *Jazz* recalls a scene in Morrison's short story "Recitatif" (1983), another musically-titled work in which Twyla and her childhood friend Roberta find themselves on *opposing* sides of a protest against school de-segregation by bussing: Twyla admits, "Actually my sign didn't make sense without Roberta's" – a meditation on contextual reference made all the more powerful because the protest "sign" of semiotics restores its concrete literal meaning.<sup>424</sup>

In *Jazz*, Morrison the protest "signs" and the drums work together to stage a formal problem, an incommensurability between saying and meaning:

What was possible to say was already in print on a banner that repeated a couple of promises from the Declaration of Independence and waved over the head of its bearer. But what was meant came from the drums. (53)

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<sup>424</sup> Toni Morrison, "Recitatif," in *Skin Deep: Black Women and White Women Write About Race*, ed. Marita Golden and Susan Richards Shreve (New York: Anchor, 1996), 87–110.

Morrison's "Fifth Avenue" march scene foregrounds the value of the drums for the production and preservation of knowledge. But rather than "restoring" an unspeakable experience, drumming – in the context of a political protest march -- instead produces a form of catachresis in a situation where the two components of the speech act have been drawn asunder. On the one hand, Morrison suggests that music is a variation on speech that can express what has escaped established narratives. And yet at the same time the drums invert the logical priority implied by the conventional idea of "saying what one means." For in Morrison's passage, meaning is not merely antecedent to saying, but rather seems to go on, to persist well after what has been said: "What was possible to say was already in print...but what was meant came from the drums." The meaning of the drums *exceeds* the saying that has already taken place via the banner. Morrison describes the drums as both partaking in the paradigm of communicability that is proper to verbal language and refuting that very paradigm. In her scene, as in the historical march that it describes, both the written pamphlets and the drums operate as a form of "silence" that foregrounds the possibility of spontaneous political action as well as spontaneous knowing outside official channels of conceptualization. Morrison stages by fictive means an encounter between apparently incommensurable modes of knowing: between drumming and text, between subjectivity and description, and perhaps more generally, between artistic expression and conventional meaning. Morrison chooses to pose the question of form – the question of the medium -- at the precise moment when the message is most urgent.

The marching scene continues:

Now, down Fifth Avenue from curb to curb, came a tide of cold black faces, speechless and unblinking because what they meant to say but did not trust themselves to say the drums said for them, and what they had seen with their own eyes and through the eyes of others the drums described to a T. (54)

For Morrison, the drums encompass the paradoxes involved with "describing to a T," precisely what has eluded prevailing verbal articulation. The achievement of alphabetic precision is simultaneously engaged and ironized.<sup>425</sup> The clarity of the drumming both engages the atomistic discreteness of the "T" and seems to rearticulate discreteness itself along different lines: The non-verbal articulations of the drums shed light on the illegibility of rhythmic forms and their saturation with history. At the same time, the drums perform the duties that an exhausted and heavily tainted language cannot, but *not* by providing a full record, or meticulously documented ("stenographic") facsimile of the details of historical trauma. Instead, the drums express their knowledge by holding space for the *antinomy* between young Dorcas and the available "descriptions" of her experience.

## 6. BROKEN FORM

She read the words and looked at Dorcas. Looked at Dorcas and read the words again. What she read seemed crazy, out of focus. Some great gap lunged between the print and the child. She glanced between them struggling for the connection,

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<sup>425</sup> For related ironies of alphabetic precision, see Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who in his *Essai sur l'origine des langues* observed that the alphabet, as a mode of writing, "does not exactly represent speech" but rather "analyze[s] it." Rousseau and Herder, *Origin of Language*, 17.

something to close the distance between the silent staring child and the slippery crazy words. Then suddenly, like a rope cast for rescue, the drums spanned the distance, gathering them all up and connected them: Alice, Dorcas, her sister and her brother-in-law, the Boy Scouts and the frozen black faces, the watchers on the pavement and those in the windows above. (58)

Here, as in other parts of Morrison's text, one mode of knowing points to and interrogates the other.<sup>426</sup> The comparison of the drums to a "rope cast for rescue" suggests that the drums perform the work of synthesis, putting the fragments of Dorcas' family story together with the massacre in East St. Louis that is now collectively protested, in ways that simultaneously bring Alice's and Dorcas' experience to the surface and exceed their personal frames of reference. But the "rope" is not an ad hoc image. Rather, as synecdoche, it evokes the frame of Dorcas' trauma by echoing imaginatively the fire truck that never came during the violent massacre in which her parents were murdered: "a little girl named Dorcas, sleeping across the road with her very best girlfriend, did not hear the fire engine clanging and roaring down the street because when it was called it didn't come" (57). This chain of litotes characterizes, in great detail, the event that did not happen, but should have and could have saved Dorcas' parents had they been living in the white part of town. The sentence refers three times to the "fire engine" that never came, through anaphoric reiteration: "when it was called it didn't come." The drums, whose sounds are "muffled" (as we shall see below) synaesthetically evoke the sight of the "rope of rescue" which was never seen, and the "clanging" that was never heard. The *silent march* makes experientially present that which did not happen, but should have.

Alice's description of the fire engine's "clanging" as an absent sound, a sound Dorcas "did not hear" because it did not exist, merges with and clarifies a childhood memory that surfaces in the mind of Dorcas twenty pages earlier in Morrison's novel: Dorcas "leaned out the window of her best girlfriend's house because the shouts were not part of what she was dreaming. They were outside her head, across the street. Like the running. Everybody running. For water? Buckets? The fire engine, polished and poised in another part of town?" (38). Here too, the task of separating dreamed sound from veridical sound (sound "outside her head") as Dorcas wakes to a real-life nightmare makes painfully clear the absent clanging.<sup>427</sup> The drums, then, begin to synthesize the visual and sound-images that have been fragmented intra-textually, within Morrison's novel. This also puts the drummers in the position of first-responders who can be relied upon. Amidst speculation about the meaning of the East St. Louis riots ("so many whites killed the papers would not print the number"), Alice "believed she knew the truth better than everybody" (57). Just where the "papers" and the leaflets fail to refer fully, and the firetruck's "rope of rescue" fails to arrive, the drums are revalued not as an alternative form of signification but as a mode of *correspondence* or connection that holds together without naming. It is not clear whether this life-line or underlying connection is discovered or attributed; that is,

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<sup>426</sup> We have seen how the sight of strangers in the street, mingling with a keen sense of rupture or separation based on gender difference, occasion a problem of the "unity of the mind" in Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*.

<sup>427</sup> See Eusebio L. Rodrigues on this passage: "Details—the bare feet, the dress, the cigar box, the dresser—make the scene vividly real, while the information about the gleaming fire engine, ready in whitetown but deliberately not dispatched, provides a political dimension of which the little girl is unaware." "Experiencing Jazz" *Modern Fiction Studies* 39, no. 3/4, Toni Morrison Double Issue (Fall/Winter 1993): 739.

whether it is “really there,” or whether it is made ephemerally real as part of the experience of listening, a mode of listening that disappears when the drumming ends.

Alice’s perception of the pamphlet carries within its intertextual echo chamber a whole tradition of a “communicative” model of language, identified with the urgencies of assembling a political program. Crucially, however, Morrison’s scene also calls into question any idea that political agendas are served only by determinate meanings; indeed, the drums in Morrison’s scene model the relationship between action and signification differently from the way the pamphlet does. The indeterminacy of the drum’s meaning is what makes their role in the march, as well as their historical and political significance, so striking. Beyond their own independent but intertwined “messages,” the drums and the pamphlet call each other into question. It is not so much a matter of *what* do the drums mean -- but *how*. The pamphlets (ironically by being imagined as containing fuzzy or blurry words) engage the drums in the question of referentiality; the drums engage the pamphlets in the question of musicality. It is an encounter between apparently incommensurate modes of knowing whose common referent nevertheless cannot escape view. Somehow, it is one of the questions that Morrison chooses to foreground (through the point of view of Alice Manfred), while reimagining a determinate historical occurrence – the Fifth Avenue March – as fiction. What gives this question its salience?

Morrison locates in the drums, provisionally, a power to “combine” what is disparate without resolving the broken fragments of reality into a falsely coherent narrative. Like Morrison’s novel itself, the knowing or interconnection that her fictional drums provisionally make possible is a kind of knowledge which “takes down the omniscient narrator.” Harkening back to Pippin’s thought experiment about the perception of drums, the spontaneity of Alice as hearer while experiencing the drums makes it possible to make judgments of cause and effect, which are exactly the kinds of judgments that Hume threw into skeptical crisis.<sup>428</sup> But in Morrison’s scene, it is precisely the “spontaneity” of the drums themselves – their cognitive work -- that reduces the closed form of a final judgment. On the one hand, Alice upon hearing the drums has a temporary place of safety in which to reflect on and put together those interrelations, causal and otherwise, that obtain between the “print and the child”; to reflect on the fact that Dorcas “did not hear the fire engine clanging...because...when it was called it didn’t come”; to experience “the silent black women and men marching down Fifth Avenue to advertise their anger over two hundred dead in East St. Louis, two of whom were her sister and brother-in-law, killed in the riots” (56-7).

At the same time, the network of causal connections between what has been endured and experienced is exactly what the drums *refuse* to foreclose, without interrogating the forms by which those judgments of causal connection are coming to Alice: Are they coming to her through jointly experienced sound? Through visual juxtaposition with the slogans and signs? Through the verbal articulations that spell it all out to the clueless “whitemen”? Cause and effect would be just the beginning of the quandary. That is, the drums are not a final word on the connection between Dorcas and the march, but somehow amplify the “silences” that have made it so difficult to think it all together. Even more provocatively, Morrison’s narrator suggests that these problematics can be stated through the question of how to relate different parts of the music

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<sup>428</sup> This is a typical Kantian resolution to the Humean riddle. If we recall the example, in Hume, of “fire warms,” we note that Hume thought that such causal connections were mere “fictions,” if they were understood to “really inhere” in the objects of sense. Kant tries to solve the problem by showing how causal categories can originate “in us,” as an expression of our spontaneous judgment, and yet be objectively valid.



to itself. The conflicted insight in Johnson's history about the relationship between the Silent Protest Parade and the 1919 Homecoming Parade, and between the kinds of music employed in each case, is picked up in Morrison's fiction through the transitions that Alice Manfred goes through in processing the music she hears. When she encounters the drumming in the silent protest, she still has ringing in her ears the nuisance that is called the "lowdown" or "get-on-down" music, a form of profanity she does not quite understand and yet one which preoccupies her throughout her experience of the march: "the dances were beyond nasty because the music was getting worse and worse with each passing season the Lord waited to make Himself known" (56). Alice's disgust and fascination with the music clarify all the licentiousness associated with the tainted origins and etymology of the term "jazz" itself. But the relation between the protest march itself – its pointed refusal of dance -- and what might be called "jazz" remains obscure, while nevertheless highlighted and problematized by Alice's consciousness. Note how Alice's point of view quickly changes the subject, so to speak, from the "dirty, get-on-down music" she disapproves of to the use of sound in the Silent Protest Parade.

The dirty, get-on-down music the women sang and the men played and both danced to, close and shameless or apart and wild. Alice was convinced and so were the Miller sisters as they blew into cups of Postum in the kitchen. It made you do unwise disorderly things. Just hearing it was like violating the law.

There had been none of that at the Fifth Avenue march. Just the drums and the Colored Boy Scouts. (58)

A relation creeps over the break in the paragraph, linking the "dirty, get-on-down music" and the drums of the Fifth Avenue March. Indeed, the relation and non-relation between the protest march, with its muffled drums, and the "lowdown music" are rhythmically asserted in alternation. A little later, the feeling that one form "had something to do" with the other comes over Alice, a judgment occasioned by the drums but which remains suspended: "Alice thought the lowdown music (and in Illinois it was worse than here) had something to do with the silent black women and men marching down Fifth Avenue to advertise their anger over two hundred dead in East St. Louis..." Here intersecting and supposedly conflicting musical traditions are being consolidated. We register this consolidation through the point of view of a woman who despite being somewhat conservative in her aesthetic tastes, does not miss that the "lowdown music" she disapproves of nevertheless might have something to do with the somber protest she is attending, and therefore by extension with the traumatic loss and violence in her own family. The playful, hyperbolic simile describing the lowdown music ("Just hearing it was like violating the law") brings this all into relation -- and begins to verge on empirical truth.

My notion of "broken form" resonates with Fumi Okiji in *Jazz as Critique* when she cites Muhall Richard Abrams, co-founder of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians: "Why is it that none of us are alike? Why? So it occurred to me that individualism, being that extensive, meant that all the information was not put in one place." Abrams' philosophical take is a reminder that there are other ways to theorize individuality. Okiji's citation of Abrams stands in stark contrast to the distinct and narrow individualism that jazz in its mainstream reception was often made to serve, at the same time that, as Okiji writes, "it is essential to pay close attention to what Abrams says here, thrown as it is into sharp relief against the communitarianism for which the organization [the AACM] is known." But in the context of Morrison's scene, the idea that "all the information was not put in one place" suggests that what

is interconnected sometimes appears in the form of what is phenomenally disconnected. It suggests a valuation of inquiry that is extended, and that cannot be exhausted by one single image either of the music or of the realities to which the different, sometimes disconnected musics are tethered.

Our challenge as readers, then, is to clarify how the presentation of the drums' spontaneity, of Alice's spontaneity, and indeed of the narrator's spontaneity offers a model of knowledge that is not distracted by the irrelevant polarities of voluntarist "riffing," on the one hand, and hyper-structured intellection on the other. In my previous chapter I suggested that, for authors like Woolf and Morrison, the goal of literary criticism is to address truths that are not yet paraphrasable, but rather embedded in the form of the novel – something which now (and perhaps *only* now, as of the moment of the work's occurrence) becomes expressible, determinate, "synthesizable." The drums in Morrison's scene do not just follow "the form"; they are in themselves a form. The *form* is what carries that which isn't yet finished, that which will be filled in and transformed by the listener, the reader, and by future generations.

The fissure between drums and pamphlet in Morrison's march scene expresses a drama of incommensurable modes of knowing. Indeed, the pamphlet's mode of signification cannot be brought into full correspondence with rhythmic meaning's mode of signification. However, this passage does not only express incommensurability, of knowledge modalities, for example, whose absolute difference must be wrestled with; it is also an expression of broken form. First, of course, we can hear in the "gap" between drum and pamphlet the whole history of the segregation of sound from word and the historical, coercive pressure that was placed on (and transfigured by) black music to perform the work of semiotic circulation (i.e. language), in a world where whites criminalized black literacy. The seeming tension, I think, between a "formalist" and the "functional music" picture originates from the fact that the very musical forms that Western philosophy regards as "aesthetic" bear, in the context of institutional racism and policed expression, the pressure of alphabetic meaning: the drums describe "to a t," indeed. And yet, as Paul Gilroy has shown, black music is at the vanguard of a turning point in critical thought, generally – not having had the luxury of resting well with conventional meanings.<sup>429</sup>

Just as jazz music is importantly absent from the march, the refusal of verisimilitude is central to the project of bringing jazz to consciousness. As is often noted, in a critical postulate that Morrison herself encouraged and perhaps initiated, jazz is in the form: "I had written novels in which structure was designed to enhance meaning. Here, the structure would *equal* meaning." "Rather than be about those characteristics [of jazz], the novel would seek to become them"

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<sup>429</sup> The black aesthetic notion of "functional music" has been an important challenge to formalist paradigms. See Baraka/Jones, *Blues People*. I do not believe that this is antithetical to the notion of reflexive form that I elaborate here. Morrison's scene shows that a reflexive awareness of form is hardly extraneous in the context of making urgent political demands. The awareness of form (will we be silent? will there be drums? how will the drums be played?) does not just supplement a strategy of planned resistance (as it surely did for Johnson, Du Bois and the Protest Parade's organizers) but also registers the incommensurability or the radical failure of fit between white majoritarian concepts and what James Baldwin calls "reality." In this way Morrison's fiction does what the drums do, and may in the future continue to perform a crucial "function" similar to the function that Du Bois and Johnson accorded to the drums in planning the march. Though I find the opposition itself untenable, the perceived controversy between "functional music" and aesthetic form requires a much larger discussion than I can pursue here.

(xix). “The structure is the argument,” writes Morrison. And in Morrison’s fictional re-writing of the 1917 Silent Protest Parade, the structure is broken.<sup>430</sup>

Reading Morrison’s novel through the dichotomous, imbricated tools of resistance evident during the March, jazz rhythms and silence, provides the reader with an understanding of some of the agonizing collective and individual incidents which drive the rhythms in jazz music and lie beneath the lyrics.<sup>431</sup>

Caryl Loney-McFarlane’s notion of “dichotomous, imbricated tools of resistance” seems to be central to the form of reality that Morrison’s fictional re-writing makes palpable. As she shows, the breach between written pamphlet and the drums, all operating under the rubric of silence – this “dichotomous” structure that Morrison’s fiction not only makes palpable but foregrounds as a message unto itself -- was part of the painstakingly planned structure of the historical Silent Protest Parade itself.<sup>432</sup> James Weldon Johnson’s account of the 1917 Negro Silent Protest Parade gives a clue, taken up by Morrison’s fiction, that the “silent march” is a defining, and generative fissure in the historiography of jazz music.

## 7. ECHOES OF THE SNARE DRUM: THE MILITARY MARCH AS SHADOW-TEXT

“In view of the temper of the times,” writes James Weldon Johnson in his *Black Manhattan*, “the Protest Parade was a courageous form of action to take. Behind all lay a culminating series of causes: lynchings, disenfranchisement in the south, discriminations of

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<sup>430</sup> Morrison’s work and its meaningfulness are intimately linked with her project of rendering meaning that is independent of the white gaze. In a 2013 interview at Cornell, Morrison explains her decision to get rid of Iago in her rewriting of *Othello* and describes an imperative that guides all her work: “to take away the white gaze, whose language is controlling.” She continues: Ellison, Baldwin, Richard Wright, I mean you understood that they were defending themselves or aggressively attacking that idea of the white oppressor. And I thought, I can’t do that. What is the world like if he’s not there? And the freedom, the open world that appears, is stunning. And I know that most African-American women writers did the same thing... There was this free space opened up by refusing to respond every minute to the gaze, somebody else’s gaze. That flavored a great deal of what I was writing. Still does. But you’ll understand about Iago now.” Morrison, “On Language, Evil and the White Gaze.” Interview with Claudia Brodsky. Cornell University, March 7, 2013. SAM Network. Video, 1hr. 50 min. <https://www.sam-network.org/video/on-language-evil-and-the-white-gaze>

I do not see Morrison as following in the footsteps of, or even building on the radical traditions inaugurated by Hugo, Poe and Woolf (though as a critic and scholar Morrison has written about all of these writers). I have placed Morrison’s “Fifth Avenue March” scene in an intertextual echo chamber with white writers who (perhaps miraculously, in spite of their whiteness) have stumbled upon the fissures that majoritarian concepts pave over in the service of false coherence: Hugo’s failed documentary record of a condemned man’s consciousness; Poe’s talking bundle (“The Man That Was Used Up”); Woolf’s red carnation.

<sup>431</sup> Caryl Loney-McFarlane, " 'Inside Nothing': The Silent Protest March in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*." Accessed 25 May 2019. [https://bluesjazzbookclub.com/2018/02/14/inside-nothing-the-silent-protest-march-in-toni-morrisons-jazz/#\\_edn1](https://bluesjazzbookclub.com/2018/02/14/inside-nothing-the-silent-protest-march-in-toni-morrisons-jazz/#_edn1)

many kinds, all of which assumed a magnified and more ironic cruelty in the face of the fact that Negroes were being called upon like all others to do their full part in the war as American citizens.”<sup>433</sup> The ironies of this cruelty are set into relief by the case of decorated war heroes like Henry Johnson, who were violently criminalized upon their return to the United States in retaliation for anti-racist activism.<sup>434</sup>

The dialogue of jazz with the military march – often a dialogue of differentiation – is deep and complex. Morrison could easily have written about a different march: the Harlem Hellfighters Homecoming Parade in 1919, a central event in the inseparable histories of jazz and its popularization in Europe, the history of Manhattan, of World War I and of black contributions to the war effort.<sup>435</sup> The homecoming parade featured the celebrated 369<sup>th</sup> Infantry band (formerly the 15<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the National Guard of New York), the military band and combat unit that is credited with spreading jazz into Europe while fighting alongside the French. Ragtime conductor Lieutenant James “Jim” Reese Europe, who fought in World War I and also toured widely in Europe, is just one among many salient examples in the history of African-American soldiers who were members of hugely influential military bands, going back to the Civil War. Indeed, during World War I, “most of the black combat regiments contained their own bands, some led by professional musicians.”<sup>436</sup> The 15<sup>th</sup> Regiment had been authorized in

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<sup>433</sup> Johnson, *Black Manhattan*, 236.

<sup>434</sup> See Henry Louis Gates account: "Who Were the Harlem Hellfighters?" *The African-Americans: Many Rivers to Cross*. PBS. Accessed 26 May 2019. <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/who-were-the-harlem-hellfighters/>.

The "level of sympathy and respect" that war hero Henry Johnson, who was awarded the Croix de Guerre, received from the French army "was a far cry from what the black men of the 92nd Division had experienced." Furthermore, in the United States, Johnson's heroism was not recognized until after his death, and Gates notes that "despite being trumpeted in advertisements by the military," Johnson "was denied a disability claim" by his own government "because his discharge papers did not properly record his injuries." Other accounts reveal that Johnson was later arrested for wearing his own uniform after he had been discharged. Robert Hill notes that this arrest took place right after Johnson made speeches condemning the racism of white soldiers. This fact is not included in contemporary official commemorations of Henry Johnson by the United States Army, <https://www.army.mil/medalofhonor/johnson>. See Colin Grant, *Negro with a Hat, The Rise and Fall of Marcus Garvey and his Dream of Mother Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 113. The other major war hero from the 369<sup>th</sup> regiment, Needham Roberts, also recipient of the Croix de Guerre, was arrested back in the U.S. on the same charge. See also Robert Ewell Green, *Black Defenders of America: A Reference and Pictorial History (1775-1973)* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 1974), for profiles of Johnson and Roberts.

In a 1919 speech Marcus Garvey expressed his outrage against this reception: "Needham Roberts and Johnson have proved to the Kaiser that the negro is more than a match for the German soldier; but Needham Roberts and Johnson were fighting somebody else's battle, and even though they knew they were fighting for someone else, they did half of their best, now. (Applause)." Robert A. Hill, "Commentary," *The Marcus Garvey and UNIA Papers Volume IX, Africa for the Africans, 1921--1922* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 293, fn3, 504.

<sup>436</sup>As Chad L. Williams writes in his landmark study of African American Soldiers in the World War I era: "African American musicians played a significant role in the fetishization of blackness that emerged during the [first world] war and flourished during the postwar period. Black regimental bands took France by storm and became almost singularly responsible for the international spread of jazz during the war and

1913 as a unit of the New York National Guard and went to France in 1917, "one of the first units from the national guard" to fight in World War I, as part of one of two combat divisions (the 92<sup>nd</sup> and 93<sup>rd</sup>) into which the U.S. army recruited segregated black troops. The "old fifteenth," marching as part of the homecoming parade of 1919, was led by Lieutenant Europe, who had been a key player in the consolidation of jazz as an artform in New York City.

In some ways, the 1917 Silent Protest Parade has a shadow-march that it foreshadows. In Johnson's *Black Manhattan* (1930), history is put together in such a way that the snare drums of the Silent Protest Parade are introduced into the history as a fraught, anachronistic echo of a different march -- the homecoming parade that took place on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue two years later, in 1919. It featured the famous 369<sup>th</sup> Infantry:

The newspapers had intimated that a good part of the celebration would be hearing the now famous Fifteenth band play jazz and seeing the Negro soldiers step to it. Those who looked for that sort of entertainment were disappointed. (235-36)

Both Johnson and Morrison show how deeply the sounds collected under the category of "jazz" are involved with the refusal of imposed meanings. In *Black Manhattan*, which was published the same year as Theodor Adorno's first of many derisive essays on jazz, Johnson carefully repudiates the charge of exuberant "goose-stepping" that made jazz arouse the suspicions of Adorno and other critics of fascism. But Johnson makes clear that even the 1919 infantry parade refuses the musical expectations that were assigned to it, suggesting its affiliation, rather than its celebratory contrast, with the Silent Protest Parade from two years earlier. As Johnson carefully describes the 1919 homecoming parade:

Lieutenant Jim Europe walked sedately ahead, and Band-master Eugene Mikell had the great band alternate between two noble French military marches. And on the part of the men, there was no prancing, no showing of teeth, no swank; they marched with a steady stride, and from under their battered tin hats eyes that looked straight at death were kept to the front. (236)

Johnson goes on to explicitly link the 1919 Homecoming Parade with the 1917 Silent Protest Parade that came before it, although it means his history of Manhattan has to jump backwards two years in time. He continues in the following paragraph:

But before the Fifteenth left for France, while they were in camp, training to go, there was another parade. On July 28, 1917 ten thousand New York Negroes silently marched down Fifth Avenue to the sound of muffled drums. The procession was headed by little children dressed in white, followed by the women in white, the men bringing up the rear. They carried banners. Some of them read: 'Unto the Least of my Brethren,'; 'Mother, Do Lynchers Go to Heaven?'; 'Give Me a Chance to Live...' (236)

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its immediate aftermath.' Chad L. Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 165.

The celebrated musician members of Reese's 369<sup>th</sup> Infantry were not part of the 1917 Negro Silent Protest Parade. Military history reveals that they had been activated into federal service on July 25, 1917—three days before the Silent Protest Parade.<sup>437</sup> Yet their musical restraint in the 1919 “victory” parade is described by Johnson as a pivot point, providing after-the-fact conceptual preparation for the earlier “muffled drums” that were played in the 1917 Silent Protest Parade. And the Silent Protest Parade, as we know, is the one whose “muffled drums” Morrison chooses to write about in order to capture something about “jazz music.” Johnson's disruption of linear narration (writing about 1919 before 1917) is Johnson's (syncopated?) way, I think, of disrupting the triumphalist narrative for which *jazz music* was so often recruited. Johnson's trajectory, moving back from Armistice Day to the East. St Louis Massacre and the Silent Protest Parade, disrupts the triumphalist narrative, culminating in the Hellfighters Homecoming, that hides the white violence against black American citizens, and black war heroes fighting for America alike, both during the war, and after.<sup>438</sup> But it is also Johnson's way of disrupting the recruitment of the *music* for exactly that narrative that Okiji, with and against Adorno, warns of.<sup>439</sup> The imposed clichés that Johnson anticipates and preemptively rejects, by providing these details of James Reese Europe's tone and performance during the march, are just as active today as they were then. In the same way that the Silent March exceeds its own “silence,” the seemingly exuberant “victory parade,” at least as told by Johnson, also held value in its refusal of sonic expectations.

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<sup>437</sup> *Ethnic and Racial Minorities in the U.S. Military: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Alexander M. Bielakowski (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2013).

<sup>438</sup> See Gates, “Who Were the Harlem Hellfighters?” Gates illustrates this paradox by following the particular life of the black war hero Henry Johnson.

<sup>439</sup> Fumi Okiji, *Jazz as Critique* (see full discussion below).

## 8. MUFFLED DRUMS



July 28, 1917. The NAACP Silent Protest Parade on Fifth Avenue. Photograph by Underwood and Underwood. James Weldon Johnson and Grace Nail Johnson Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.<sup>440</sup>

There are four drummers in this brilliantly sharp image of the 1917 Parade. The two drummers in the middle are playing snare drums, with the drummers on either side playing a type of drum called a field drum which is made of a thicker canvas, but still possesses snares. The absence of a bass drum suggests that they were playing in a somber style.<sup>441</sup> But of course the sound is missing; a silent photograph of a silent protest. How did the sound of the drums help to constitute this silence?<sup>442</sup>

One single phrase repeats with disarming uniformity across historical accounts of the landmark parade: *muffled drums*. “A Negro’s Parade with Muffled Drums,” read a newspaper article a few days later.<sup>443</sup> In contemporary accounts as well: “Following muffled drums, ten thousand men and women marched from Harlem through the heart of Manhattan in complete

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<sup>440</sup>Image reproduced in Michael Morand, “Beinecke Marks Centennial of 1917 NAACP Silent Protest Parade with Photograph Display, July 21-30.” Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, July 10, 2017. <https://beinecke.library.yale.edu/article/beinecke-marks-centennial-1917-naacp-silent-protest-parade-photograph-display-july-21-30>

<sup>441</sup> Thanks to drummer Savannah Harris for contributing her technical and conceptual expertise to this analysis.

<sup>442</sup> This and other photographs of the 1917 parade offer an astonishing visual history. Melissa Barton’s recent *Gather Out of Star-Dust, a Harlem Renaissance Album* begins with a photograph of the parade.

<sup>443</sup> “A Negro’s March with Muffled Drums,” *The Survey* (August 4, 1917), 405-406.

silence, with only their signs expressing their outrage.”<sup>444</sup> Reports on the existence of “muffled drums” in the parade, in those very terms, are unanimous. To be sure, the phrase “muffled drums” indexes an elegiac frame of reference. And yet the designation of the sound in question is disarming in its particularity, and the verbatim repetition of the phrase is striking. The phrase can be traced back to James Weldon Johnson, who writing in *Black Manhattan*, characterizes the Silent Protest Parade in these terms: Although his rhetorical stance does not always wear this on its surface, Johnson was of course a central figure inside the history that he tells. In the photo reproduced above he can be seen walking alongside W.E.B Du Bois, in the line of men marching just behind the drummers whose “muffled drums” answer the joint musical directive co-composed by Johnson. Johnson’s position as a historian is not one of “omniscience” but rather of direct, cooperative engagement. In fact, Johnson was one of the organizers of the march, and in particular he appears to have been its sonic architect, as well as participant. It is Johnson who is credited with employing the strategy of a silent march in the first place.<sup>445</sup> For someone with an ear as highly trained as Johnson’s, the choice of the term “muffled drums” would have had a precise meaning – indicating the power held in check by the drummers and more poignantly by the voices that choose through passive resistance to muffle their own outcry.

“We march because we deem it a crime to be silent in the face of such barbarous acts,” reads the flyer distributed in advance by the NAACP, and also handed out by children at the event and reproduced by Johnson.<sup>446</sup> The silence of the Protest Parade, one might say, *thematizes* the silence around the massacre, making felt the silence of mourning in a way that reprimands the silence of complicity. The flyer reveals yet one more step in the transmission of the language of “muffled drums,” now not only as key concept, but as sonic intention: “The laborer, the professional man -- all classes of the Race -- will march on foot to the beating of muffled drums.”<sup>447</sup> Thus, the directive becomes a fact of the event, the unifying factor across class lines. But what are “muffled drums”? Do they refer to a specific technique of muffling the drums, or do they rather characterize a quality of sound, a quality of an experience that recedes from view upon arrival? What does it mean to inscribe this experiential quality *into* a collective action?

In Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s famous 1838 poem “A Psalm of Life,” the phrase “muffled drums” refigures the heartbeat of living beings into a funeral march:

Art is long, and Time is fleeting,  
And our hearts, though stout and brave,  
Still, like muffled drums, are beating  
Funeral marches to the grave.<sup>448</sup>

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<sup>444</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley and Earl Lewis, eds. Volume 2 of *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African-Americans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 118-19.

<sup>445</sup> See Rebecca Meacham, “Lynching: Silent Protest Parade,” in vol. 2 of *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance*, eds. Cary D. Wintz and Paul Finkelman (New York: Routledge, 2004), 751.

<sup>446</sup> Johnson, *Black Manhattan*, 237.

<sup>447</sup> The flyer and memorandum distributed by the NAACP in advance of the historic march can be accessed online, via the National Humanities Center.

<https://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai2/forward/text4/silentprotest.pdf>

<sup>448</sup> Longfellow’s allusion is to the classical *Ars longa vita brevis*.

One of the significant early commentators who lambasted Longfellow’s stanza for its alleged “unoriginality” -- but who likely was irritated by Longfellow’s firm anti-slavery views -- was Edgar Allan Poe. Poe used this very stanza as the epigraph for “A Tell-Tale Heart” (1843), but then dropped the epigraph from 1845 version of the story afterward. Longfellow’s *Poems on Slavery* appeared in that year.



The ambiguous “still” refers both to the state of death and to a pause in the flux of time; that is, there is an oxymoronic relation between “still” as adverb and as adjective. This suggests paradoxically that art can persist beyond the limits of “fleeting time,” precisely by holding a space for finitude, in the form of the “funeral march.” In W.H. Auden’s satirical and somber 1936 poem, “Funeral Blues,” alluding specifically to jazz in both title and form, “muffled drums” are offered as an opposing force, or stopping point, *within* the lexicon of jazz’s urban modernity:

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone.  
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,  
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum  
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Whether or not Auden is alluding directly to the 1917 Negro Silent Parade, or to Longfellow’s poem, we can see how the “muffled drums” act as an aesthetic intervention that temporarily “silences” the myriad agendas with which F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “jazz” was made to fit. Thus, for Johnson, Auden, and Morrison, “muffled drums” can become a new point of departure, indeed a new center of reference, from which to begin to theorize the spontaneity of mind encoded in the music.

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See Sidney Moss, *Poe’s Literary Battles: The Critic in the Context of his Milieu* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1963)151. See Edgar Allan Poe, “Review of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Poems” (Text-02), *Aristidean*, April 1845, 130-142.

## EPILOGUE

### 1. IS EXPERIENCE MERELY “POSSIBLE”? SPONTANEITY AND THE DIALECTIC OF ENLIGHTENMENT

Kant’s project in the First Critique is to outline the conditions of possibility for experience. Later commentators, carrying forward the spirit of Kant’s argument but violating its scope, took the question of *possible experience* quite literally, wondering whether it was really possible for people to have experience at all in an oppressive society. Theodor Adorno, for example, thought that the possibilities left for true spontaneity were decidedly slim. The *conditionality* of Kant’s argument – the fact that he leaves open, logically speaking, whether the conditions for experience are ever met – is carried forward in such interpretations, but the problem becomes emphatically social.

My affirmative reading of spontaneity is in tension with certain influential moments in Adorno’s reading of Kant’s First Critique – namely, Adorno’s wariness of an “understanding” that makes sure to “imprint” its own conditions of intelligibility on the object before having to face it. Ultimately, the elements of spontaneity that I am picking up in Kant’s First Critique may resonate with more familiarly palatable aspects of the Third Critique for literary study. It is actually quite instructive to contrast the two images: What, if anything, can be recuperated from spontaneity, such that the application of concepts, be they *a priori* (the line and the circle in Woolf’s *The Waves*)-- or empirical (the china) – becomes something other than a forcible bending of reality to fit the contours of the mind? The authors I have discussed here, from Poe to Morrison, are all too aware of the pernicious role that rationality has played on the side of carrying out pre-given ends – but nevertheless their fiction puts rationality on the side of creative reflection – in a way that provides a counterargument to Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

A passage from the “Excursus II” essay of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* helps to establish some of the epistemological terms that will get transformed, recast and set in motion over the course of the “Culture Industry” essay:

According to Kant, the homogeneity of the general and the particular is guaranteed by the ‘schematism of pure understanding,’ by which he means the unconscious activity of the intellectual mechanism which structures perception in accordance with the understanding. The intelligibility which subjective judgment discovers in any matter is imprinted on that matter by the intellect as an objective quality before it enters the ego.<sup>449</sup>

In this homology between cognitive structure and social relations, it is as if mental representation itself becomes a commodity stamped by its own conditions of production. The form that experience will take is already determined in a fundamental way by the cognitive – or industrial – apparatus prior to any actual encounter in the empirical world.

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<sup>449</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 64.

It is striking that Horkheimer and Adorno's description of the "false harmony" that is prescribed by mass art hearkens back to the type of judgment that is paradigmatic of Kant's First Critique and not the Third Critique – that is, the nightmarish scenario in question is one in which aesthetic experience is treated as if it were something other than itself, namely empirical cognition.

The artwork steps into the unfitting role of an empirical object for determinative cognition, and Horkheimer and Adorno's example of the Hollywood movie gives a clue as to how the Kantian terms of empirical cognition have been extruded from the mind of the individual cognizer and mapped onto different elements of the social field. On the Kantian model the *a priori* forms of experience were always out of the individual cognizer's hands, so to speak; yet, crucially, they were housed latently in his or her head. Now, a new kind of external, extruded agency is assumed for those very forms of experience, whereas previously no cultural energy was required to maintain them. "The active contribution which Kantian schematism still expected of subjects...is denied to the subject by industry" (98). The agent who furnishes the form of experience and the agent who makes judgments on the basis of experience need no longer be one and the same organic whole; producers and consumers now jointly constitute a single circuit of cognition, as if they were one organism. With this mapping of empirical cognition onto the social sphere, different industries replace the brain as concept-bearing agents, in an analogy that is almost medieval in its allegorical projection of mental faculties out into social space, relations between producers and consumers.

The senses are determined by the conceptual apparatus in advance of perception; the citizen sees the world as made *a priori* of the stuff from which he himself constructs it. Kant intuitively anticipated what Hollywood has consciously put into practice: images are precensored during production by the same standard of understanding which will later determine their reception by viewers. (65)

Here it is no cognitive apparatus at all but rather the market which determines the object in advance of perception. With their playful jab at Kant's own terminology, Hollywood is fully "conscious" while Kant is stuck in the "intuition" stage; Hollywood has out-conceptualized the concept. Over 150 years after Kant, it is not clear whether there are even any intuitions left for the understanding to work on. In this Hollywood-updated version of a classical philosophical figure, the theatre of perception is no longer a figure at all. Experience itself is regarded as a "production" whose conditions of possibility exclude all spontaneity. The cognitive apparatus leaves out of the picture whatever is not in conformity with its form. In Horkheimer and Adorno's jointly authored text, the *a priori* limits of what can be seen *at all* have disappeared into the "limits of representation" that govern what can be shown on the screen. If this disappearance of a *priori* limits into a *posteriori* limits represents a willful misreading of Kant, the misreading may be valid for (may help to reveal the truth of) a culture for which cinematic viewing now exemplifies real seeing, to disastrous effects. It is a conflation that denigrates both cinematic viewing and empirical seeing. This illegitimate or figurative extension of the Kantian schematism also thematizes the very conflation within the culture industry that they are making a case for, between pre-censored thought and thought generally.

Now, the question is what forms of spontaneity, if any, are left, or can still be claimed for conceptuality? And this is where I argue, with Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison, and against Hollywood that, ironically, we have to turn to imaginative fiction, to see what forms of creativity

are still possible within determinate conceptuality, even as imaginative fiction is exactly the place where the ordinary operations of determinate conceptuality are suspended. That is a kind of tension in modernist fiction: it does not, cannot distance its projects entirely from the ends of determinate cognition because part of its ‘job,’ so to speak, is to tell us something about what those ends are in the first place — or could be, in a less deadening society.

## 2. BALDWIN, IMPROVISATION AND THE REFUSAL TO GIVE UP ON THOUGHT

“I’m going to improvise -- *like a writer* -- on some assumptions.”

James Baldwin, UC Berkeley, January 15, 1979.<sup>450</sup>

This remark by James Baldwin does not introduce a novel, non-fiction essay, or even a musical piece. Rather it is the way he chose to open his speech at UC Berkeley on January 15, 1979. Baldwin delivered this speech the same year that he labored over the essay that would become “The Cross of Redemption,” which began as a response to recent “jazz criticism,” and which produced Baldwin’s indictment of the term “improvisation” as it is usually deployed. Yet Baldwin says at the outset of his UC Berkeley speech that he is going to improvise, not in his capacity as a writer (which he literally is), but that he is going to improvise *like* a writer. Ed Pavlic has noted in a recent study the primacy of musical aesthetics even over prose expression in this opening remark (while acknowledging the “obvious caution” with which Baldwin was employing the notion of improvisation).<sup>451</sup> I would add, however, that the metaphor goes both ways, so to speak: that is, just as oration can be modeled on musicality, there is a suggestion that music contains an argumentative content. Baldwin’s remark also implies that improvisation, while not itself bound to logical structures, can nevertheless operate within and intervene against the terms of argumentation.

The at once writerly and musical stance that Baldwin takes vis-à-vis what he calls “assumptions” might be contrasted with the language games more conventionally associated with assumptions and their manipulation, with what Edgar Allan Poe sardonically called the “powers of deduction.” To work on a logical proof or deductive argument is to build upon pre-given assumptions. In deduction, one is preoccupied primarily with *what follows*. Could it be that what Baldwin is doing is reducible to logical analysis? One can, of course, decide that a given premise leads to an untenable conclusion, and then use these implications as grounds for rejecting the premise that was initially taken for granted. Or one can demonstrate – by logical analysis – that a given statement holds within its presuppositions which have not yet been made explicit, and thereby uncover something latent in a proposition which is actually untenable but which was not visible on its surface.

So then why improvisation? What is it that deduction cannot do, and that improvisation can? And how does Baldwin’s *methodologically* and *stylistically* radical opening to what will turn out to be a *politically* radical speech revise both extant understandings of what improvisation is, and its function in relation to critical thought? Contra clichéd understandings of

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<sup>450</sup> James Baldwin Speech. C-Span, 15 January 1979. Video clip. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?170651-1/james-baldwin-speech>

<sup>451</sup> Ed Pavlic, *Who Can Afford to Improvise? James Baldwin and Black Music, the Lyric and the Listeners* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2017.

“riffing” or “theme and variations” according to which original assumptions remain unchanged as points of reference, Baldwin suggests in his Berkeley speech that assumptions themselves are transformed in the course of the improvisation. At first radically defamiliarizing what we mean by “improvisation” by transposing it into the key of language, so to speak, Baldwin goes on to clarify the true dynamic permeating both linguistic and musical creativity. He does this in a way that both acknowledges the specificity of black artistry and points to the possibility of theorizing broadly from this historically specific and violent failure of fit between majoritarian language and experience. “*A writer is involved in a language which he has to change.*” For example, to improvise on the subject of the civil rights movement is to call into question its very terms: “*If you are a citizen, why do you need to fight for your civil rights? If you’re fighting for your civil rights, that means you’re not a citizen.*” At this point in the UC Berkeley speech, Baldwin is citing a question that Malcolm X posed to a young sit-in student at a debate moderated by Baldwin. By the end of this strictly valid, two-step logical proof --which is simultaneously structured in the form of a question and answer -- Baldwin, quoting Malcolm X to invoke a “writerly” form of improvisation, has altered the way the central term, “citizen” is heard by the listener. The premise of citizenship has been first engaged and then re-valued entirely. Just as provocatively, Baldwin has implied that improvising “like a writer” consists in precisely this: “I want to try to *shift* a certain assumption,” he later says.

As both artist and critic, Baldwin offers many possible points of departure for theorizing backwards a radical rationalist and emphatically “unamerican” strain of literary experimentation that preceded him in the nineteenth century. After all, Poe’s tales clarified the roles of logic and aesthetics in *opposition* to one another while nonetheless maintaining an idiosyncratic degree of near-miss proximity between the two domains. But by invoking improvisation as a *writerly* practice, Baldwin frees improvisation from being restricted to the musical, and even to the artistic, domain altogether — a theoretical pluralism which has arguably been central to jazz and blues practitioners from the beginning, but which contemporary scholarship has only started to take up. For Baldwin linking the work of Malcolm X and John Coltrane in this example, musicians in the black radical tradition simply *are* performing the logical work that too many philosophers have neglected.

Baldwin’s opening gambit, then, brings three key registers into play: music (“improvise”), fiction (“like a writer”) and philosophy (“some assumptions”). The three domains are constellated together in such a way that the deep interrelations no longer seem far-fetched (one may ask then, why regard them as *inter*-relations in the first place?) But what does it mean to improvise on a set of assumptions? A thorough elucidation of what improvisation is might one day reveal that Baldwin’s phrase ought to be taken quite literally, though it may *appear* to be figurative to the extent that it stretches mainstream concepts. How does it clarify the functions both of music and of fiction within the context of critical practice? It is worth noting how radically such a demonstration of critical thinking revises clichéd understandings of what “improvisation” consists in. To think Malcolm X’s deduction as a form of improvisation says a lot about how Baldwin understood the contributions of the jazz musicians that he so admired – how he understood their music’s relationship to existing political assumptions. But unlike logical analysis, improvisation itself operates within the language of the assumptions from which it exacts a critical distance, even the untenable ones. The speaker is “formed” by the language which he or she must contest. Improvisation as revision or even ironic quotation, then, achieves a kind of truth *akin* to the objectivity of detached observation or analysis, but without sharing those features.

Baldwin continues:

And, though I feel a little uneasy in doing this, in saying this, nevertheless what a writer is obliged at some point to realize is that he is involved in a language which he has to change. For example, for a black writer, especially in this country, to be born into the English language is to realize that the assumptions of the language, the assumptions on which the language operate, are his enemy.

The idea of being involved in a language which one has to change is not only a brilliant elucidation of (or is it merely a metaphor for?) a jazz musician's relationship to established forms, but also clarifies the sizable overlap between musical and writerly interventions upon official history.

The question of what forms of knowledge, know-how and general competence go *into* and are engaged by improvisational practice has been privileged in contemporary cognitive science and philosophical approaches to improvisation.<sup>452</sup> But these scientific contributions, while valuable, may be a distraction from improvisation's critical promise. What Baldwin does is clarify instead the crucial relation of improvisation to *existing knowledge*, and especially to knowledge so-called. This expansive notion of improvisation identifies musical and linguistic spontaneity as a counterpoint to the ultimate control of consciousness.

### 3. ART AND KNOWLEDGE: WELLEK ON KANTIAN EPISTEMOLOGY AS AESTHETICS

Breaking with the Russian Formalist tradition, René Wellek and the Prague Structuralists abandoned the idea that the distinctive feature of the literary artwork can be found in a distinct form of language use. For him the distinction between art and non-art remains essential, but he goes against the sacred axiom that literary language is a different kind of language. In a 1959 essay titled "The Crisis of Comparative Literature," Wellek writes:

I would not want to confine the study of literature either to the study of sound, verse, and compositional devices or to elements of diction and syntax; nor would I want to equate literature with language. In my conception these linguistic elements form, so to say, the two bottom strata; the sound stratum and that of the units of meaning. But from there emerges a "world" of situations, characters, and events which cannot be identified with any single linguistic element, or, least of all, with any element of external ornamental form.<sup>453</sup>

I will discuss below how Wellek in 1942 (in his classic study with Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*) compares the literary artwork *itself* to a human language: "the literary work...much

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<sup>452</sup> See, for example, Dr. Charles Limb's ongoing experimental study, of which I am a subject: "Neural Substrates of Spontaneous Musical Performance: An fMRI Study of Jazz Improvisation" PLoS ONE 3(2): e1679. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0001679>

<sup>453</sup> René Wellek, "The Crisis of Comparative Literature," in *The Princeton Sourcebook of Comparative Literature: From The European Enlightenment to the Global Present*, eds. David Damrosch, Natalie Melas and Mbongiseni Buthelezi (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009), 170.

resembles the system of language.”<sup>454</sup> For the moment I just want to signal how such a comparison between art and language (how such a metaphor, in fact) might relate to the critique of the linguistic unit of analysis just discussed. The metaphorical mapping that Wellek invites us to perform between a literary artwork and a language would collapse if the literary artwork were itself already nothing but its own linguistic properties (the view that he attributes to the Russian Formalists). Metaphorical mappings (even if what is being mapped is only two *models*) function only on the presupposition of a non-equivalence between the two terms being mapped; hence, in order for the *comparison* between art and language to generate meaning beyond a trivial truth of  $a=a$ , it must be presupposed that verbal art communicates *more than just linguistically*. This implies that there is a non-linguistic remainder that gets communicated even in literary works of art.

Wellek’s inquiry into a difficult ontological problem, his 1942 essay the “The Mode of Existence of the Literary Work of Art,” was reprinted in *Theory of Literature* in the form of a chapter titled “The Analysis of the Literary Work of Art.” I would argue that this chapter has a bivalence which is captured by the somewhat baffling relationship between the two titles (the passage in the titles from “mode of existence” to “analysis”). Indeed, within Wellek’s chapter itself, what begins as an ontological question (what does the artwork consist in?) slowly develops first into an aesthetical-epistemological question (what does it mean to *know* an artwork?) and then into a full-blown epistemological question (what does it mean to know *any* object?) In this final moment of Wellek’s text, the encounter with the work of art has almost slipped into the privileged example of the problem of knowledge as such. This is a tricky point to make, because *nowhere* does Wellek positively assert that encounters with artworks and encounters with regular objects share a common epistemological framework. In fact, it is exactly the opposite: Wellek is deeply committed to the ways in which aesthetic judgments *differ* from other forms of judgment, just as he is committed to an absolute distinction between artworks and non-artworks. However, I would argue that for Wellek in this chapter, aesthetic judgment provides a model for *coping* (in the most human sense of the word) with the limitations on knowing that are set by other forms of cognition. That the objective analysis of the literary work of art persists, despite the apparent (and, Wellek thinks, ungrounded) theoretical objections to its possibility, provides a model for re-valuing cognitive limitations as such. In this way, the emphatic possibility for Wellek of *knowing* an artwork reaffirms a Kantian perspective on the limits of knowledge: how such limits continue to be productive (to put it lightly), rather than demeaning, just as limits and limitations are what make possible knowledge of empirical realities that are not themselves artworks. Wellek’s aim is to show how the indeterminacy and the undecidability of the artwork is not itself an impediment to knowing it. For him, aesthetic experience lays bare the imperfection that lies at the heart of *all* knowledge and is its *only* condition of possibility.

How can we view an artwork as an object to be grasped while also preserving its essential indeterminacy? Wellek begins here by drawing a surprising analogy between a literary work of art and a system of language<sup>455</sup>:

The system of language is a collection of conventions and norms whose workings and relations we can observe and describe as having a fundamental

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<sup>454</sup> René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt, 1956), 153.

<sup>455</sup> An analogy which itself presupposes, with Roman Ingarden, that the literary artwork is more than the sum of its linguistic elements. See Ingarden, *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*, trans. by Ann Crowley and Kenneth R. Olson (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

coherence and identity in spite of very different, imperfect, or incomplete pronouncements of individual speakers. In this respect at least, a literary work of art is in exactly the same position as a system of language. We as individuals shall never realize it completely, for we shall never use our own language completely and perfectly. The very same situation is actually exhibited in every single act of cognition. We shall never know an object in all its qualities, but still we can scarcely deny the identity of objects even though we may see them from different perspectives. We always grasp some "structure of determination" in the object which makes the act of cognition not an act of arbitrary invention or subjective distinction, but the recognition of some norms imposed on us by reality. Similarly, the structure of a work of art has the character of a "duty which I have to realize." I shall always realize it imperfectly, but in spite of some incompleteness, a certain "structure of determination" remains, just as in any other object of knowledge.<sup>456</sup>

Remarkably, Wellek finds a common "situation" among the parallel examples of experiencing art, speaking a language, and having a cognition of an object. In the earlier part of the chapter, Wellek rejects a purely sociological model of the work of art just as he does a purely psychological model, and yet a notion of community here becomes crucial to his articulation of the mode of the existence of the work of art, to the "imperfect realizations" that are the conditions of experience. In the same way that imperfect "knowledge" of a language, distributed among its various speakers, does not inhibit successful language use, what would it mean to "speak" an artwork?

In a later essay called "Virginia Woolf as Critic," Wellek writes: "Philosophically, Virginia Woolf was no idealist...while her views must not be pressed into a philosophical scheme, she clearly aims – at least in her criticism – at *grasping an object*, and she did not and could not approve either of the solipsism implied in Anatole France's 'adventures of the soul among masterpieces' or Pater's view of man's imprisonment in his own mind and body"<sup>457</sup> What I find interesting about Wellek's remark is that, in his estimation of Virginia Woolf's metaphysical sensibility, it is the reality of the *work of art* as an object to be "grasped" which testifies to Woolf's philosophical view of the external world. *Solipsism* usually refers to the denial of external reality, but Wellek uses the term *solipsism* to signal specifically a denial of the reality of a work of art. Here, again, the cognition of a work of art has become the privileged example of cognition.

To be sure, Wellek is the first to insist on the categorial difference between art works and empirical objects. "Imaginative realities," he repeats in *Theory of Literature*, should not be confused with "empirical reality" (153), just as one should "distinguish sharply...between the empirical person and the work" (73). However, there are moments when Wellek has specific reasons for provisionally and momentarily grouping artworks and empirical objects together. For both artworks and empirical objects, he would like to stress, the mental activity instigated by the artwork is subject to normative constraints that are exerted by the artwork -- normative constraints which make it crucial to guard the theoretical possibility of misapprehension.

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<sup>456</sup> Wellek and Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 153.

<sup>457</sup> René Wellek, "Virginia Woolf as a Critic," *Southern Review* 13 (Summer 1977): 419-437.



The literary work of art is neither an empirical fact, in the sense of being a state of mind of any given individual or of any group of individuals, nor is it an ideal changeless object such as a triangle. The work of art may become an object of experience; it is, we admit, accessible only through individual experience, but it is not identical with any experience. It differs from ideal objects such as numbers precisely because it is only accessible through the empirical part of its structure, the sound-system, while a triangle or a number can be intuited directly. It also differs from ideal objects in one important respect. It has something which can be called "life." It arises at a certain point of time, changes in the course of history, and may perish (155-6).

Lamentably, Wellek did not seem much to appreciate Virginia Woolf as an artist, and yet his surprising word here – “life” – is quite Woolfian in that the word is charged with supplying almost all that the theory of art is lacking, in its existing categories. The idea that artworks require a unique ontological vocabulary, beyond existing categories, Wellek also shares with Roman Ingarden, who writes:

I understand that one can take the position that one should not accept the existence of anything other than material things or psychic fact. In that case, however, I request that those who hold this view cease dealing with literary works or any other linguistic formation; for among neither material things nor psychic facts is there anything that would be a work or linguistic formation of this sort.<sup>458</sup>

However, for Ingarden, it appears that even before the question of literary *art* is introduced, the linguistic medium is itself in-between existing ontological categories (“any linguistic formation,” he says). This raises the question of literary art as a privileged medium among the arts and suggests, in a way that coheres with Wellek’s analogy between art and language, that something of the ontology of the artwork may already be glimpsed in the ontology of language.

Wellek’s emphatic anti-solipsism lies in his conviction that we are answerable to artworks – as we are to any object lying outside of us – even though we (as a species, or as a community) have, to a certain degree, already contributed the forms by which they must be apprehended. The formal contributions of the perceiving subject, the reader or the listener, do not -- and it is ironically exactly this mind-*independence* of the artwork (its independence from any *particular* form of subjectivity) that frees it from being locked in to a fixed set of meanings. It is this which allows for the *multiplicity* of the artworks’ meanings, both within a given moment and across periods and contexts. This multiplicity of meanings Wellek refers to as the “life” of the artwork, a term which for Virginia Woolf has no small significance.

It is true we are ourselves liable to misunderstandings and lack of comprehension of these norms, but this does not mean that the critic assumes a superhuman role of criticizing our comprehension from the outside or that he pretends to grasp the perfect whole of the system of norms in some act of intellectual intuition. Rather, we criticize a part of our knowledge in the light of the higher standard set by another part. We are not supposed to put ourselves into the position of a man who,

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<sup>458</sup> Roman Ingarden, *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*, trans. Ann Crowley and Kenneth R. Olson (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1973), lxvi.

in order to test his vision, tries to look at his own eyes, but into the position of a man who compares the objects he sees clearly with those he sees only dimly, makes then generalizations as to the kinds of objects which fall into the two classes, and explains the difference by some theory of vision which takes account of distance, light, and so forth. (155)

Works of art, for Wellek, are objects to whose form the perceiving subject contributes, as is the case with any Kantian object. However, Wellek's emphatic anti-solipsism lies in his conviction that we are *answerable* to artworks -- as we would be to any object lying outside of us --even though we (as a species, or as a community) have, to a certain degree, always already contributed the forms by which they must be apprehended; and, even though (and this is unique to objects that are artworks), we in principle cannot anticipate the set of novel and nevertheless *correct* (even if contradictory) meanings that will be attributed to the artworks by other perceivers and other communities of perceivers. What must be conceded, and what can be affirmed when we encounter an object for which the fact that the "whole" is inaccessible is precisely a measure of its reality? For Wellek, neither the formal nor the substantive contributions of the perceiving subject as reader (or viewer or listener) undermine the possibility and urgency of objective criticism. It is ironically exactly the independence of the artwork from the mind (that is, its independence from anyone's *particular* form of subjectivity) that frees it from being determined by the attributions given to it, and which allows for the *multiplicity* of the artworks' meanings, both within a given moment and across periods and contexts, among its many readers and listeners.

For Wellek, the limits of one's cognition are assessed not by some impossible feat of self-reflexivity (figured as seeing one's own eyeball; Wellek is alluding perhaps to Wittgenstein: "Aber das Auge siehst du wirklich nicht"), but rather by an act of *comparison* that involves engaging directly with one's own experiences of seeing darkly and unclearly.<sup>459</sup> Hence acts of comparison with other minds -- the ultimate critique of solipsism -- substitutes for what would otherwise be an absurd and intolerable intellectual burden for self-reflexivity to bear all on its own.<sup>460</sup> Comparison becomes the only viable rubric under which point of view can itself become the object of representation. In this moment of Wellek's literary theory, Virginia Woolf's poetics are in fact very close at hand.

Like the page of the book, in *Le dernier jour*, that the young, not-yet-condemned man reads at his own pace, the image of the sea in *To the Lighthouse* is a shared percept on which two or more points of view recurrently converge. As Auerbach writes, in relation to a different passage from *To the Lighthouse*, "the multiplicity of persons suggests that we are here after all confronted with an endeavor to investigate an objective reality."<sup>461</sup> It is not at all the case, then, that *idealism* follows from a heightened attention (literary or otherwise) to the inner space of consciousness. On the contrary, the constancy and reality of the object is actually, on this Auerbachian and Wellekian view, *attested* to by the variegated points of view which converge

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<sup>459</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. Frank Ramsey and C.K. Ogden; rev. and ed. Marc A. Joseph (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2014), 5.632.

<sup>460</sup> In a future project I investigate further the ways in which Wellek's notion of comparison here inflects his ongoing defense of (and his estimation of the modes of inquiry involved in) the field of *comparative literature*.

<sup>461</sup> Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 536.

upon it. Here, Lily puts aside her canvas for a moment and looks out at the view with William Bankes:

They both smiled, standing there. They both felt a common hilarity, excited by the moving waves; and then by the swift cutting race of a sailing boat, which, having sliced a curve in the bay, stopped; shivered; let its sails drop down; and then, with a natural instinct to complete the picture, after this swift movement, both of them looked at the dunes far away, and instead of merriment felt come over them some sadness--because the thing was completed partly, and partly because distant views seem to outlast by a million years (Lily thought) the gazer and to be communing already with a sky which beholds an earth entirely at rest (*TL*, 34).

In this passage, the sky “*beholds* an earth entirely at rest,” as if the sky by encompassing the earth were itself engaged in a form of looking or knowing. The poor little “gazer,” a direct object postponed to the very end of the sentence, is herself nearly “outlast[ed]” by the formulation in which she appears. But in the beginning of the passage, there was not one gazer but two -- an intersubjectivity so empowered by the act of looking that “they” had the impression of “complet[ing]” the view they were observing. They moved their eyes around different parts of the scene, selecting salient details successively, as if the view were itself their own spontaneous painting in the process of composition. Perhaps nothing expresses the ‘content’ of the passage to the reader more than the invitation to stumble, while parsing the syntax erroneously, on the oxymoronical phrase “completed partly.” The phrase itself may have the provisional illusion of completion, until the larger construction “partly x, partly y” comes into view, revealing instead that Lily Briscoe and William Bankes’ sadness was partly a matter of completing the picture, and partly a matter of something else entirely: a distant, primordial view that swallows up their own view. In this distant and unattainable perspective from space, the painterly viewpoint itself becomes an object of representation; the gazers become an image dwarfed to the point of disappearance by the primordial scale of time and distance that “beholds an earth entirely at rest.” At the very end of *To the Lighthouse*, the painter Lily Briscoe will think, “I have had my vision,” leaving hanging in the air a similar overtone of partial completion.

For Woolf as for Kant, perception is a creative act, but one emboldened by the comparison and revision generated by the intersubjective dimension. Lily Briscoe and her companion engage the Kantian “drawing” (*zeichnen*) that makes the phenomenal world a possible object of experience. But beyond Kant’s own ability to address the various resonances of this problem, Woolf’s version of spontaneous synthesis makes palpable the sense of loss that attends such construals and objective determinations. While preserving a nod to Hume’s “natural instinct” to complete the picture, Woolf’s is a spontaneity that incorporates into its operation a mournful admission of the loss that completion brings, as well as a gesture toward knowledge’s own never-fully-graspable grounds.

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