

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

The Art of the Modernist Body

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

by

Valerie Lauren Popp

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Art of the Modernist Body

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Professor Michael A. North, Chair

*The Art of the Modernist Body* explores the fraught relationship between corporeality and the genesis of new language in modernist literature. The dissertation argues that the history of disability in the early twentieth century facilitates a revised account of Anglo-American modernism; specifically, the modernists' formal preoccupation with loss, deficiency, and absence, long regarded as a vital aspect of the movement, can be re-imagined productively through the heuristic of disability theory. The project likewise reveals that many of modernism's signature novelties, including free verse, Imagism, and the embrace of ordinary speech, are influenced by artists' attempts to represent physical deviance. Each text in question is generated out of repeated encounters with extraordinary figures or forms, and the artists openly challenge the conceptual, social, and political parameters that delimit the ideal human body. Their literature also reminds us that the modernist period is a remarkably inchoate time in terms of how the body is imagined. Two World Wars, the rise of the machine age, and advances in prosthetic and rehabilitative medicine are just a few of the phenomena that brought the human form to the forefront of British and American culture, with politicians, cultural critics, industrial scions, workers, artists, and soldiers all tussling over the social and economic value of

imperfect bodies. Accordingly, many accounts from the period resist any entrenched, discrete notions of normality and abnormality, and acts of corporeal discipline, normalization, and rehabilitation are neither roundly condemned nor applauded. The confluence of multiple visions of corporeality not only alters the cultural landscape, but it also affects the very language through which the experience of physical difference is articulated. The novelists and poets herein record both processes, namely by producing what might be called a “contingency of corporeality:” they define the superlative modernist body as a hybrid entity, a form that registers the dueling forces of normalization and destabilization.

The dissertation of Valerie Lauren Popp is approved.

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## Introduction

### *Like a Patient*

“Behold a man,” contemporary poet C.D. Wright commands, “the most familiar body outside one’s own (to which one pays less and less attention), as perfect in its imperfections as in its perfections.” So we look at the photograph, perhaps marking the archaism of this imperative as we do so, for it conjures an older sense that has nothing to do with ocularity: “behold” from the Old English, *bihaldan*, meaning to hold by, to retain, to keep, as said of an opinion or a belief or a commitment. The photo, taken from Sally Mann’s project “Proud Flesh” (for which Wright supplies the prefatory text), satisfies this arcane sense of “beholding” as well. For it is a shot of Mann’s husband Larry, a lawyer and part-time blacksmith who was diagnosed with muscular dystrophy fifteen years ago and who is Mann’s sole subject in “Proud Flesh.” As the title suggests, the collection seeks to resist depicting Larry Mann’s disability in a stereotypical fashion; the title itself is a play upon the term “proud flesh,” which refers to the “overgrowth of granulations that spring upon a wound.” Viewed collectively, the pictures simultaneously reject the narrative of the steadily deteriorating body and the triumphalist narrative of the cripple “overcoming” his disability.

When the Manns were interviewed for National Public Radio in February of 2011, the correspondent said of Larry: “he’s rugged, with a solid frame, and you realize, watching him move about the farm, that he’s got a pronounced hitch in his step” (Block). The photograph, with limned lines of muscle cutting obscurely through shadow, confirms his solidity; perhaps the only sign of his disability is the way he leans on the table in front of him for balance. Mann explains that she heightens the peculiar effects of the light by choosing camera equipment from the early twentieth century, described by the NPR correspondent as “the kind where you duck under a cloth to take the picture. They have hulking wooden frames, accordion-like bellows and long brass lenses held

together with tape, with mold growing inside” (Block). Mann tells the story of her husband’s crippled body with crippled technology.

The photo is called “Hephaestus.” What do we know of Hephaestus, Vulcan, the so-called “crook-foot” god? The Iliad calls him the “famous crippled smith” of Olympus, the deity who was hurled out by Zeus for taking Hera’s side in a quarrel and then plummeted from immortal heights “all day long,” finally landing upon the human isle of Lemnos. Disability scholar and activist Petra Kuppers, musing on an allusion to Hephaestus in the poem “New/Unnamed” by the Australian disability culture poet Philip Dowd, reminds us that Hephaestus is the “maker-god, the anvil-god, the one who makes nice things for the other inmates of Olympus...He is the craftsman of the gods, who can create out of nothing, poeisis” (“Disability Culture”). William Ebenstein likewise discusses Hephaestus’s trade, though he chooses to emphasize the god’s command of technology. The blacksmith’s workshop is replete with mechanical wonders: “twenty self-animated tripods with golden wheels,” “voice-activated bellows” (the Olympian iPhone?), and “two golden statues who serve as his assistants” (“Toward an Archetypal”).

Perhaps these fantastic tools are what create the “distant drone” of machines Wright imagines as the sonic texture for the photograph of Larry Mann. She admits the press of myth, the press of the desire to create a language that both shapes and unshapes her subject:

Crows cawing. Always crows. Distant drone of machinery. An old tree has fallen. It will burn through the months in this room. The light stretched, curved, squared off. The contrasts strictly regulated. Stippling of the backs of the legs. Torn strips. Craqueleur. Shredding. Blackened slurry in the corner of the frame. She did that. The sorcerer. He is worn smooth, marmoreal. Tomorrow he goes into town, to lawyer. But he is standing now. He is Vulcan. Hephaestus. (Who had a bum leg.) He is at his forge. He is Fire. He is the only god on the Mount with a job. Who works with his hands. If the room were amplified, it would tick and respire as walls and windows disappeared. Mattress fit for a prison cot. A bowl made by a friend, a Russian tea glass, an aerial of television disguised as blackdrop, and *them*. A man beheld. It goeth to the quick. To the quick. Has your arm gone to sleep? Stripped of activity. An overflowingness of being. He knows we are looking. When he faces the window, the rain obscures the field. Perhaps nothing is out there. Else, the world, sweet and wet, swarming with color. A darkling hand hovers above its

opposite shoulder. The image of the back, a canvas for scratches made by the photographer. All backs are lonely. All backs existentially apart. The way they knew it would be. And yet “empirically personal,” the words retrieved unacknowledged. Likewise these, “big strong seeing.” How is it their privacy is not penetrated by the audacity of our stare? How is it that these frames add up to an enactment, not a series of stills of him? Let’s all sit down in our broken chairs with our broken hearts in our laps and clap. Anticipation of movement, of a sudden shift. The body’s betrayal, dignified by its bearing. Just some window light, some cloth, a worktable, a man lying quietly, or standing with his foot on a stool. *The mystery*, thought the optimist’s daughter, *in how little we know of other people is no greater than the mystery of how much*. The converse is also true. Do you need to stretch now? Can you open your legs more? Can you get closer to the edge and recline in the air a little more? Can you stay on that brink? Were you dreaming again? Of being choked off? Limb by limb? If she knew what he was thinking, would she turn away? Would regret trickle in, shame maybe? A spill of unsaid? Speculate, as you will, on the meaning, but not the upshot. Every frame, evidence of deep true control. Clear, beautiful, frozen. His face, finally. Painfree. *Like a patient etherized upon a table*. Would she turn away? Never.

Wright’s writing, which customarily intersperses sensual, concrete observations (“crows cawing. Always crows”) with cosmic ponderings (“an overflowingness of being”) means that her style is well-suited to broaching the complexity of disabled subjectivity. The disciplining, potentially exploitative manipulations of the photographer, implicit in the “squarings” and “smoothings” of Larry Mann’s body and his surroundings, are offset elsewhere by corporeal realities that defy regulation: “certain sensations have to be attended, an itch that intensifies, an ache that gets louder.” The body imprints its own story, with the prose as the site of record. Likewise, the simple lines “all backs are lonely. All backs existentially apart” are shorthand for the knowledge that all bodies, at some point, become subject to a documenting, examining gaze; that all bodies, all spines, are subject to bending.

And then those final leveling lines, as Wright invokes one of the most famous similes in twentieth-century literature: “like a patient etherized upon a table.” What is happening here? It is, in one way, the most banal, the most immediate allusion one can make. I recall being in an interview in which I was discussing the history of disability imagery in modernist poetry, and one of my interviewers nodded thoughtfully and said: “I have to agree, because when I think of modernism,

frankly, the first thing that comes to mind for me is Eliot's "Prufrock" and the patient etherized upon the table. It's the modern image." Clearly, to be an etherized patient is, for T.S. Eliot and for legions of readers, synonymous with the unfortunate condition of the early twentieth-century subject. It is synonymous with a kind of moral, psychic, and indeed physical disability- for despite the flaneural aspirations of the opening invitation to "let us go," the poem spends a lot of time restricted to various kinds of "chambers." Patienthood becomes symbolic of the most quintessentially modernist anxieties- utter lack of agency, affective numbness and inability to discern meaning from language and gesture, the Prufrockian impossibility of getting one's mind and tongue in concert ("It is impossible to say just what I mean!"), the psychological paralysis that generates a plethora of inconsequential questions in lieu of action. Koppers has written about Prufrock's brethren the "hollow men" and how their disabled forms embody a similarly bleak vision of modernity: "lean together," "drawn, they stand in that/ shape without form/ shade without colour,/ paralysed force, gesture without motion" ("Disability Culture"). What Koppers deems the "flaccid," purgatorial ache of their wait confirms that Eliot uses paralysis negatively, monolithically, as a "metaphor for the human condition" ("Disability Culture").

But what if the components of metaphor are pulled apart? What if the metaphor is recentered, as it is in Wright's accompanying text for the photography of Larry Mann? What if the line is placed in a new context and we are compelled to rethink our assumptions about the speaker, the time period in question, the poet? Certainly this is in part what Wright accomplishes at the end of her piece. The "spill of unsaid" and the possibility of speculation, the inability to know the other that apparently torments Prufrock so, become the foundation of love. Of peace. To be patient-ly etherized upon a table means to be free of a particular kind of existential agony, because it means being linked to someone who "will never turn away" from what Susan Wendell calls the "hard

physical realities” (45) of disabled bodies. For Larry Mann, it means being “beheld” in the archaic sense.

Might Eliot himself have envisioned the metaphor of the “patient etherized upon a table” in this way? Kuppers asks: “who is sung to here? Who is asked for permission to let me be the poet of cripples- members of cripp culture, addressed by their singer, or the mainstream addressed by an Orphic poet, like Eliot?” (“Disability Culture”). Well, Eliot himself spent a fair amount of time on clinical tables, a fact which certainly complicates the ready assignment of this poet to the ranks of the “mainstream” and able. And while I don’t wish to devote much space to Eliot here, I point this out because it illustrates how our ableist assumptions (i.e. to be an etherized patient is to be mute and devoid of agency) and our preconceptions about modernity (to be a modern urbanite is to be mute and devoid of agency) can reinforce each other and thereby close down potentially complex and historically aware readings of modernist art. In the case of the line from “Prufrock,” I would refer to Marjorie Perloff’s *21<sup>st</sup>-Century Modernism: A New Poetics* and her chapter “The Avant-Garde Eliot,” which reminds us that before Eliot was the standard-bearer for high modernism, his “Prufrock” was called “absolutely insane” (27) by an editor. Could we imagine that for our Eliotic speaker, who inhabits a world full of people who come-and-go without purpose or reflection, the “catatonic” (20) suspension mimicked by the prosody in the line “patient etherized upon a table” might have been an achievement, a desirable physiological state rather than an undesirable one? Such a reading would also reinforce Stephen Spender’s observation that the “ether” possibly connotes “ethereal,” linking anesthesia with the vividness of dream (and it’s worth noting that in contemporary medicine, fantastic dreams are considered a common part of the experience of anesthesia).<sup>1</sup> Or does it change our perception to know that before the ether was regulated for use

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<sup>1</sup> Alison Winter’s chapter “Anesthesia and the Redefinition of Pain” in *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* tells the fascinating story of how ether was transformed from a drug associated with

as an anesthetic in the mid nineteenth century, it was fashionable to hold gatherings known as “ether frolics,” where participants recreationally inhaled ether to induce visions and histrionic behavior (Romantic poet Robert Southey reportedly was a frolic attendee)?<sup>2</sup> Perhaps these famous first lines of “Prufrock,” which have typically been read as symbolic of a world that is already numb, impotent, voiceless, are actually a vision of possibility and expansiveness which the rest of the poem, the im- “patient” world, cannot match. Is being “etherized upon a table” actually a kind of “moment’s surrender?”<sup>3</sup>

Who has permission to be a “poet of cripples?” Who counts and who doesn’t? The issue of identification was a critical matter for me in the conception of this project, particularly because none of my writers explicitly self-identified as disabled- at least, none of them did so in a way that would

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theater and spectacle into a carefully regulated medical anesthetic. Winter shows how the growing use of ether as an anesthetic in the mid-nineteenth century was concomitant with a historical “anesthetizing” of sorts, as the drug’s complicated and “messy” history was ignored so as to create a “perfect profile” for its emergence as a medical wonder (184). Whether or not Eliot was aware of the “ether frolic” tradition is unclear; it is, however, possible that the opening lines of “Prufrock” might have been commenting upon a similar modern “anesthetizing” of the very term “ether,” which once had sensual, visionary currency but was regulated until it became synonymous with numbness.

<sup>2</sup> In 2005, the modern UK theater group Sound&Fury, in collaboration with the theater collective Shunt, conceived and performed a work entitled *Ether Frolics*, which they describe as an attempt to explore “the history and contemporary practice of anaesthesia and questions of consciousness” (“Sound and Fury”). Initial performances were in the vault-like spaces underneath the London Bridge railway station; performances of the 2008 revival took place at the Royal London Hospital. The review from *The Guardian*’s Michael Billington recounted “a white-walled, hospital-like space where a jocular medico prepares us for the effects of an anaesthetising suppository. In the ensuing darkness, we hear a collection of strange sounds, including distantly tinkling bells, and see weird sights - especially striking are the geometric shapes, including triangles and cubes, that come looming out of the darkness” (981). See also Stanton B. Garner’s “Is There a Doctor In the House? Medicine and the Making of Modern Drama,” which uses *Ether Frolics* to frame a discussion of realist drama and the medicalized body.

<sup>3</sup> Hunter S. Thompson on ether: “This is the main advantage of ether: it makes you behave like the village drunkard in some early Irish novel... total loss of all basic motor skills: blurred vision, no balance, numb tongue- severance of all connection between the body and the brain. Which is interesting because you can actually watch yourself behaving in this terrible way, but you can't control it” (45).

be recognized in contemporary disability studies discourse, though we must be mindful of the fact that they did not have contemporary discursive practices available to them in their historical moment, and so the language and strategies of self-identification and community formation were not what we might expect. Even bearing historicity in mind, identity politics are a thorny matter. Rosemarie Garland Thomson writes in *Extraordinary Bodies* that disability is an especially troublesome category because it “unites a highly marked, heterogeneous group whose only commonality is being considered abnormal” (24). Or, as skeptical colleague once said to me: “well, aren’t we all disabled?” Well, yes, in a way, and the universality is one of the qualities that ensures the relevance of disability theory. Tobin Siebers notes that “only 15% of people with disabilities are born with their impairments” (59), which means that most disabled people *become* disabled. Perhaps more significant is Siebers’s observation that the trajectory of human disability is seldom linear and predictable. The customary narrative that has us moving progressively from able-bodiedness to disability with age or the onset of disease is in actuality not customary at all. It is typical to transition unevenly and unexpectedly between able-bodiedness and disability repeatedly over the course of a lifetime; disability studies theorists contend that it is more accurate, if more disconcerting, to think of ourselves as “temporarily-abled” (Siebers 60).<sup>4</sup> Alternately, Deborah Marks has suggested the term “contingently able-bodied,” which, she argues, exposes the “fantasy” of ‘ability’ (18). The notion of “temporary” or “contingent” able-bodiedness is likewise valuable in that it decenters what is known as the “overcoming” or “triumphalist” narrative, in which an individual conquers his or her disability. Though it seems benign, the “overcoming” narrative is pernicious because of its implicit critique of the disabled individual. Michael Davidson writes that these narratives all seem to advise,

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<sup>4</sup> See also Bérubé.

“Buck up! If you’d stop whining and get on with your therapy (and stop asking for expensive accommodation) you could be one of us” (224).<sup>5</sup>

Some of the most persuasive work in disability theory in recent years has emerged from texts that reflect the audacious truth of our “contingent able-bodiedness.” Jim Ferris’s essay “The Enjambed Body: A Step Towards a Crippled Poetics,” for instance, describes a succession of surgeries and repairs to his leg, “fragmentation and rodding,” (4) the waits until subsequent surgeries, “broken leg healed, largely forgotten,” (4), numerous braces, stitch “caesuras” (5) that find their way into his verse. Vivian Sobchack’s essay “Real Phantoms/Phantom Realities: On the Phenomenology of Bodily Imagination,” which discusses her experience with phantom limb syndrome after the amputation of her left leg, offers the metaphor of her body as “laboratory;” she records her changing perceptual experiences of her leg and reflects upon the attendant changes in the language with which she registers this process. Sue Schweik’s work on early twentieth-century poet Josephine Miles likewise focuses upon the “contingent” able-bodiedness of her subject; Miles, who had rheumatoid arthritis, experienced “unpredictable flare-ups and remissions” (495) which challenged the stability of categories such as “normal,” “sick,” “disabled,” and “cured.” Ferris and Sobchack, who embrace *crip* identity unequivocally, and Miles, whose career occurred before the emergence of what we would regard as disability activism, are all equally deserving of a place in the disability studies project.

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<sup>5</sup> Simi Linton describes how the “overcoming” narrative inhibits political and social change by placing the onus upon the individual: “the ideas imbedded in the *overcoming* rhetoric are of personal triumph over a personal condition. The idea that someone can *overcome* a disability has not been generated within the community; it is a wish fulfillment generated from the outside. It is a demand that you be plucky and resolute, and not let the obstacles get in your way. If there are no curb cuts at the corner of the street so that people who use wheelchairs can get across, then you should learn to do wheelies and jump the curbs. If there are no sign language interpreters for deaf students at the high school, then you should study harder, read lips, and stay up late copying notes from a classmate. When disabled people internalize the demand to “overcome” rather than demand social change, they shoulder the same kind of exhausting and self-defeating “Super Mom” burden that feminists have analyzed” (165).

The three writers in my dissertation satisfy this contemporary conception of disability as a dynamic, historically and environmentally contingent phenomenon. D.H. Lawrence, the earliest of the trio, experienced pulmonary illness sporadically and with varying degrees of intensity until his death from tuberculosis at a young age. John Worthen writes that Lawrence “had what was called a ‘weak chest’: he was particularly subject to colds, coughs, inflammation and bronchitis” (184). At times he was healthy enough to embark upon lengthy transatlantic and trans-Mediterranean travels, many of which he documents in his nonfiction essays and novels alike. Other times he was so ill that he could not get out of bed, and he wrote frankly about the sense that certain body parts were behaving like men who were “defaulting” on their debts.<sup>6</sup> The mutability of Lawrence’s physical condition becomes intimately tied to his strategies for poetic revolt, as well as to his sensitive, exhaustive (at times, exhausting) defenses of biological variation in nature.

H.D.’s place is at once the most traditional, the most tenuous, and the most significant. Unlike Lawrence and Williams, both of whom had physical defects that were medically diagnosed when they were young men, H.D. did not have a readily identifiable, namable condition. She becomes increasingly infirm with age, the most acute injury occurring when she injures her hip during a fall in 1956; after the fall, she never walks “normally” again. William Carlos Williams speaks of her disability when describing the final time that these two poets and longtime friends would see each other, at a ceremony held by the American Academy of Arts and Letters in May of 1960: “didn’t she make a grand entrance to the platform with her crab’s walk brushing all formality aside in her determination to be there?” She was, he said, a “distinguished poet right to the end”

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<sup>6</sup> Lawrence once wrote of his financial woes in 1909: “I wish I were not so handicapped for cash, my shirts are patched, my boots are- well, not presentable” (*Letters*, 130). That the language of disability and the language of poverty often intertwine for Lawrence is suggestive of what contemporary disability theorists have come to recognize as an irrefutable link between disability and economic inequality. See Charlton, as well as Davidson’s chapter “Universal Design: The Work of Disability in an Age of Globalization.”

(qtd. in Mariani 757). Yet the fact that H.D. lacked a specific, easily classifiable disability or ailment for much of her life is, in some sense, the point of her inclusion. One of the major accomplishments of her poetry is how it exposes the ways in which people who merely feel “deviantly” are pathologized in certain environments. H.D.’s personal narrative suggests that she was seen as someone who periodically required “emotional convalescence,” and her disability was her failure to respond to external stimuli with the feelings and language that others expected of her. Her poetry is critically valuable to disability studies in that it elucidates the particular dilemmas of those whose disabilities are not physical;<sup>7</sup> it raises the provocative issue of why the regulation of feeling should be a desirable aim at all, and it questions how to express mental disability in a world where the language of material disability is overdetermined and where disabled bodies are all too present.

William Carlos Williams always regarded himself as both a physician and a poet. Now, with the development of medical school courses in “patient narrative,” and the welcome progress of programs in the medical humanities in the U.S. and abroad, many contemporary readers know him in both roles as well.<sup>8</sup> Yet I want to supplement this duality with the often-neglected role of patient, for Williams surely was that, too. Like H.D., Williams became disabled with age; he had a series of

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<sup>7</sup> As Bradley Lewis notes in his history of “Mad Pride,” Thomas Szasz, one of the most influential anti-psychiatry and “Mad Pride” activists of the late twentieth century, argued that mental illness did not even exist: “for Szasz, *physical* illness was real because you can see the x-ray, but a “broken brain” is a myth because there is no x-ray that will show it. For Szasz, to see mental illness as “real” rather than as metaphor was to make a serious category mistake. “Mental illness” is not objectively observable; it is a myth” (343). Now, of course, due to advances in medical technology (particularly imaging), some types of mental illness are “objectively observable.”

<sup>8</sup> Brian A. Bremen has noted that Williams’s writing about medicine, which “exposes the limits of the predominantly algebraic, scientific model of diagnosis prevalent around the turn of the century,” anticipates the contemporary “narrative” understanding of the patient evinced in the medical writings of people such as Oliver Sacks (86). For more on Sacks’s writing and its relevance for disability theory, see Cassuto, who notes that Sacks’s body of work “suggests an effort to bend the case study away from scientific taxonomy and towards the use of medical methodology to liberate human diversity and individuality” (124).

strokes in 1951-52 that severely affected his speech, his motor coordination, and his vision. Much of his late poetry is seen as an acquiescence to his new physical reality; T. Hugh Crawford writes that the last book of *Paterson*, for example, has a “tone of peaceful resignation” (145), and he remarks that Williams’s stroke “adds a poignancy” to the images of “flickering recognition” that run throughout the final section, but his analysis stops there. In *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, Marjorie Perloff may advance a different reading of *Paterson*, denying its seemingly improvisational feel, but she likewise alludes to Williams’s stroke to make a claim about his late-career return to “stateliness.” Apparently, when Williams has his stroke, he loses his modernist mojo as well: “no more snatches of documentary prose, no Cubist or Surrealist superpositions or dislocations” (153). What both Crawford and Perloff fail to recognize, though, is that after Williams’s stroke, he becomes the subject of his own documentary impulse in poems such as *Paterson V* and “Asphodel,” and furthermore, these acts of self-documentation are just as performative and elaborate as his earlier, more overtly “modernist” works; in part, I argue, this is because Williams’s embodied experience of his disability is not nearly as static nor as “stately” as such readings suggest. That “Asphodel” purports to be a “triumph of simple confession,” as Perloff says, doesn’t mean that it is. In addition to accounts of his strokes, I also discuss the often-overlooked fact of Williams’s adolescent heart ailment, which he frequently links with the subjects of walking and locality in his work.

### *Disabling Modernism*

In a dual-field project such as this one, I also had to consider a few key conceptual matters at stake for the field of modernism. Perhaps the first query any respectable modernist scholar poses to herself is, which modernism? Opening any tome nowadays, when the plural “s” is *de rigueur*, it is difficult to imagine a time when people spoke of modernism as a monolithic entity. Reading a sentence which defines modernism as committed to “reactionary grand narratives of social and psychic order” is a bit like going through your drawer and finding the popsicle-stick creature you

made in kindergarten: it's quaint but vaguely embarrassing. Michael Levenson, who, despite his trenchancy obviously could stand to peruse some body theory, opines: "a coarsely understood Modernism is at once an historical scandal and a contemporary disability" (1). Recent work in modernism, enriched by scholarship in fields including (but certainly not limited to) gender studies, affect studies, postcolonial studies, and film studies, has taught us to be judicious about assigning labels and agendas to particular writers, and to be alert to how our own critical biases can sometimes make us unaware of the nuance of forms and positions that, to us, seem essentialist, mundane, conciliatory, bourgeois, conservative, etc. That said, even the most strenuously avant-garde modernist projects can sometimes advance a regressive agenda. So the "grand narratives" persist, though now we seek evidence of them in unexpected places: in out-of-print books, in secondary plot lines, in supporting characters, in other literary traditions. This is why, when we are interpreting a poem such as "Prufrock," we often have to pick our Eliot. Which modernism does the poem exemplify? Do we see hints of the post- *Waste Land* incarnation, high modernism and the "autocratic, inhibited, depressed, rather narrow-minded, and considerably bigoted fake Englishman" (119), as Cynthia Ozick famously characterized him in her 1989 essay "T.S. Eliot at 101"? Or do we see remnants of a nascent modernist aesthetic and evidence of an "avant-garde" Eliot, the young man who once wrote in the "Preludes:" "I am moved by fancies that are curled / around these images, and cling: The notion of some infinitely gentle / Infinitely suffering thing" (15)?

Disability theory is a welcome heuristic in that it gives us the means to assess such options more sagely. Consequently, for this project, my examination of modernism is less about delimiting the movement according to a specific set of political or cultural aims than it is about establishing a nuanced historical context for the three writers in question, and then using disability theory to isolate and illuminate those moments, practices, and texts that best evince how modernists were working

through (and generating) the terms of embodiment in their era.<sup>9</sup> The art of the three writers I've chosen spans the entirety of what is typically defined as the modernist period. This historical scope is significant because it includes key modernist events such as the lingering effects of *fin-de-siècle* decadence, the Great War, the global economic crises of the 1930s, World War Two, and the first tentative steps towards a post-nuclear postmodernity, all of which are also watershed phenomena with respect to the institutionalization and medicalization of disability in the twentieth century. My dissertation is also an Anglo-American "mongrel," to riff on Mina Loy's language. The hybridity reflects the unusual nature of modernism's transatlantic reach; other literary periods may boast rich transatlantic histories, but Anglo-American modernism was singular in the remarkable extent to which the definitive moments and texts of the period emerged out of transatlantic collaborations. Lawrence, H.D., and Williams all were bound to each other through an intricate lattice of personal and professional relationships.

It seems equally germane to mention how I conceive of the relationship between modernism and modernity, especially given the vexed status of modernity in current disability studies debate. Whether a particular strain of modernism is seen as responding to modernity or whether it is viewed as an equal term in a mutually constitutive, mutually originative relationship (hence the journal title *Modernism/modernity*) can determine what kind of texts get enshrined, which ones are ignored, which methodologies seem viable, and a range of other critically pertinent issues. It is my position that to portray modernist artists as merely responding to modernity's relentlessly "progressive narrative" of "the triumph of the rational spirit, principles of efficiency, and scientific management" ("Cultural

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<sup>9</sup> Sara Danus's definition of modernism as "an umbrella term covering a variety of cultural practices" (6) is instructive here, as is Lawrence Rainey's conception of modernism as a "social reality." Rainey argues that by understanding the institutions (such as publishing) that mediate between readers and works and by studying the "social spaces and staging venues" (5) where modernism operated, we can avoid the "high modernism" vs. mass culture schism and the perils of formalism. Rainey's comments about the fallacy of the high/low divide in modernism are worth heeding; his dire warnings about the perils of formalism are less so.

Locations” 31) denies them of what, to all evidence, was their astute sense of modernity’s contradictions and its subversive possibilities. As Sara Blair has remarked, the modernists may have shared “a commitment to experimenting with the cultural power of literary forms,” but implicit in this commitment is an awareness of the “contestatory nature of [these] investments in form, technique, and literary value” (166). Likewise, in the introduction to their volume *Bad Modernisms*, modernist scholars Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz take up the question of modernism’s formal and cultural traditionalism. They note that by the end of the twentieth-century, “modernism’ could be used in a way that ‘avant-garde’ could not: to suggest a persistent orthodoxy rather than a deliberate challenge” (6), or a continuity with and enforcement of tradition rather than a radical break. Postmodernism, viewed as an “energizing refutation of modernist complacencies” (6), became the fashionable locus of all that was subversive and edgy and, more germane for the discussion here, potentially liberating for those whose bodies were silenced or denied a place in modernism’s history. Yet this critical development obscures the fact that “badness is relative and contextual” (9), as Mao and Walkowitz put it: that when properly contextualized, seemingly conservative literary forms or practices become strategic. They become potentially radical modes of critique and investigation rather than extensions of a homogeneous modernist endeavor.

Elucidating the contradictory history of modernist textual and cultural production is especially significant for this project. It complicates our assumptions about how certain writers negotiated the subject of the body in modernist art, and it challenges the reductive narrative of modernity that has been promulgated by disability studies scholars in the humanities. Many early twentieth-century institutions, inventions, and practices certainly initiated and encouraged the “making” of modern disability, and acknowledging modernism’s complicity in this often destructive transition is a necessary historical reckoning.<sup>10</sup> Yet the modernist period also gave rise to an equally significant

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<sup>10</sup> Garner lodges a similar critique of disability studies in his discussion of modern drama: “the

assortment of institutions, inventions, and practices that questioned the emergent “normativity;” historical context might have circumscribed the potential for resistance, but such potential was present nonetheless. Given how many disability studies scholars have embraced an unqualified view of modernism as a totalizing, hegemonic, pro-technological, normalizing force, it is imperative to acknowledge such historical nuances. One crucial aim of my project is thereby to illumine how the art of writers such as D.H. Lawrence, H.D., and William Carlos Williams is simultaneously a record of disability’s “modern” making and a site of its undoing.

Postmodern art has proven amenable to disability theory, largely because postmodern disability artists now can access a lexicon and a tradition that are politicized and readily identifiable as “crip,” and their aesthetic strategies need not respond to the alleged modernist burden of the totalizing narrative. Eighteenth century art and literature are also fertile ground for disability theorists, since this time period, like the postmodern era, is regarded as an era of flux. Yet whereas postmodernity offers the possibility of a historical moment when disabled men and women possess the tools with which to destabilize and destroy modern binaries such as sick/well, disabled/able-bodied, the eighteenth century is seen as a time when such paradigms were nonexistent or, if they

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emphasis of disability studies on social construction is often at odds with a study of the somatic body, its conditions of ease and dis-ease, and the biosphere to which it belongs, while the suspicion of the medical on the part of disability theorists limits their interest in broader developments in medical discourses, practices, and technologies. The difficulty presented by a narrow application of this approach...is evident with a figure such as Samuel Beckett, whose drama and fiction are rife with medical terminology and with characters marked by bodily impairment and illness...because Beckett’s work does not foreground the social meanings of impairment, it has received little attention from disability theorists. Those who consider it, such as Ato Quayson, inevitably confront the question of whether one can speak of disability at all in Beckett’s dramatic and fictional universe” (314-15).

did exist, they were emergent and labile, rather than means by which political and economic control were exercised and deviant bodies were controlled, hushed up, locked up.<sup>11</sup>

The burgeoning of the modern age in the late eighteenth- and nineteenth century creates and consolidates these previously fluid categories, with the late nineteenth- and early twentieth century period often seen as the culmination, and some would argue the nadir, of this process. Tim Armstrong has pronounced that “modernism is characterized by the desire to *intervene* in the body; to render it part of modernity by techniques which may be biological, mechanical or behavioural” (6). Modernity’s interventions had (and continue to have) contradictory consequences for all bodies, though the consequences for people with disabilities were even more difficult to parse. In this vein, Tobin Siebers notes that one of the major debates in disability studies centers around the notion of whether or not people with disabilities “had it better or worse” before the inception of modernity. Yet I’d contend that the notion of a vibrant debate over the status of modernity is somewhat fictional, given the extent to which the “had it better beforehand” camp tends to dominate current disability studies discourse. It is when industrial society is created, one line of thought avers, that normalcy begins to be enforced. For example, Rosemarie Garland Thomson opines that “in modern times markers of individuation like physical disability render one a ‘case’ upon which power is exercised,” whereas in pre-modern times, disability, while sometimes viewed as a disadvantage, might have been read “as a distinguishing mark of power or prestige’ (40). Modernity, with its concomitant rhetoric of “case” and cure, forecloses the possibility of a positive cultural interpretation of disability. Lennard Davis similarly has pointed out that the word “norm” didn’t

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<sup>11</sup> In the words of Helen Deutsch, “newly naturalized disability caused the eighteenth century to doubt its own eyes.” It was a period “suspended between two narrative paradigms of the disabled individual:” a premodern notion of monstrosity and “divine punishment for moral failings,” and our modern, “triumphalist” narrative of disability as “an obstacle to be heroically conquered by a randomly afflicted individual” (198). See also Deutsch and Nussbaum for a comprehensive survey of disability in the eighteenth century.

even come to consciousness until the middle of the nineteenth century (3). In fact, one could add a number of telling terms to that list: “gammy,” meaning lame or disabled through injury or pain, didn’t appear until 1879; “gimp” (presumably a variation on “gammy”), which refers both to a lame leg and to a person with a lame leg, first appears in 1925; and the first documented use of “crip” as abbreviation for cripple occurs in 1918. In addition to acts of linguistic enforcement of difference, Davis notes that the rise of eugenics, which was a transatlantic (and ultimately global) phenomenon, winning adherents both in America and in England, occurred coevally with the height of the modernist era (8-10).<sup>12</sup> Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell likewise have referred to the *manufacturing* of disability in the early twentieth century, with increasing value placed on homogeneity due to standardization of the workplace (“Cultural Locations” 23).<sup>13</sup> Or consider a late nineteenth-century movement such as Fletcherism, which is in critical vogue again because of the renewed interest in epicurean culture; the Fletcherian concept of the body as a “machine,” designed to eliminate waste and “maximize efficiency,” reflects a cultural interest in bodily perfectibility, improvement, and the regulation of corporeal excess. The modern period is also seen as a definitive moment for the

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<sup>12</sup> In their introduction to *Cultural Locations of Disability*, Snyder and Mitchell similarly claim that bodily discipline is a “quintessentially modernist project.” They write: “The eugenics period provided the tools and rationale for a hygienic drive toward the valorization of perfection and normalization. These goals stand at the heart of the modernist impulse. Rather than make eugenics an aberration of modernism, this study takes as the targets of our critique the practices of hereditary “cleansing” developed in this period” (4-5).

<sup>13</sup> Siebers alludes to Jameson’s notion of the “political unconscious” to explain how social spaces implicitly reinforce bodily homogeneity: “a social propensity to organize cultural representations and artifacts according to the symbolism of number and averaging rather than individualism.” Siebers explains that many innovations in modernist architecture and industrial design were predicated upon a model of an ideal “social body:” “Le Corbusier invented the modular scale of proportion, while [Henry] Dreyfuss pioneered human factors engineering. The former favored a man six feet tall, possessing proportionate dimensions between his upraised hands, head, waist, and feet. The latter created a series of charts representing “Joe,” “Josephine,” and “Joe Jr.,” a typical American male, female, and child, whose proportions set the human factors needed to design the Bell telephone, Polaroid camera, and Honeywell thermostat as well as airplane interiors, tractors, vacuum cleaners, trains, and helicopters” (85).

Foucauldian phenomenon of “bio-power,” that matrix of concepts like health, sanitation, birthrate, longevity, and race which, since the late eighteenth century, has enabled authorities to invade, track, control, and at times eliminate non-normative bodies under the guise of progress.<sup>14</sup> When William Carlos Williams writes the following lines about modern life in *Paterson V*, he is inscribing bio-power’s effects: “the times are not heroic/ since then/ but they are cleaner/ and freer of disease.”<sup>15</sup>

In Edith Wharton’s 1912 novel *The Reef*, the “beaded and bugled” doyenne Madame de Chantelle sits down with George Darrow to discuss his relationship with Anna Leath. She appraises Darrow’s love interest in that sniffingly epigrammatic style that is the *lingua franca* for all of Wharton’s aristocratic women, saying: “Anna is ‘modern’- I believe that’s what it’s called when you read unsettling books and admire hideous pictures” (180). The formidable Madame might be “old fashioned- like [her] furniture” (182), as she puts it, but her judgment about the modern is spot-on. For aesthetically speaking, what complements the entrenchment of the “normative” body is greater attention to the representational power of the non-normative, and the appropriation of the language of disability to define and advance artistic projects. The modern return to the Greek etymology of the term “aesthetic,” meaning “things perceptible by the senses, things material” is an especially key constituent in this alternate sort of bodily “intervention.” Siebers locates the origin of the shift in

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<sup>14</sup> Biopower’s representational import is just as significant than its institutional force; Siebers writes, “biopower determines for Foucault the way that human subjects experience the materiality of their bodies. The human subject has no body, nor does the subject exist, prior to its subjection as representation. Bodies are linguistic effects driven, first, by the order of representation itself and, second, by the entire array of social ideologies dependent on this order” (55).

<sup>15</sup> Deborah Lupton has observed that in theory, the Foucauldian approach, which sees illness as a discursive construction and hence imagines the doctor-patient relationship as emerging relationally, suggests that patients can exercise more power than they do in the physician-dominated “medicalization” model of modern health. Yet she remarks that most critics tend to read Foucault in a way that reifies the medicalization model: they “focus on surveillance and medical domination, and the inability of the patient to return the clinical gaze. They often represent medical power as overwhelmingly coercive and confining, despite Foucault’s own insistence about the productive rather than the repressive nature of power” (101).

realism, which is the first movement to offer up “trash, fragments, imperfection” as “more real” than corporeal perfection (67). Modernist art advances this project by “changing the sense of aesthetic beauty to a rawer conception” (Siebers 67), and by turning disruption, defamiliarization, and heterogeneity, and breakage into strategies that convey a “realer” phenomenological experience. Jesse Matz, for instance, has written convincingly of the role of what he calls “literary impressionism” in modernist art; one of the most relevant observations he makes is how impressionist narratives often depend upon the presence of a second body {“collaborators”), usually a woman or a lower-class character, who, because of his or her “unique” faculties, has “special access to contingent, sensuous, concrete existence” (34).<sup>16</sup> This suggestion that bodies that are devalued in or excluded from modern society can generate narrative power through their “sensual” extraordinariness explains why so much modernist art appears to veer precariously close to primitivism at times. As Michael Levenson notes, the desire to do “violence” to a perceptually stilted culture is what compelled Picasso to paint “primitive masks over the faces of his *Demoiselles d’Avignon*” (2); it is why the language of shell-shocked Septimus Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway* is simultaneously the most perceptive and the most poetic language in the entire novel; it is why Hemingway’s novels are replete with characters who possess psychic and/or physical disabilities.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Matz cites the example of Conrad to remind us that such access isn’t always welcome or desired, however.

<sup>17</sup> Sharon Snyder contemplates a disability studies reading of Jake Barnes’s war wound in Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*: “What might it mean to point out that Hemingway’s character’s contemplations of impaired bodies stem from Hemingway’s own lifelong struggles with inherited depression and a shrapnel wound received during his stint as a ambulance driver in World War One? How might the story predict his inability to accept his physical debility following two plane crashes in the 1950s? How does this parallel of a maimed biology between Jake and the author serve as a challenge to criticism’s insistence on the robust masculine mystique of the Hemingway hero? From just such questions can one begin to comprehend disability as integral to critical insights” (176).

Yet using disability or illness as a metaphor for cultural renewal is, in the end, no better than using it as a metaphor for modern cultural collapse. Are sick and disabled bodies merely another kind of fodder for primitivist modernist impulses, then? It's a legitimate question, particularly considering that Lawrence and Williams have been accused at various junctures of primitivizing women, the working class, African-Americans, and queer bodies. The disability studies community has engaged in robust debates about the kinds of stereotypes and objectifications that tend to accompany depictions of disabled bodies as "more real;" the awareness of "disability primitivism" is always counterbalanced against the need to reaffirm that disability is not just socially constructed, to acknowledge that disabled bodies do indeed experience the world differently and that these material experiences (including the feeling of pain) exert their own cultural force. This is where the still-controversial matter of embodied authorship becomes paramount, as Foucault's influence (and misapplication of his influence) contributes to the enduring critical saw that the body is merely a discursive product.<sup>18</sup> By asserting that the body has extra-discursive, messy, material meaning, the writers in my dissertation anticipate our contemporary, post-Foucault moment: a moment when the limitations of disembodied theory have been made starkly manifest.<sup>19</sup> In other words, we have to remember that the body intervenes in modernism, too.

Regarding modernist literature, it is too reductive a reading, I think, to assume that all writers explore the issue of disability and the primitive uncritically. On the contrary, a quality that unites all

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<sup>18</sup> Thomson appeals for an approach that strategically deploys both constructionist and essentialist paradigms. The benefits of strategic constructionism include how it "destigmatizes the disabled body, makes difference relative, denaturalized so-called normalcy, and challenges appearance hierarchies" (23). Strategic essentialism complements this methodology by mitigating structuralism's tendency to dissolve the material realities of difference: it "validates individual experience and consciousness, imagines community, authorized history, and facilitates self-naming" (23).

<sup>19</sup> As Catherine Waldby remarks, "the living body is excessive, unpredictable, organised through unquantifiable forces of meaning and desire, as well as complex, nonfunctional kinds of organic drive" (144).

of the works in my dissertation is how they consciously make their own conceptual and linguistic limitations into the very subject of their art. It is true that not every sick body or crooked leg in modernism is significant. Where the core of future work in disability studies resides is in learning how to differentiate the moments of “mere metaphor” (good or bad) from those moments that arise out of circumstances and modes of production that are genuinely germane to the field. That is where the core of my project resides: in using a disability studies-inflected, historically-aware, formalist approach to differentiate which examples of modernist corporeal “breakage” are, in fact, generated from places of awareness and experience, and, as such, grant the non-normative body a complex subjectivity that transcends the metaphor of the disabled modern “human condition.” Moreover, I show how Lawrence, H.D., and Williams all self-consciously engage this metaphor as a modern production, and each writer offers multiple formal and rhetorical ways of refuting it. This shared commitment to discursive variety, I argue, is itself both incontrovertibly modernist and a persuasive anticipation of contemporary disability theory.

One modernist text that directly and usefully engages matters of form, the body, and the primitive is Virginia Woolf’s *On Being Ill*. First published as an essay in the Eliot-led *New Criterion* in 1926 and later reprinted separately under the Hogarth imprint in 1930, *On Being Ill* (also titled elsewhere “Illness: An Unexploited Mine”) begins with an assertion that would be familiar to any disability studies scholar: that sickness, particularly physical sickness, is familiar (“common”) but somehow considered an unsuitable or improper subject for literary representation.<sup>20</sup> Woolf aims to

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<sup>20</sup> After the essay’s initial appearance in *New Criterion*, another version of it was published later that year in the American magazine *The Forum*. The 1930 Hogarth edition, which contained a number of changes from the 1926 *New Criterion* edition followed. After Woolf’s death, Leonard Woolf republished the essay twice in 1947 and 1967, and Hermione Lee notes that “he inaccurately gave its first publication date as 1930, perhaps as a way of wiping out Eliot’s earlier connection to the essay altogether” (xxii). Though Eliot published the essay, he apparently was unimpressed when he first saw it; his tepid response caused Woolf a great deal of psychological distress.

redress this error by giving illness its long-overdue due.<sup>21</sup> She remarks that the sick body "intervenes" to produce its own narratives ("blunts or sharpens, colours or discolours, turns to wax in the warmth of June"), narratives that do not necessarily match those generated by the mind (4).<sup>22</sup> Woolf suggests that the "intervening" body is a conundrum precisely because it exceeds the conventional boundaries of literary art; namely, it threatens literature's cherished belief in the primacy of the mind, and it does so by being materially unpredictable. The essay's definition of the "intervening" body anticipates the prevailing contemporary theorization of disability, in which the disabled body is defined as one that "exceeds a culture's predictive capacities" and is "excessive to traditional social circuits of interaction" (*The Body and Physical Difference* 3).

Moreover, the articulation of these narratives demands a novel kind of language, for English, according to Woolf, is impoverished:

Let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry. There is nothing ready made for him. He is forced to coin words himself, and, taking his pain in one hand, and a lump of pure sound in the other (as perhaps the people of Babel did in the beginning), so to crush them together that a brand new word in the end drops out. (7)<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> It's worth noting that Woolf's essays often have been treated like the "ill" members of her corpus. Lee remarks: "it has taken a long time for them to be read for their own sake, and for attention to be paid to their literary strategies and thought-processes. Recent critical readings of the essays' tactics of apparent looseness and spontaneity, of interruptive open-endedness and refusal of authority, have looked especially closely at those which refuse categorization and slip across and between genres- not manifesto, or literary criticism, or feminist argument, or meditation on life, or fiction, or biography or history or autobiography, but a curious, original mixture of all of these." *On Being Ill* is one of these.

<sup>22</sup> Woolf could speak with authority about the "intervening" stories of the body. Lee writes: "all her life, severe physical symptoms- fevers, faints, headaches, jumping pulse, insomnia- signalled and accompanied phases of agitation or depression. In her most severe phases, she hardly ate, and shed weight frighteningly. Terrible headaches marked the onset of illness or exhaustion" (xii).

<sup>23</sup> Intriguingly, Woolf claims that burden of responsibility for the new language of illness must rest upon the Americans, because her countrymen are unable to "take liberties" with words: "to us it is a sacred thing and therefore doomed to die, unless the Americans, whose genius is so much happier in the making of new words than in the disposition of the old, will come to our help and set the springs aflow." William Carlos Williams surely would have agreed.

Here Woolf redeploys the rhetoric of the modernist quest for new forms of language to articulate the experience of narrating one's bodily pain. She implies that this other language has a therapeutic effect that the doctor (and his clinical discourse) cannot provide; perhaps this is why the essay itself possesses what Hermione Lee has called an "intimate," conversational tone. *On Being Ill* constructs a space for an alternative kind of "sick talk" that would not be countenanced in an actual doctor's office, where what Woolf calls "the cautious respectability of health" (11) reigns. Amid fantastic, dreamlike, semi-colon-studded sequences, the meagerness of words like "health" and "civilization" becomes all too apparent. Moreover, Woolf reminds her reader of the human cost of these words: "in health the genial pretense must be kept up and the effort renewed- to communicate, to civilise, to share, to cultivate the desert, educate the native, to work together by day and by night to sport" (12). The inexorable project of "health" is implicitly also one of war, colonialism, industrialization. In this way, the essay becomes a "satire on conformity" (xxviii), as she uses illness to skewer culture for generating the very notion of illness itself.

Woolf's example confirms that the field of modernist studies has much to gain from heightened attention to disabled subjectivity. D.H. Lawrence ponders the relationship between physical health, cultural health, and English civil and military authority in his poetry and essays, with sickness and injury emerging as desirable alternatives to an excessively disciplined, excessively hygienic English national body. I also show how Lawrence's conception of free verse as a "standard that must flow" is indebted to his experience of pulmonary illness, and how his resistance to treatment and diagnosis (particularly towards the end of his life) and his resistance to literary censorship are interrelated. Lawrence's refusal to identify as "sick" may trouble some disability scholars, but closer attention to his letters and his body of work reveals that this reluctance was in fact a manifestation of what the Huxleys would call "the man's strange obstinacy against professional medicine:" an obstinacy that surely many in the disabled community would understand.

Moreover, I show how his resistance to the language and technology of “professional medicine” emerges as a central theme in his works, a theme that often complicates the binary readings of ability and disability that have tended to predominate in Lawrence scholarship.

“Disabling” H.D. is an equally edifying process. Critics typically read the early compositions from this American poet as archetypes of Imagist precision and control, with the poems often spoken of as if they are perfectly calibrated bodies. The Imagist prescription “to use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation” asserts a distinctly industrial equation between value and labor. In order for a word to have value within the poem, it must be functional: it must “contribute” or “do” something. H.D. herself is even seen as being “shaped” by Pound. The famous anecdote about Pound taking the pen and scrawling “Imagiste” at the bottom of the poem “Hermes of the Ways” describes a gesture that is as evaluative as it is creative. Yet within these poems is a subversive corporeality that resists the formal sparseness and the accompanying machinery of the Imagist manifesto. H.D.’s depictions of zones of material liminality (for instance, the zone “where sea-grass tangles with/ shore-grass”) often isolate one branch or flower that is excluded from the “privileges” afforded the others. Throughout the course of the poems, however, these seemingly biological “privileges” are destabilized and revealed to be constructions, so that the excluded, extraordinary flora are no longer stigmatized as disadvantaged.<sup>24</sup> I show that her examinations of the flowers that inhabit these “borderlines” are a commentary on (and ultimately a rejection of) both the normalizing rhetoric that inspired Imagism *and* that which arose from it. I also address her World War Two epic *Trilogy*, a poem in which disabled figures inherit a post-apocalyptic landscape. For H.D., who moved to London in 1911 and refused to leave England even when the literally deafening *Luftwaffe* bombs began falling, this choice of place raises provocative questions about disability and survivorship, embodying national allegiance, and expatriate modernist literature.

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<sup>24</sup> H.D.’s nickname, used by both Pound and Aldington, was “Dryad.”

I point out how the experience of disability illuminates the erosion of the boundaries between civilian and soldier during the bombing campaigns of the war, thereby permitting the appropriation of some of the subjective strategies and terms that were once only available to those “on the front-“ most of whom, of course, were men. I also suggest that the circulation of this language permits the formation and articulation of what we might think of as a proto-disability identity politics. H.D. imagines “twisted and tortured individuals” negotiating language and cooperatively engaging in projects that reply to the political and cultural exigencies of the new world. And, perhaps most importantly, she speaks as part of the group, acknowledging rifts and inconsistencies within, and documenting how the different bodies inscribe their own unique narratives through shock, pain, and other taboo feelings. H.D.’s investigations of this process constitute a sort of “autoethnography:” in *Trilogy*, she defines her “subjective ethnicity as mediated through language, history and ethnographical analysis” to create “a kind of figural anthropology” of the “twisted” (Lionnet 99).

Reading William Carlos Williams from a disability perspective shifts our understanding of what it means to be the “local” modernist. By examining Williams’s early work, I show how his poems’ material and thematic performances of disability become a key strategy for engaging the subject of locality and for refuting the charges of poetic parochialism that were often leveled against him. For Williams, disability permits the genesis of a new, American idiom, even as it carries an implicit critique of the conditions that made the new idiom desirable in the first place. Yet he also insists that disabled bodies are a social fact, one often “ignored” and censored by those in positions of authority, and I argue that this belief generates a style of total yet empathic documentation that refutes both the medicalized model of doctor-patient exchange and the uncompromising modernism espoused by some of his contemporaries. Lastly, my analysis of *Paterson* reveals how Williams’s late verse experiments and his experience of disability are mutually constitutive, as his definitive turn towards the shorter line coincides with changes in his vision, speech, and limbs; though the staff of

Passaic General Hospital presented him with an electric typewriter after one of his strokes (he reportedly disliked the feel of it at first), Williams's typing eventually became so impaired that he was wiggling one finger "wormlike" over the keys, and he barely could remember which keys were which. The recuperation of his disability narrative here not only affects how we read the poem in the narrative of Williams's career, but also how we see the arc of modernism as it bends towards postmodernity.

In his 1939 essay "Against the Weather: A Study of the Artist," Williams remarked that "obviously- all defects are officially neglected by those in power; never studied or even mentioned- for clear reasons!" (*Selected Essays* 213). While fortunately this is no longer quite true, much work remains to be done. By uniting modernist studies and disability studies, I hope my project represents one small, halting step away from that willful neglect.

## Chapter One

### D.H. Lawrence and A Disabled Aesthetics

It was the winter of 1911, the denouement of a trying year for twenty-six year old D.H. Lawrence. He had published his first significant work, with Heinemann releasing his novel *The White Peacock* in January, but its mixed reviews relegated him to the periphery of the English literary scene. As Lawrence confessed to one of his acquaintances, “the publishing of the book has brought me nothing but bitterness. A good many folk have been hostile” (*Letters* 12). He was increasingly dissatisfied with his position at the Davidson Road Boys’ School; though teaching kept him financially solvent, it also thwarted his ambition to write full-time. By November, the demands of the classroom, twinned with the unbearably dry heat of the pipes at Davidson Road, had forced him into convalescence. It turned out to be the first of many he would experience in his lifetime, as the next twenty-five years would test the strength of his bronchial tubes, his lungs, and ultimately his will. But in 1911, the pneumonia-stricken Lawrence had not yet come to terms with his chronic condition, had not yet reconciled himself to inhabiting a rasping body, and his writing from the period reveals a man fighting a civil war with his tissues and bones. Propped up amid his fever-damp sheets and bottles of elixir, Lawrence composed a series of letters in which he directs his legendary vitriol at his sick self:

I could walk like a grenadier guard, but for my left leg, which slumbers on, when all the rest of me is awake...I loathe to be an invalid...it is nearly unendurable to have to wait for one’s strength to come back- like Penelope. I hate my legs, miserable defaulters- I detest them...if I’m ever ill again I shall die of mortification. (*Letters* 16-17)

The practical indignities of disease are compounded by his belief that the pneumonia has compromised his formal discipline. He dismisses much of his work from his so-called “sick year,” deriding *The Trespasser* as being “too florid, too *chargé*,” and he reserves special censure for “those pieces where the stitch is slack and loose;” not coincidentally, these are the pieces that most closely

resemble his atrophied legs (*Letters* 21-22). The tenor of such comments should be familiar to any reader of Lawrence's correspondence. Verbs like "loathe," "detest," and the ever-popular "hate" constitute his *lingua franca*, and it is a language he speaks in sickness and health alike. Yet these letters, which mark the commencement of Lawrence's lengthy and notorious illness narrative, are particularly noteworthy for their youthful bluster; for their keen and decidedly unromantic appraisal of the body; and for the vehemence with which the young writer yokes his literary aesthetic to his physical well-being. To a man whose literature was already becoming renowned for its celebration of the human form, his slack and slumbering limbs must have seemed like the cruelest of ironies (Worthen 84).<sup>25</sup> How was he to comprehend *his* body, now so unlike the ones that moved and loved and breathed and danced across the leaves of his work? Or could he find a place in his art for the experience of bodily revolt? Could he redefine the qualities of the healthy body beautiful by finding a language for the modern age, an age that, according to him, demanded an unprecedented "adjustment in consciousness to basic physical realities?" (*Letters* 773)

The loathe/hate letters of 1911 confirm that Lawrence was pondering such questions well before the first spasms of World War One. The conflict is often rightly cited as a key juncture in Lawrence's aesthetic development, particularly with respect to his fiction, and it does compel Lawrence to acknowledge the strange ecstasy of violence.<sup>26</sup> Yet it is clear that the war does not produce Lawrence's anxieties about physical difference so much as it crystallizes his inchoate thoughts; many of his beliefs about modernist form and the broken body originate in his private battles. The Lawrentian saga of the body truly begins in his own bed, in his own mottled skin. For underneath his vigorous self-abnegations, he hints that the sick or wounded body might counteract

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<sup>25</sup> Worthen quotes one of the early reviews of *The White Peacock*: "we are never allowed to forget their most goodly bodies."

<sup>26</sup> See the section "Middle Phase" in *Squires* for a discussion of World War One and its effect upon Lawrence.

what he called the “misty miserable modernness” (*Letters* 46) of England. Consider the peculiar allusion to Penelope in the letter where he chastises his leg. With a dash and her name, Lawrence twists our initial assumptions about how he regards his recovery. Waiting for one’s strength to return is likened to a lover’s vigil, a comparison that effectively recasts the relationship between lameness and strength as a marriage of sorts. And like Penelope at her loom, fiercely clicking away in Odysseus’s absence, Lawrence generates art out of the agony of intermediacy. The vulnerable body does not compromise the narrative: it *is* the narrative, a hobbling epic for a hobbling era.

In fact, the fateful junction of Lawrence’s personal illness narrative and that of his ailing society would transform him, remaking him into a man who later would define human desire as “the admitting of deficiency” (*Phoenix* 446). This definition not only complicates our portrait of Lawrence the modernist, but it calls into question one of the most persistent myths in Lawrence scholarship: the so-called “Chatterley Syndrome.” A phrase coined by disability studies scholar Louis Battye in a 1966 essay, the “Chatterley Syndrome” refers to Lawrence’s ungenerous depiction of the war veteran Clifford Chatterley, who is “shipped home smashed” (*Chatterley* 9) from the front and subsequently becomes one of the most infamous cuckolds in English literature. William Ebenstein writes of Clifford’s case: “it is the beautiful, healthy, young wife who is victimized, frustrated both sexually and emotionally, because she is tied to an impotent invalid with a crippled soul...[the story] builds upon the idea, taken to an extreme by Lawrence, that once a person becomes crippled he is no longer a man.” The analogy between Clifford’s physical handicap and his sexual dysfunction would seem to suggest that desire and disability are incompatible in Lawrence’s art. Yet I argue that his work promulgates a remarkably nuanced take on the human body and its limitations.<sup>27</sup> It is a

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<sup>27</sup> A number of recent works have offered reassessments of the archetypal Lawrentian body. See Squires; Jan Gordon’s work on the “talking cure” in *Lady Chatterley*; *Writing the Body in D.H. Lawrence: Essays on Language, Representation, and Sexuality*, Ed. Paul Poplawski; Christopher Lane’s examination

crucial but seldom-acknowledged fact, for instance, that both Clifford *and* his rival Mellors are disabled; Mellors even identifies himself as a man of “damaged health” (*Chatterley* 150) with a heart that is “not so strong” and lungs that, like Lawrence’s, are “not so elastic” (*Chatterley* 211). To put it baldly, the dominant critical framework, in which Clifford the impotent cripple is positioned against a rapacious and physically robust Mellors, is not merely insufficient; it is inaccurate. What reads as disdain for the disabled body is actually disdain for a society that attempts to treat or fix or standardize that which is extraordinary.<sup>28</sup> Lawrence’s profound respect for the “make” of all bodies, regardless of how deformed or scarred or sick they are, is both his definitive aesthetic principle and his primary theme, and the “Chatterley Syndrome” is just another oversimplification in a field that is rife with them.<sup>29</sup> The readings in my chapter acknowledge the complexity of Lawrence’s vision, particularly with respect to the experience of human disability. In doing so, I hope to illumine what is arguably Lawrence’s most controversial desire of all: the desire to incorporate the deficient body into his world, and into the literature of the early twentieth-century.

It is in Lawrence’s poetry that we discover prodigious evidence of this labor. While celebrated for its depictions of vitality, health, and wholeness, his poetry truly embodies his commitment to an aesthetic of physical difference. Consider how we might use the rubric of disability to reinterpret his reputation for technical carelessness. R. P. Blackmur, in his own much-maligned essay “D.H. Lawrence and Expressive Form,” set the critical tone for decades when he

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of modernism and the history of the “rest cure”; and James J. Miracky’s study of Lawrence and Woolf.

<sup>28</sup> It is telling that Aldous Huxley once said of his friend: “he allowed them [his writings] to flower as they liked from the depths of his being and would never use his conscious intellect to force them into a semblance of more than human perfection, or more than human universality. It was characteristic of him that he hardly ever corrected or patched what he had written. I have often heard him say, indeed, that he was incapable of correcting” (*Letters of D.H. Lawrence*, xvii).

<sup>29</sup> See Tom Brangwen’s description of Nat-Nut/Nut-Nat in Lawrence’s *The Rainbow*. Brangwen tells Anna: “E canna’ help ‘isself, Duckie, it’s th’ make o’ th’ fellow” (83).

pronounced Lawrence's poetry "uneven and lopsided" (291), and Stephen Spender once claimed that Lawrence's writing had "artistic defects" (83-84). Even those who esteem Lawrence's verse acknowledge its singular challenges. As Roger Simmonds, Keith Sagar, and Christopher Pollnitz have pointed out, the project of salvaging his poetic reputation is necessarily paradoxical; it requires that we situate Lawrence within a tradition that he regarded as moribund. To welcome him posthumously into the pantheon of great poets is to elide the pleasure and the creative verve that his controversial status afforded him. Lawrence himself admitted as much, confiding to a friend: "I *know* that if I could write the finest lyrical poetry or prose that ever was written, if I could be put on the pinnacle of immortality, I wouldn't. I would rather struggle clumsily to put into art the...utterance of the great racial or human consciousness" (*Letters: Vol. II* 302). Pollnitz, for one, finds evidence of this "clumsy struggle" in Lawrence's response to the censorship campaign against *Pansies*: "the unsuccess of the suppression of *Pansies*...stimulated some of Lawrence's finest essays; and it gave him the opportunity to put [the censors'] mind-manacled tactics in the stocks and to treat them self-reflexively" (49). Pollnitz's argument primarily concerns the political brouhaha over Lawrence's obscene subject matter, but it is an observation that also might be applied to his use of free verse.<sup>30</sup> For Lawrence, the philosophy of "unsuccess" not only determines the content of his works, but it dictates his unconventional formal choices as well.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> See also Glass on Lawrence, language, and obscenity.

<sup>31</sup> See D.H. Lawrence, *Complete Poems*. In the 1932 Introduction to *Last Poems*, Richard Aldington wrote that Lawrence's challenging prosody was a manifestation of his "intense fluidity." "The individual Lawrence," he claimed, "is as fluid as everything else. You can't bind him down to anything, because today isn't yesterday, and tomorrow will be neither. All of which goes to explain what critics deplore as 'the uneven quality' of his writing. Lawrence didn't care much whether his 'writing' was 'good' or 'bad.' He didn't admit that sort of distinction, the implication of a fixed standard. Even the standard must flow" (594-95).

The punning title of *Pansies* is just one of the many instances where he engages in this sort of play. In the foreword to Martin Secker's 1929 "trade edition" of the collection, Lawrence famously suggests that his *Pansies* should be thought of as *pensées*, "casual thoughts that are true while they are true and irrelevant when the mood and circumstance changes" (*Complete Poems* 423).<sup>32</sup> A letter from Lawrence to the Huxleys, in which he anticipates readers' objections to the title, elaborates upon his use of the term. Eschewing its usual definition, he writes that he conceives of the *pensée* not as a lyric exercise, but rather "as a sort of loose little poem form; Frieda says with joy: real doggerel" (*Letters* 766). His insistence that his *pensées* are *not* lyrics is a classically Lawrentian act of gleeful provocation, one that he might have avoided had he chosen or even created another name for his shifty little poems. The figurative power of the name depends upon the friction, not the concord, between the word and its expected connotations. Lawrence's title is also aggressive in that it disregards what he calls the "merely pretty-pretty" symbolism of flowers. In relating *pensées* to pansies, for instance, Lawrence reiterates his appreciation for ephemeral things:

I should like them to be as fleeting as pansies, which wilt so soon, and are so fascinating with their varied faces, while they last...[flowers] have in their fragrance an earthiness of the humus and the corruptive earth from which they spring. And pansies, in their streaked faces, have a look of many things besides heartsease.  
(*Complete Poems* 423)

Both Lawrence's *Pansies* and their namesake flowers garner the highest words of praise in his lexicon: they are "earthy" rather than abstract, and they possess the virtue of "corruptive" power. The fundamental way in which this "earthiness" manifests itself is through physical difference,

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<sup>32</sup> The Secker "trade edition" omits fourteen poems that were included in the privately printed "definitive" 1929 edition of *Pansies*. In the foreword, Lawrence gives an amused account of the censorship: "When Scotland Yard seized the MS. in the post, at the order of the Home Secretary, no doubt there was a rush of detectives, post-men, and Home Office clerks and heads, to pick out the most lurid blossoms. They must have been very disappointed. When I now read down the list of the omitted poems, and recall the dozen amusing, not terribly important bits of pansies which have had to stay out of print for fear a policeman might put his foot on them, I can only grin once more to think of the nanny-goat, nanny-goat-in-a-white-petticoat silliness of it all" (*Complete Poems* 423).

specifically in characteristics that might be construed as deformities. Lawrence ensures that we won't find a monochromatic host of golden daffodils in this field. Rather, the pansies, like Lawrence's own wilting body, are inherently, gorgeously contradictory. Their distinctive "varied" and "streaked" faces affirm their origins in the soil, as does their slightly unpleasant aroma. These botanical imperfections are relevant because they mean that the pansy is metaphorically versatile; they can be as evocative of death and pain, of what we might call *heartcease*, as they are of "heartsease."<sup>33</sup> Lawrence suggests that the poems' metrical freedom grants them a similar versatility, and indeed the collection is known (if not always lauded) for its considerable thematic range.

The 1929 introduction to the definitive, uncensored version of *Pansies* contains a less familiar but equally compelling translation for the term "pansy." As in the foreword to the Secker edition, Lawrence suggests here that pansies and *pensées* are synonymous: "This little bunch of fragments is offered as a bunch of *penseés*, anglicé pansies; a handful of thoughts" (*Complete Poems* 417). Yet the next sentence invites a wholly different interpretation. He emphasizes the palliative possibilities of the word, claiming that he derives "pansy" from the French verb *panser*, to dress or soothe a wound.<sup>34</sup> "These," he writes of his poems, "are my tender administrations to the mental and emotional wounds we suffer from. Or you can have heartsease if you like, since the modern heart could certainly do with it" (*Complete Poems* 417). Ironically, he attributes the curative power of his poetic "dressings" to their fragmentation, with material difference being the solution for the wounds of the modern world. Each pansy is a "little fragment" or a "little piece," and Lawrence asserts that

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<sup>33</sup> Lawrence's use of the word "heartsease" is yet another play on language: it means peace or tranquility, but it is also a colloquial name for small-flowered, mixed-color pansies.

<sup>34</sup> According to Larousse, the primary definition of the verb refers to the treatment and/or dressing of a wound: "*soigner une plaie sur le corps en y appliquant un remède ou une bande pour la guérir ou la protéger.*" More broadly, *panser* also denotes the act of soothing or calming someone or something: *consoler, soulager.*

they all perform their artistic labor independently. He further clarifies his perspective via an extended metaphor that imagines the pansies as “creatures:”

It suits the modern temper better to have its state of mind made up of apparently irrelevant thoughts that scurry in different directions, yet belong to the same nest; each thought trotting down the page like an independent creature, each with its own small head and tail, trotting its own little way, then curling up to sleep. We prefer it, at least the young seem to prefer it to those solid blocks of mental pabulum packed like bales in the pages of a proper heavy book...Let every *pensée* trot on its own little paws, not be laid like a cutlet trimmed with a *patte de mouche*. (*Complete Poems* 417)

The trotting *pensée* feet constitute a lively alternative to the homogenized poetry of old. Conventional verse, while formally sound and symmetrical, appears handicapped in the chaotic modern milieu. Instead, modernity is epitomized best by the image of diverging feet: sometimes moving in concert, sometimes working at cross-purposes, always operating in accord with their individual, discrete truths. As the embodiments of true thought, these apparently unruly paws achieve a different kind of corporeal perfection.

Lawrence’s aesthetic, in other words, demands that the reader surrender himself to the experience of the unpredictable. To appreciate the beauty of his *Pansies*, one must acknowledge, investigate, and then reject the entrenched cultural bias against disordered forms. Acclimatizing one’s self to free verse is a crucial step in this process, as it signals a commitment to letting the “little feet” travel where they may. Yet many of Lawrence’s poems also stage *thematic* confrontations with bodies that resist disciplining. Take the fascinating work entitled “Self-Protection:”

To make self-preservation and self-protection the first law of  
Existence  
Is about as scientific as making suicide the first law of  
Existence,  
And amounts to very much the same thing.

A nightingale singing at the top of his voice  
In neither hiding himself nor preserving himself nor  
Propagating his species;  
He is giving himself away in every sense of the word;  
And obviously, it is the culminating point of his existence.  
(*Complete Poems* 523)

The nightingale turns this *pensée* on sublime exposure into self-reflexive exercise. While the bird does not “propagate its species” via conventional reproduction, it does bear an immortal song, one which complements the warbling of our speaker. The nightingale’s song implicitly critiques the “law” of self-protection in that it exposes the bird’s body to harm, possibly death. This is a deeply metapoetic moment; the nightingale seduces Lawrence’s speaker with its abandon, its Keatsian rapture, and it does so while the poem itself luxuriates in the possibilities of free verse. What does a free poem look like? How does it sound? The poem writes these questions into itself and dares the reader to find answers.

With a surety that would have made Darwin apoplectic, Lawrence’s speaker claims the act of “giving oneself away” as both transcendent and organic. The first full stanza presses scientific logic through an act of subversive appropriation. The rhetorical symmetry of the first four lines mimics an equation, a structure that is then confirmed through the leveling effect of the final line: “it amounts to very much the same thing.” Yet the astonishing coupling of self-preservation and suicide undercuts the repetitive form and reveals that the laws (and language) of natural selection are inadequate here. Lawrence’s poetic logic, with its capacity for accommodating the extraordinary, triumphs instead. Thus the allure of symmetry fades as Lawrence’s speaker continues:

And I don’t suppose the ichthyosaurus sparkled like the humming-bird,  
No doubt he was khaki-coloured with muddy protective coloration,  
So why didn’t he survive?

As a matter of fact, the only creatures that seem to survive  
Are those that give themselves away in flash and sparkle  
And gay flicker of joyful life;  
Those that go glittering abroad  
With a bit of splendour. (*Complete Poems* 523)

The poem upends our presumptions about survivability; in Lawrentian evolution, it is the *sui generis* body, the exposed body rather than the camouflaged one, which endures. Words like “flash,” “sparkle,” “glittering,” and “flicker” recall Lawrence’s tribute to the streaked pansy, as the poem

links the nightingale's artistry to its physical distinctiveness. There is, of course, a sexual dimension to this emphasis upon bodily freedom and "giving one's self away," but one mustn't let Lawrence's reputation dictate the terms of interpretation. It bears remarking that Lawrence himself would have quibbled with such an approach, for it neglects his principle of listening to "every sense of the word."<sup>35</sup> In "Self-Protection," the erotic import of the phrase "giving one's self away" is tempered by a graver meaning: to give one's self away is to risk the health and wholeness of physical form.<sup>36</sup>

Richard Hoggart has observed that Lawrence lived his own theory by continually "[forcing] himself to be exposed to his experiences. He refused to accept the second-rate compromise or the comfortable near-truth" (673). As the owner of a body that was chronically fragile, Lawrence indeed had visceral reasons for making an art of self-sacrifice. And while in recent years it has become compulsory to interpret Lawrence's defiant verse as proof of his various liminalities, it is clear that he views physical disability as an especially resonant motif, not to mention one with unprecedented

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<sup>35</sup> See Wexler. Her reading of Foucauldian extremity is helpful here: "Foucault does not limit the effects of transgressive sexual discourse to sexuality. Extremity pushes the reader beyond the empirical referent: 'something that smacks of revolt, of promised freedom, of the coming age of a different law, slips easily into this discourse on sexual oppression. Some of the ancient functions of prophecy are reactivated'. From politics to religion, Foucault indicates the range of meanings transgression can evoke." Wexler suggests that critics would do well to keep this "range of meanings" in mind when analyzing Lawrence, for "even critics who recognize Lawrence's symbolic intention often thwart it by interpreting his symbols as expressions of a particular belief rather than a general capacity for belief" (167).

<sup>36</sup> Sagar refers to the poem "Anaxagoras," which features the lines "That they call science, and reality. / I call it mental conceit and mystification / and nonsense," to illustrate Lawrence's disdain for scientific and medical modes of inquiry. See also Lawrence, *Complete Poems*, p. 620. Lawrence's late poem "The Scientific Doctor," no doubt penned as a response to the countless physical examinations he endured throughout his lifetime, features a speaker who chooses illness (possibly death) over the invasive, objectifying procedures of modern medicine:

When I went to the scientific doctor  
I realized what a lust there was in him to wreak his so-called  
science on me  
and reduce me to the level of a thing.  
So I said: Good-morning! and left him.

historical and personal salience.<sup>37</sup> Disabled subjectivity allows Lawrence to define and defend his modernist practices without compromising his allegiances to the self, to the moment, and to a dynamic language of the body; the result is a critical discourse that honors rather than corrects the inconsistencies for which his work is known.

Lawrence's free verse is the cornerstone of his disabled aesthetic. His collection *Look! We Have Come Through!* represents the beginning of his experimentation with a looser prosody, and Lawrence's personal tumult often is cited as an impetus for the change.<sup>38</sup> Though the collection was published in 1917, many of its most recognizable poems date from the period between 1912 and 1914, when Lawrence met and married Frieda Weekley; compositions like "Bei Hennef," "First Morning," and "A Young Wife" depict their early connubial days in the unrhyming, emotionally frank verse that would become his signature. Yet Lawrence's 1912 convalescence is equally prominent in the critical narratives of his development. Keith Sagar, for instance, has argued that Lawrence finds his distinctive style when he "sheds all the formal disciplines" of his earlier poetry, a transition Sagar locates in the post- "sick year" poems of *Look! We Have Come Through!*: "some of the best poems from [the collection] were part of the struggle to get out, to come awake, to recover from disabling sickness" ("Open" 45). Sagar suggests that the experience of illness is what breaks Lawrence's poetry for good. Not only does it legitimize Lawrence's desire to alter the conventional physiology of English verse, but it also provides him with a cogent and accessible metaphor for the

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<sup>37</sup> See for example Kiely. Kiely ingeniously compares Lawrence's style to a labor strike: his language "sabotages" rather than "massively assaults," for it "means to *dislocate* (italics mine) the metaphorical link, with its appearance of finality and coherence, and to replace it with looser, vaguer juxtapositions of metonymy" (94).

<sup>38</sup> In their introduction to *Complete Poems*, Vivian de Sola Pinto and F. Warren Roberts describe *Look! We Have Come Through!* as "an attempt to give expression to the drama of the psychological relationship between a newly married husband and wife, a kind of duel of sex" (8).

process. The art of “coming through” aligns physical recovery with the formal recovery of a freer style: a style that, according to Lawrence, is more robust *because* it is less symmetrical, less contrived.

It is important, however, to qualify the relationship between Lawrence’s recuperation and his free verse. One difficulty with Sagar’s reading is that while it makes for a tidy *kunstlerroman*, it imposes precisely the sort of narrative linearity and wholeness that Lawrence dismissed as “bunk.” *Look! We Have Come Through!*— an assured, exultant title if ever there was one— seems to indicate that Lawrence was relieved to be well again, and relieved to have discovered a verse form that could embody the openness he so admired. But the fact is that Lawrence does not come through unscathed, for neither his body nor his poetry enjoyed the complete transition that the title imagines. His great recovery of 1912 proved to be nothing more than a respite; his ailment had marked him, making him susceptible to relapse for the rest of his days. As a work borne of multiple polarities (sickness and health, rhyme and unrhyme, man and woman), *Look! We Have Come Through!* is about achieving this type of strain, not alleviating it.<sup>39</sup> It is an indecorous paradox, to have a creative doctrine that insists upon sickness instead of curing it, and that of course is the point. Just as he transforms his own maladies into occasions for literary production, just as he turns censorship into an artistic coup, so do Lawrence’s works resurrect the cultural significance of the human body by repeatedly endangering its symmetries, its health. The result is an aesthetic that posits a discomfiting but thoroughly modern contingency between deficiency and newness: an aesthetic that, to borrow Virginia Woolf’s phrase, produces the “more primitive, more sensual, more obscene” (7) idiom of disease and disability.

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<sup>39</sup> Lawrence’s choice of titles emphasizes this dynamism. In opting to call his free verse poems “unrhyming,” he implies that the title’s significance is concentrated in its prefix; the “un” stages the disappearance or removal of rhyme, and it directs our focus towards the act of generating contrast. The “-ing” likewise affirms the tension by situating the poems in an eternal present. And the fact that there are rhymed poems in the “unrhyming” group and unrhyming poems in the “rhyming” group invariably complicates any attempt to finalize the categories.

Lawrence's 1918 essay "Poetry of the Present" attempts to explain why free verse is the perfect mode for such imperfection.<sup>40</sup> Comparing modernist poetry with the "exquisite" but obsolete verse of his Romantic predecessors, he argues that the "poetry of the instant present cannot have the same body or the same motion as the poetry of the before and after. It can never submit to the same conditions" (*Complete Poems* 184). His allusion to the "body" and "motion" of verse confirms what A.R. Ammons tells us in his essay "A Poem is a Walk:" every poem has its own special body, its own physiology, and this broad array of physiologies is what keeps the tradition vital (114-119). Crafting a new poetic body to complement the symmetrical ones of old necessitates the removal or destruction of parts, particularly the legs and/or feet. Truly modern poetry, Lawrence writes, is modern because it lacks "base and pediment" (*Complete Poems* 183). The absence of feet, which ordinarily would register as a disability or deficiency, is advantageous and hence desirable in his vision of the present. Perhaps most significantly, Lawrence tells us that the footless verse does not "sigh for what it is not" (*Complete Poems* 183). It does not aspire to a state of wholeness because it is already whole in and of itself. Nor does the creation of "footless verse" require the denigration of its opposite. This is where Lawrence distinguishes his poetic philosophy from that of his modernist brethren, whom he sees as indiscriminate practitioners of *vers libre*.<sup>41</sup> Restricted verse and free verse inhabit entirely separate realms, and according to Lawrence, the separation should be encouraged rather than dissolved. Each mode of poetry has a form that befits its expressive function; since neither one is inherently superior to the other, neither one can be deemed lesser or

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<sup>40</sup> See Lawrence, *Complete Poems*, p. 186. The essay is published as the introduction to the American edition of Lawrence's *New Poems* in 1918, though Lawrence remarks that it "should have come as a preface to *Look! We Have Come Through!*"

<sup>41</sup> See *Complete Poems*. Lawrence writes, "to break the lovely form of metrical verse, and to dish up the fragments as a new substance, called *vers libre*, this is what most of the free-versifiers accomplish" (185).

lacking.<sup>42</sup> Poems *sans* pediment exist in a tense, albeit productive, equilibrium with their perfectly symmetrical counterparts.

A related metaphor of disability acts as the linchpin of Lawrence's free verse manifesto. In an oft-quoted passage from the essay, Lawrence challenges the hegemony of the hale by agitating for corporeal breakage. It is a virtuosic performance from Lawrence the polemicist:

Free verse is, or should be, direct utterance from the instant, whole man. It is the soul and the mind and the body surging at once, nothing left out...we can get rid of the stereotyped movements and the old hackneyed associations of sound or sense. We can break down those artificial conduits and canals through which we do so love to force our utterance. *We can break the stiff neck of habit.* We can be in ourselves spontaneous and flexible...we can see that utterance rushes out without artificial form or artificial smoothness...(Complete Poems 184)

His free verse method, which forces the "severer strain" until the "neck of habit" is snapped, mimics the sort of extreme exposure that is immortalized in poems like "Self-Protection." Or, as Lawrence put it in a 1913 letter to Henry Savage: "a purely lyric poet gives himself...till he spontaneously combusts into verse" (*Letters: Vol II* 115). Paradoxically, he envisions the resurrection of literature as a series of figurative breakdowns and injuries: each assault provides an occasion to debate conventional ideas of wholeness, and to show how utterly inadequate they are. By invoking disability, Lawrence thereby disrupts the language with which these notions are reproduced and enforced. Forget Mellors's dirty talk: *this* is Lawrence at his most audacious, wedding his metrical revolution to a radical redefinition of the "whole man."

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<sup>42</sup> Writing of the poetry of *Birds, Beasts, and Flowers*, Keith Sagar summarizes Lawrence's formal strategy as follows: "Lawrence is interested in making discoveries, not artifacts...Each poem is exploratory. It does not seek to be gem-like, self-contained, finished, outside time. It exists in the dimension of time and process, and that is its life" (218). This exploratory impulse necessitates a formal generosity and a sort of insistent tolerance for imperfection: "it may be satisfying to see a well-wrought urn, but how much more exciting to see a lump of clay gradually taking shape, almost collapsing, always at risk of flying off the wheel, but caught up again, finding its shape, though never a perfect shape, for perfection is mechanical and sterile" (219).

His vision of wholeness is novel in that it aims for simultaneity in “soul and mind and body” rather than symmetry or health per se. The distinction between simultaneity and symmetry is crucial for Lawrence, not least because it sets him apart from his fellow “poets of the body” (Gilbert 79). Keats, Wordsworth, Whitman: some critics would have us believe that Lawrence belongs with and to these prophets of the wondrous human form. Yet behold the ideal Lawrentian body, a snapped, combusted, wrung, broken, scarred record of human boldness. Such is Lawrence’s natural selection, a system in which the battered body survives and physical splendor is tantamount to a death sentence. “Don’t touch me and appreciate me,” the speaker admonishes his lover in “She Said As Well to Me,” and he might as well be admonishing us, too. For Lawrence’s masculine physique does not aspire to the perfection of its Romantic relatives. It cannot ply the currents around Paumanok with virile grace, it cannot amble the paths of Grasmere upon firm, stout legs, as Wordsworth and his peripatetic speakers so often do. His poetry does not begin as “Song of Myself” famously does, with a thirty-seven year old persona whose perfect health engenders his song. The greatest legs in Lawrence’s work, the “eloquent limbs” (as he calls them), are the ones that move in unexpected ways.

His rhyming lyric “Embankment at Night, Before the War” constructs a world out of recalcitrant body parts. Subtitled “Outcasts,” the poem is a tribute to the marginalized souls who inhabit London’s blanks: the spaces under and between the urban thoroughfares where “great electric cars sing through.” The speaker, meandering through the city in the rain, divines the story of the outcasts in their legs:

At Charing Cross, here, beneath the bridge  
Sleep in a row the outcasts,  
Packed in a line with their heads against the wall.  
Their feet in a broken ridge  
Stretched out on the way, and a lout casts  
A look as he stands on the edge of this naked stall.

Beasts that sleep will cover

Their face in their flank; so these  
Have huddled rags or limbs on the naked sleep.  
Save, as the tram-cars hover  
Past with the noise of a breeze  
And gleam as of sunshine crossing the low black heap.  
(*Complete Poems* 144)

Through rhyme, the “broken ridge” of feet is juxtaposed against the proper “bridge” that unites the two banks of the river; verbs like “stretched” and “cast” reinforce the contrast by suggesting failed or deferred crossings. The poem also conveys the outcasts’ marginalization by likening their bodies to those of beasts. The unorthodox position of their limbs is what engenders this comparison, for they sleep with their heads and lower bodies intertwined: “face in their flank.” The bourgeois inhabitants of the city, a group that Lawrence once dismissed (*à la* Eliot) as an “ignoble procession” of “legs going quick quick quick,” enjoy no such communion between the two halves of their bodies. Moreover, the speaker observes that the outcasts’ limbs are stained with a favorite Lawrentian substance: mud. In “Poetry of the Present,” he begs to “feel the heavy, silting, sucking mud, the spinning of sky winds. Let me feel them both in purest contact, the nakedness of sucking weight, nakedly passing radiance” (*Complete Poems* 182). “Embankment at Night,” which enshrines the “low black heap” and a “long, low tidal-heap,” satisfies the desire for pure contact by erasing the boundary between the outcasts and the earth. Their muddiness is thereby another way in which the poem dismantles a cultural obsession with hygiene, health, and wholeness; it exposes “the whiteness which is the seethe of mud” (*Complete Poems* 183), the fertile tension that can occur when a taboo is turned into something sacred.

The core of the poem further explores the link between physical disability and literary production. Here the legs are anatomized into “thighs,” “toes,” and “knees,” and each stanza teems with similes and metaphors for each part:

Eloquent limbs  
In disarray,  
Sleep-suave limbs of a youth with long, smooth thighs

Hutched up for warmth; the muddy rims  
Of trousers fray  
On the thin bare shins of a man who uneasily lies.

The balls of five red toes  
As red and dirty, bare  
Young birds forsaken and left in a nest of mud-  
Newspaper sheets enclose  
Some limbs like parcels, and tear  
When the sleeper stirs or turns on the ebb of the flood-

One heaped mound  
Of a woman's knees  
As she thrusts them upward under the ruffled skirt-  
And a curious dearth of sound  
In the presence of these  
Wastrels that sleep on the flagstones without any hurt. (*Complete Poems* 145)

The eloquence of the limbs is directly proportionate to their disarray, with the dirtiest, uneasiest, most twisted legs eliciting the richest figurative language. The enviable thighs of the young man are contracted, “hutched up” for warmth like those of a dozing animal. The inflamed toes, meanwhile, inspire an unusual comparison to birds that have been abandoned; their color makes them conspicuous and hence vibrant in their setting, and it confirms the kinship between man and beast once more. Especially curious is the speaker’s observation that some limbs are enclosed in papers for warmth. The limbs literally become wrapped in words, with the ink rubbing off on the skin and perhaps printing the legs with news from the front. Each time the sleeper moves, these words get smudged and/or ripped up. This contingent relation between the leg and paper, and implicitly between the leg and the language on the paper, creates a lovely metaphor for Lawrence’s belief in the transformative powers of the body. By virtue of their extraordinary corporeality, his outcasts force a fundamental change or “tear” in the idiom that encases and defines them; compelling the reader to reappraise words like “beast” and “mud” is how Lawrence makes this tear apprehensible. The poem’s valediction for the “intertwined plasm” beneath the bridge represents the climax of his poetic labor, as the outcasts’ limbs, no longer enclosed by negative connotations, merge into the

image of the river. It is, Lawrence suggests, the ultimate image for the poetry of the present: “There are no gems of the living plasm. The living plasm vibrates unspeakably, it inhales the future, it exhales the past, it is the quick of both, and yet it is neither. There is no plasmic finality, nothing crystal, permanent” (*Complete Poems* 182).

As one of his rhyming poems, “Embankment at Night” does not provide a prosodic model for the sort of thwarted fixity it embraces in theme. Lawrence’s unrhyming *oeuvre* is where he truly negotiates the formal implications of his doctrine, and so it is fitting that a number of the unrhymed poems use disability to dramatize his quandary. The conversational poem “She Said As Well to Me,” which confronts the myth of “oneness,” does so by exploring the landscapes of the male anatomy. Lawrence, never one to discourage a *ménage à trois*, invites us into bed with the speaker and his lover so that we might witness their peculiar standoff. His lover casts an appreciative gaze upon his physique:

She said as well to me: ‘Why are you ashamed?  
That little bit of your chest that shows between  
The gap of your shirt, why cover it up?  
Why shouldn’t your legs and your good strong thighs  
Be rough and hairy?— I’m glad they are like that...  
And I love you so! Straight and clean and all of a piece is the  
    Body of a man,  
Such an instrument, a spade, like a spear, or an oar,  
Such a joy to me-’ (*Complete Poems* 254)

At first it seems as if the speaker’s modesty is the source of their discord, for his lover entreats him to leave his body exposed. She especially adores his legs; in their strength and roughness, they are the antitheses of the withered urban limbs that move through London, wobbling underneath what Zadie Smith has memorably called “the sloppy English backside.” Unfortunately, the speaker’s lover has a somewhat circumscribed definition of exposure. For Lawrence, and ultimately for his speaker, this is where her otherwise laudable critique of modesty goes awry. She prizes his physical perfection above all; channeling Whitman, she claims that only a body which is “straight and clean

and all of a piece” is worthy of her admiration. Even more disconcerting are her endeavors to find adequate language for his form, as when she strings together a line of prospective metaphors and similes: “such an instrument, a spade, like a spear, or an oar.” She resorts to a catalogue of inanimate objects, her words summarily robbing his body of its vitality, of its complexity. Lawrence critiques this very sort of frantic “nerve-brain” effort in *Studies in Classic American Literature*: “you can idealize or intellectualize, or you can let the dark soul in you see for itself” (*Studies* 124). The speaker’s response to her touch confirms the theft of his “dark soul:” “so she laid her hands and pressed them down to my sides,/ so that I began to wonder over myself, and what I was.”

Our speaker cannot escape so easily. His lover’s language makes a whirlpool out of the middle stanzas, circling and drawing him down towards the nadir that is her desire: “I wish I could grip you like the fist of the Lord,/ and have you-,” she cries. She extends the “instrument” metaphor by praising the singularity and distinctiveness of his body:

What a tool in the hands of the Lord!  
Only God could have brought it to its shape.  
It feels as if his handgrasp, wearing you  
Had polished you and hollowed you,  
Hollowed this groove in your sides, grasped you under the  
Breasts  
And brought you to the very quick of your form,  
Subtler than an old, soft-worn fiddle-bow. (*Complete Poems* 254)

Even the invocation of God cannot temper the horror of being transformed from a man into an “it.” Hers is a mechanized version of Genesis, with the repetitive “hollowing” and “polishing” rubbing away his external flaws. The mention of God’s “handgrasp,” particularly when coupled with her desire to “grip” him, also undermines the benignity of her creation myth. This is sacrilege in Lawrence’s universe; our speaker is rendered immobile so that he might be molded into a pleasing “shape.”

His lover, however, is more than willing to trade physical vitality for aesthetic pleasure. Her final salvo attempts to freeze him so that she might possess him utterly: “Look, you are clean and

fine and singled out!/ I admire you so, you are beautiful/ this clean sweep of your/ sides, this firmness, this hard mould!/ I would die rather than have it injured with one scar” (*Complete Poems* 255). Lawrence strips the romance from her self-surrender, thereby giving us a scathing take on the condition of modern love. Her fear of physical “scars” becomes a liability: “So she said, and I wondered,/ feeling trammeled and hurt./ It did not make me free” (*Complete Poems* 255). Out of our speaker’s hurt comes the poem’s crucial turn, when he (and presumably Lawrence) openly challenges the vocabulary with which she expresses her love. He hollows out the earlier metaphors with a zeal that rivals hers: “No tool, no instrument, no God!/ Don’t touch me and appreciate me./ It is an infamy” (*Complete Poems* 255). Perhaps more importantly, he describes the human body in a language that is artistically *and* biologically alive. Why reach for abstractions in a world teeming with natural beauty? Our speaker instructs his misguided lover to approach him as one would approach any beast. In this setting, her unequivocal love for his “straight” and “clean” form is not just foolish, but perilous. He stays her roaming hands with a metaphor of his own: “You would think twice before you touched a weasel on a fence/ as it lifts its straight white throat./ Your hand would not be so flig and easy” (*Complete Poems* 255). By comparing himself to the weasel, our speaker not only questions the desirability of “straightness,” but he also critiques the manically dull repetitions that attend his lover’s narrow view of beauty.<sup>43</sup> Her liberal use of exclamation points cannot compensate for her barren abstractions, for her musings about his “straight and clean” and “clean and fine” body. His language, by contrast, seems to delight in novelty. Each line yields different adjectives and verbs, and his chosen creatures- the weasel, the adder, the bull- are an unorthodox trio of beasts. Variety, it seems, “makes him free” in a way that his lover’s embrace does not.

We mustn’t forget that Lawrence’s speaker sometimes restrains his meandering poetic impulse. He, too, indulges in seemingly facile moments of repetition, as when the weasel “lifts its

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<sup>43</sup> See also Swift on repetition in Lawrence.

straight white throat” and the adder “lifted her head,” or when the adder sits up in “delicate, startled wonder” and “glided delicately away” (*Complete Poems* 255). Similarly, the speaker imagines each animal at a moment of physical rising, looping the disparate metaphors together via the shared activity. Yet the astute reader will recognize that the speaker and his lover do not approach repetition in the same manner. That the speaker himself is engaged in his own form of “lifting” or “rising” here is key. Whereas his lover seeks to transmute his body into the abstract, to “idealize the blood” (*Studies* 113), our speaker labors to keep body and mind in a productively tense equilibrium. His effort, in concert with the animals’ “lifting,” replaces his lover’s vain (in every sense of the word) and mechanical idealization of his physique. Such is the origin of the uneasy marriage between variation and stability in Lawrence’s verse. Moreover, his lines model what Lawrence refers to as “desperate recklessness” (*Studies* 58): the vital desire that compels us to expose our bodies to harm (scars and hacking coughs be damned) in hopes of rejuvenating our enervated consciousness. With the image of the bull, for instance, the speaker chastises his lover for being governed by self-preservation: “and the young bull in the field, with his wrinkled, sad face,/ you are afraid if he rises to his feet,/ though he is all wistful and pathetic, like a monolith arrested, static” (*Complete Poems* 255). In her fear, the lover deprives herself, as well as her partner, of the spectacle of the risen creature.

Her desire to keep the bull in its “sad” inertia also reminds us of how she tries to control the speaker’s virile form with her “pressing” hands. Aligning himself with the domesticated bull, the speaker suggests that her pledge to defend him is actually a form of emasculation; his doubt about “what I was” suggests both an existential wondering and a gender crisis. Romantic as it may seem, her appreciation for his body enables a sexual and stylistic power grab. Only by revising the terms of aesthetic judgment can our speaker resuscitate their relationship. “Is there nothing in me to make you hesitate?” he asks in the final stanza. “I tell you there is all these./ And why should you

overlook them in me?-" (*Complete Poems* 256). The imperfect body, like his combustible free verse, suggests that the "natural" preference for incorporation and recuperation is itself a culturally manufactured fiction. Worshipping the able body only perpetuates the decidedly artificial "mania" for unity: "to me it is life to feel the white ideas and the 'oneness' crumbling into a thousand pieces, and all sorts of wonder coming through," Lawrence once wrote to an acquaintance. "It is painful, much more painful...I hate 'oneness'" (*Letters* 605).

The agony of shattering the myth of "oneness" is acutely felt in the essay "Climbing Down Pisgah," which stands as one of Lawrence's more fascinating meditations on the virtues of brokenness. Published posthumously in 1936, the essay moulds a topography of cultural crisis, with the men atop Pisgah surveying a violated landscape. Like Eliot and Fitzgerald, Lawrence imagines Anglo-American modernity as "a hopeless squalor of industrialism, the huge cemetery of human hopes" (*Phoenix* 741). The waste land below, however, is not as horrifying as the scene at the summit. According to Lawrence, Thomas Hardy and Walt Whitman were among the many poets who scaled the mountain for the gilded promise of "wholeness." Now the mountaintop plays host to this fraternity of disillusioned and inert pioneers, while their feckless heirs cling to the sides and ponder their future. Lawrence notably counted himself amongst the danglers; he once invited Cynthia Asquith to visit him in Derby by alluding to his position on the metaphorical cliff, asking her, "Would you really like to come here- it's a nice place really...but I feel as if I were on a sort of ledge half-way down a precipice, and did not know how to get up or down, and it is a queer kind of place to ask visitors to see you, such a ledge" (*Letters* 443). Needless to say, Lady Asquith politely declined his offer.

While he might have been "half-way down" when he penned the letter to Asquith in 1918, by the time he wrote "Climbing Down Pisgah" he had decided to leave the ledge- and he wanted to take modernism down with him. The essay issues an ultimatum to his literary brethren: "Hie, boys,

over we go!” Their climb/plunge down will be a bruising but necessary trek, during which they will exchange their healthy bodies for the opportunity to resurrect English culture. The metaphor that governs his theory of free verse makes a timely return here: “let’s break our necks if we must,” he cries, “but let’s get down, and look over the brink of some other horizon” (*Phoenix* 741). For Lawrence, “breaking the pentameter” must coincide with a thorough and uncompromising reevaluation of all aesthetic practices, including the tendency to privilege the strong body. The purpled and fragmented human form legitimizes the modernist desire to explore “the other horizon” of human experience.

Along with their necks, Lawrence insists that Pisgah’s “boys” surrender their legs to the descent. His focus upon the role of legs is far from arbitrary. The essay’s “leggy” mien, to borrow Lawrence’s own phrase from *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, reveals the extent to which disability informs his distinctive brand of modernism.<sup>44</sup> The image of the disabled human leg functions as a textual scar, a tableau of his efforts to reacquaint the “blood-consciousness” with the “mind-consciousness.” “If the mood is out of joint, the rhythm often is,” he observes, speaking of his own wobbly poetry. “I have always tried to get an emotion out in its own course, without altering it. It needs the finest *instinct* imaginable, much finer than the skill of the craftsmen” (*Letters* 135). Not exactly *il miglior fabbro*, and Lawrence insists he doesn’t want to be; technical perfection threatens the sacrosanct link between “mood” and “rhythm.” This formal mantra dovetails with Lawrence’s meditations on his

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<sup>44</sup> Lady Chatterley insists that reading “legs” is the quintessential modern experience: Connie woke up to the existence of legs. They became more important to her than faces, which are no longer very real. How few people had live, alert legs! She looked at the men in the stalls, great puddingy thighs in black pudding-cloth, or lean, wooden sticks in black funeral stuff. Or well-shaped young legs without any meaning whatever. Either sensuality or tenderness or sensitiveness, just mere leggy ordinariness that pranced around. They were all daunted out of existence. But the women were not daunted. The awful mill-posts of most females! Really shocking, really enough to justify murder! Or the thin pegs! Or the trim, neat things in silk stockings without the slightest look of life! Awful, the millions of meaningless legs, prancing meaninglessly around! (274)

own vulnerable body. He writes: “what makes life good to me is the sense that, even if I am sick and ill, I am alive, alive, alive to the depths of my soul, and in touch somewhere with the vivid life of the cosmos” (*Phoenix* 202). Being “out of joint” or “sick,” in meter or in limb, not only affirms one’s own vigor, but it primes one for contact with other earthly creatures. Whether it is sexual or platonic, imagined or actual, recurrent or fleeting, such contact can break the vertebrae of the modern world. Or as Lawrence envisages it, “all the laws of physics, dynamics, kinetics, statics...can be broken, superseded, in a moment of great *extremity*” (italics mine). The image of the disabled leg trenchantly syncs the mind and blood, as each moment of “great extremity” is enacted through the extremities of the human body. How fitting, then, that the men of Pisgah will display their creative mettle by subjecting their legs to the crags:

To assert that our legs are not grey machine-sections, but live and limber members who know what it is to have their rear well scraped and punished, in the slither down Pisgah, and are not going to be diddled any more into mechanical service of mountain-climbing up to the great summit of Wholeness and Bunk. (*Phoenix* 744)

It is a fraught synonymy: to be “live and limber” is to have “well scraped and punished” legs. Surely Lawrence rebukes the Romantic cult of the healthy male form here, but his critique of the modern body is equally ardent. The “machine-section” legs, dulled to a camouflage “grey” that befits their ashen surroundings, embody the twentieth-century desire for mass-produced symmetries.

Indestructible, indefatigable, and bereft of the peculiar cadences of human motion, their “climb” is an exercise in what Lawrence once called “hard-worked staleness” (*Letters* 742). The legs’ movement generates the illusion of progress, while the land below continues its inexorable decay. These chugging limbs, in tandem with the static figures atop the summit, constitute the defining crisis of modernism: “curse these ancients, they have said everything for us...curse these moderns, they have done everything for us” (*Phoenix* 741). The genius of Lawrence’s dislocated legs is that they model a new formal relationship between “saying” and “doing,” and between the “ancients” and the “moderns” as well. The “fractured verbal exchanges” (Simmonds 134) that are Lawrence’s signature

find a fleshy analogue in the “punished” limbs, and this pairing creates the optimal conditions for Lawrentian free verse; the mind and the body enjoy a simultaneous plunge towards novelty. Not only is the myth of “wholeness” unrecoverable, it is anathema to the creation of a truly radical literary aesthetic.

## Chapter Two

### “Slashed and Torn but Doubly Rich:” H.D.’s Poetics of Deformation

“A new sensation/ is not granted to everyone. / Not to everyone everywhere, / but to us here, a new sensation/ strikes paralyzing, / strikes dumb, / strikes the senses numb, / sets the nerves quivering” (*Collected Poems* 559-60). Part of H.D.’s epic poem *Trilogy*, these kinetic lines arise from the ruins of a blitzed London, bearing a precious message for those who have survived the Luftwaffe’s assault: the war-marked and wounded forever will embody that potent, mysterious, and violent force which she names the “new sensation,” and they must learn how to transmute it into a procreative and protean form. Yet her tribute to extraordinary sensation, while obviously inspired by a distinct time and place, is suggestive in ways that transcend the text’s immediate historical moment. As I will argue in this chapter, H.D.’s invocation of a “dumbstruck elect” illuminates a compelling but overlooked quality of her art: its investment in the language of disability. I explore how H.D. fashions her body of work into a persuasive critique of what *Trilogy* eventually calls the “geometry of perfection” (*Collected Poems* 577): the lines and shapes of the safe, the symmetrical, the healthy, the mundane, the sane. Her poetry is remarkable for its claims that the disabled and deformed will inherit the earth in the twentieth-century, that they will be the first to sense the potential Paradise in their seemingly barren surroundings. Even more salient is H.D.’s belief that the disabled are granted a special tongue; only they can produce the exceptional language that is needed to tell the story of what modernity has wrought. So says the speaker in “The Flowering of the Rod:” “So the first- it is written, / will be the twisted or the tortured individuals, / out of line, out of step with world so-called progress” (*Collected Poems* 586).

My particular aim here, then, is to trace the genesis of H.D.’s interest in disability, and to explore how it might inform our understanding of her modernist ambitions. Beginning in the knotty prose of the 1919 work *Notes on Thought and Vision*, I will show that her post-World War One

re-evaluation of her own poetics is a key juncture, for it is the period when H.D. takes the exacting lexicon of her *Sea Garden* and transmutes it into a language of corporeal experience. She transforms the twisted brambles and flowers of her Imagist poems into an oeuvre that enshrines human disability, moving from branch to body in a way that at once revises and perpetuates her Imagist origins. The disabled form, then, ultimately constitutes an approach to the visionary poetics for which H.D. would become known. Every errant limb is a site where she negotiates her aesthetic legacy. Regardless of H.D.'s own position in the spectrum of disability, she consistently articulates her poetics through what we would call a disabled perspective.

Like the salt-stunted flora of *Sea Garden*, her poems are shaped by encounters between beauty and a disfiguring power. The subject positions in H.D.'s work require the presence of both kinds of forces; this enables her to resist the traditional hierarchies of pulchritude, in which the beautiful is aligned with all that is good. Witness, for instance, the fury of the speaker in the 1931 poem "Red Roses for Bronze:"

I feel that I must turn and tear and rip  
the fine cloth  
from the moulded thigh and hip,  
force you to grasp my soul's sincerity,  
and single out  
me,  
me,  
something to challenge,  
handle differently. (*Collected Poems* 213)

Here the speaker implies that her subjectivity, her "me/ me," is contingent upon an act of rapture. It is a sexual fantasy, to be sure, as she imagines the finely muscled thigh and hip underneath the clothes, but what she truly craves is the intellectual thrill of challenging her partner, of forcing him to be different because *she* is different. The poem's form then illustrates just how exquisite strangeness can be. Its lines winnow to a single word, incarnating her wish to "single out" the "me," and the unpredictability of the rhyme scheme tests the reader's ear. These accreted irregularities

generate what H.D. describes elsewhere as a “swing from normal consciousness to abnormal consciousness” (*Notes* 19). Accompanied by the “grinding discomfort of mental agony” (*Notes* 19), the move from comfortable come-and-go to a heightened state of sensual receptivity is a hallmark of her poetics. So too is her insistence upon incorporating the experience of this shock, this agony, into her poems’ formal and metaphorical architecture. H.D.’s aestheticization of the world’s ruined things- the topless buildings in *Trilogy*, the amputated stems of her Imagist flowers, ancient Sapphic fragments, the limbless soldiers returned from the front- is the most fraught element of her work. Like Pound’s scrawl underneath “Hermes of the Ways,” it is at once her signature and her liability.<sup>45</sup>

Yet any account of her fragmentary aesthetic must acknowledge that H.D.’s definition of material “wholeness” was not the definition that many of her set ultimately espoused. Defying twentieth-century modernity and its “mechanistic, materialist conceptions of reality” (Friedman, “Who Buried” 802), she constructs a realm in which ambition is just as sacred as attainment, in which the trauma is as privileged as the triumph. Her memoir *End to Torment* retrospectively sketches the maturation of this philosophy. In it, H.D. chides her younger, Pound-obsessed self for always searching for something to make her whole: “Find a coordinated convention, Man-Hero who will compensate, complete the picture...it filled my fantasies and my dreams, my prose and poetry for ten years” (19). Even some of her slightly later poems recount the futile search:

It was not chastity that made me wild, but fear  
That my weapon, tempered in different heat,  
Was overmatched by yours, and your hand  
Skilled to yield death-blows, might break

With the slightest turn- no ill will meant-

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<sup>45</sup>The poet Carolyn Forché has remarked upon the “insurmountable difficulty of writing her way toward restoration while conceiving a poetic form that would somehow display the ruin” (264). Another critic observes that H.D.’s works, particularly her epics, are “restless and obsessive...her forms- though they are not entirely successful- are ambitious. Her relentless attempt to achieve such an epic range...in a minimalist manner is heartbreakingly earnest” (Hillman 189).

My own lesser, yet still somewhat fine-wrought,  
Fiery-tempered, delicate, over-passionate steel. (*Collected Poems* 179)

As a record of the clash between a genius and a protégé/lover, the 1924 poem “Toward the Piraeus” attempts to invent an idiom that will liberate the speaker from her sense of incompleteness. It is a quintessential dilemma of H.D.’s poetry: “how to resist that will to power without being subsumed in its terms” (Willis 13). Here not only does the speaker claim that her weapon is forged in a “different heat,” but she subtly asserts her own verbal agility with a pun on the word “temper;” in contrast to the pen of her sparring partner, which moves with a crushing precision, her pen is “fiery-tempered” in structure and in spirit. Like the flames in which it is forged, her pen flickers instead of slashes, writing poetry that leaps and twists in unexpected directions. Despite these sparks of confidence, the speaker’s faith in her language is fragile, and her collaborator’s Damoclean pen still hangs over the final lines.<sup>46</sup> She continues to regard herself as a lesser artist, one who relies upon the compensatory strength of her death-blow-dealing partner to offset her weaknesses.

But the elder H.D., the H.D. of *End to Torment*, would come to recognize that imperfection has its own might. “Ezra would have destroyed me and the center they call ‘Air and Crystal’ of my poetry” (35), she confesses in an entry dated April 9, 1958. Her assessment of Pound’s influence upon her work (and life) has a surety and a sharpness that are absent from “Toward the Piraeus.”

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<sup>46</sup> In *End to Torment*, H.D. famously describes her fateful collaboration with Pound as follows: “Drifting. Drifting. Meeting with him alone or with others at the Museum tea room...Drifting? ‘But Dryad,’ (in the Museum tea room), ‘this is poetry.’ He slashed with a pencil. ‘Cut this out, shorten this line. ‘Hermes of the Ways’ is a good title. I’ll send this to Harriet Monroe of *Poetry*. Have you a copy? Yes? Then we can send this, or I’ll type it when I get back. Will this do?’ And he scrawled ‘H.D. Imagiste’ at the bottom of the page” (18). Susan Stanford Friedman, discussing H.D.’s initiation into Freudian analysis in the 1930s, helpfully notes that H.D.’s version of the famous “Imagiste” anecdote was apocryphal: “to heighten the narrative of Pound’s production of ‘H.D. Imagiste,’ H.D. streamlined the story. Aldington was in fact present at the scene, and her initials were already on the page, as she told Norman Holmes Pearson many years later. But H.D. probably stressed for Freud the birth of the ‘crystalline’ Imagist poet under the slashing *condensare* of Pound’s pen” (*Analyzing* 178). Aldington, for his part, had this to say about Pound’s influence in a letter from spring of 1912: “Ezra had been butting in on our studies and poetic productions, with alternative encouragements and the reverse, according to his mood” (11).

Moreover, she no longer views the “delicate, over-passionate” things, the “Air and Crystal” of her poetry, as deficiencies. Now H.D. claims that these seemingly undeveloped or unruly elements possess a remarkable power. She declares: “intellectual and physical perfection must be tempered, balanced, re-lived, re-focused, or even sustained by the unpredictable, the inchoate, challenged by a myth, a legend” (19). Dissatisfied with exactitude, she finds bliss in the irregular figures, words, and occurrences that others cannot, or will not, examine.

*Working Towards a Modernist Body: Notes on Thought and Vision*

H.D.’s 1919 trip to the Scilly Islands, immortalized in the meandering work known as *Notes on Thought and Vision*, is a crucial moment in the formulation of this aesthetic creed. For H.D., the preceding years in London were as brisk as the winds that erode the coastlines in her verse. Many of the benevolent influences in her life proved to be sources of pain, and she openly began to question her role in the modernist vanguard. This period of self-reflection culminates in a turn towards the mysteries of the body, as H.D.’s poetry becomes fascinated with the human form. H.D.’s unexpected pregnancy, the result of an assignation with Cecil Gray during their 1918 trip to Cornwall, surely played a role in the transition, though it is not quite the watershed that many critics believe it to be. For in the avant-garde prose stylings of *Notes on Thought and Vision*, we can see H.D. exploring all kinds of marked and morphing bodies, of which the pregnant body is merely one example. Penned after her Scilly sojourn, *Notes* is a cathartic exercise. Comprised of and concerned with “elementary, unbeautiful and transitory” (51) entities, the text achieves what we might think of as a studied awkwardness. It collects shards of questions, associations, and myths and arranges them in baffling ways, and it repeats and redoubles upon itself without shame or apology. As Kathleen Crown has pointed out, even the use of the word “notes” in the title suggests a “manifesto in

process” (219). No evidence of the Man-Hero’s harsh pen upon these lines. Rather, there is a disquieting beauty in how her style exemplifies the very principles put forth in the book.

The opening fragment, for instance, informs us that *Notes* is a meditation on the “three states or manifestations of life: body, mind, over-mind” (17). The H.D. “over-mind” is the most nebulous of the three states, but it constitutes the core of her work. Such subject matter demands the sort of formal amorphousness for which the text is known (and frequently panned). One easily might apply her famous description of the over-mind to *Notes* itself: “that over-mind seems a cap, like water, transparent, fluid yet with definite body, contained in a definite space. It is like a closed sea-plant, jelly-fish or anemone. Into that over-mind, thoughts pass and are visible like fish swimming under clear water” (18-9). Like the jelly-fish, the text possesses a discrete but ever-shifting body, a body with the capacity to create productive distortions in the human brain. The adroit reader will reset himself and adapt to the challenges of the fluid structure; only then will his brain guide him towards the mysterious provinces of the over-mind.

*Notes*’s formal quirkiness is also a symbol of H.D.’s intellectual intensity. “When a creative scientist, artist or philosopher has been for some hours or days intent on his work, his mind often takes on an almost physical character” (18), she writes, and this “almost physical character” is the over-mind. Not every artist registers the transition in the same fashion, but H.D. experiences it as a visual blur: “sometimes when I am in that state of consciousness, things about me appear slightly blurred as if seen under water. Ordinary things never become quite unreal or disproportionate” (18). Her embrace of fuzzy vision undermines the Imagist manifestoes, with their emphasis upon lucidity and the pleasure of the austere line, and it establishes (albeit cautiously) a new standard by which the creative elite will be judged.<sup>47</sup> “At a time when “most of the ‘so-called artists...have lost

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<sup>47</sup> The jellyfish “blurriness” of *Notes* might be likened to Pound’s Vorticist phase, which replaced Imagist precision with concentrated dynamism.

the use of their brain” (21), the text’s blurriness affirms that *this* artist has retained the use of hers. The slightly “disproportionate” writing reveals her capacity for uncommon thought and uncommon poetry. It is the ultimate embodiment of H.D.’s fierce sensitivity, and of her burgeoning faith in an aesthetic she once regarded as inferior.

Accordingly, she uses a series of disparate metaphors and images to illumine the path to the over-mind. Not only is the state itself indeterminate, but so too are the routes by which a person might access it, and the text explicitly rejects a hierarchical presentation of the different approaches. Instead, it gives the reader a plethora of options:

Certain words and lines of Attic choruses, any scrap of da Vinci’s drawings, the Delphic charioteer, have a definite, hypnotic effect on me. They are straight, clear entrances, to me, to over-world consciousness. But my line of approach, my sign-posts, are not your sign-posts...my sign-posts are not yours, but if I blaze my own trail, it may help to give you confidence and urge you to get out of the murky, dead, old, thousand-times explored old world, the dead world of overworked emotions and thoughts. (24)

The passage clarifies what we might call H.D.’s archaeological aesthetic. To gain access to the over-mind, one must take a fine sieve to the earthpile of modern experience and sift out the valuable bits: “one must look hard at/for the scattered ‘members’ and understand the meanings offered by the fragmentation” (DuPlessis 124-5).<sup>48</sup> H.D. enumerates the scraps, pieces, and remnants that transfix her, but she does so with the knowledge that her chosen fragments may not make sense to anyone else. That which appears crooked or incomplete might, in fact, be “straight” or whole to her, and vice versa. Yet H.D. won’t leave her reader utterly adrift. She recognizes that relativism can be lonely, which is why she privileges the exchange of “sign-posts” in her vision of a new world.<sup>49</sup> That

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<sup>48</sup> Of course, some critics persist in reading the search for “members” as a phallic quest.

<sup>49</sup> Writing about the relationship between H.D.’s visionary experiences and her “cinematic” poetics, Connor remarks that *Notes* “signals an ability to connect, beyond the self, to a community of spectators” (46).

“my sign-posts are not your sign-posts” does not preclude collaborative effort, for the act of witnessing another person’s response to an event or a work of art can compel one to seek out his/her own sources of stimulation.

And so she offers her own experience as a template, all the while reminding us that “every person must work out his own way” (23) to the over-mind’s watery expanse. In one of the text’s most discussed passages, she writes of how pregnancy provided her with a means of transcending the mere brain and body: “for me, it was before the birth of my child that the jelly-fish consciousness seemed to come definitely into the field or realm of the intellect or brain” (20). She posits that the womb, a sacred space where the over-mind might be centered and nourished like a fetus, can function as a complement to the brain by providing a second “privileged access point for transformative vision” (DuPlessis 40). The womb-based theory of perception would seem to suggest that women have an over-mind advantage over men, and the text wonders, too: “is it easier for a woman to attain this state of consciousness than for a man?” (20). The question, however, lacks an answer. Rachel Blau DuPlessis has rightly remarked that the inquiry is “bold and tentative at once, excited by yet resistant to that postulate of female difference” (40), and Rachel Connor concurs: “the essay poses a number of rhetorical questions for which it provides no solution” (47).<sup>50</sup> The text is equivocal in other ways as well. H.D. frequently substitutes the neutered phrase “love-region” for the word “womb,” thereby integrating men into her vision of brain/womb double-consciousness. Similarly, she speaks of the second type of vision as “love” vision rather than “womb” vision, a choice that elevates erotic experience but refuses to grant primacy to either gender

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<sup>50</sup> Despite the text’s insistent indeterminacy, DuPlessis goes on to contend that H.D. *does* “declare the advantages of female physicality, of female Otherness on the vision quest which remained the highest aspiration for both genders...she argues in a Tiresean fashion that the female body in its physical presence has a special gift: dual lenses for vision” (40-1). Morris arrives at a similar conclusion: “though both sexes possess this capacity, her formulation privileges her own particularly female experience of integration and regeneration” (“Concept” 279).

(22-3). And how to interpret her pronouncement that “all *men* have possibilities of developing this vision” (23)? Perhaps she is implying that love-vision is innate in women but must be acquired by men. Or is she exposing the masculinist structures of the English language, in which the word “men” is shorthand for both sexes? Her “jelly-fish” text floats away without a definitive response.

The text’s greatest secret, however, is that it is skeptical of physical perfection. Inordinately preoccupied with the human form but unsure of how to treat it, asking “where does the body come in?” and “what is the body?,” *Notes* obscures the binary that positions the able body against the disabled, the ill. This is not to say that the work denigrates that which seems physically whole or perfect. At times, it admires physical strength as much as it does mental acuity. When imagining the chosen few who will access the power of the over-mind, for instance, H.D. specifies that they must have “healthy bodies and the right sort of receiving brains” (27). The combination of agile brains and bodies is potent enough to kindle a creative renaissance, turning “the whole tide of human thought” (27) and dissolving the torpor that has settled over the world; a healthy body thus becomes a prerequisite for the attainment of over-mind consciousness. Likewise, *Notes* resurrects the classical ideal of the strong, graceful body, most notably in its portrait of the Delphic charioteer. She lauds his “knife-cut” chin, his “firm” stance, and the “fall of his drapery, in geometrical precision” (24-6), and she later refers to “the electric force of the lines and angles of [his] priest-like body” (27). Curved but angular, draped but taut, delicate but firm, his form proves that for H.D., “the athletic body is always a meeting point, between temporal and spiritual, nature and art, male and female” (Collecott, “Images” 159-60). The splendid body is one of her liminal zones: a place where contraries can mingle and generate the energy required for artistic production.

Despite its classical influences, *Notes* has a rather unusual notion of what typifies a beautiful physique. By juxtaposing the athletes and charioteers with a few splendidly imperfect bodies, the text ultimately widens the scope of beauty to encompass (rather than exclude) what H.D. calls “the

wisdom of ugliness” (32). It does this quietly, so quietly that it is easy to understand why some have mistaken it for a paean to gorgeous things. *Notes* reveals its paradoxical stance through a series of meditations on “natural” symmetry, bodily excess, and disease. The text’s striking beginning is one such meditation:

Three states of manifestations of life: body, mind, over-mind.

Aim of men and women of highest development is equilibrium, balance, growth of the three at once; brain without physical strength is a manifestation of weakness, a disease comparable to cancerous growth or tumor; body without reasonable amount of intellect is an empty fibrous bundle of glands as ugly and little to be desired as body of a victim of some form of elephantiasis or fatty-degeneracy. (17)

With its appeal for “equilibrium,” the text’s opening salvo depicts illness as grotesque and excessive. The images are of bodies that have been pushed beyond their normal lines, forms swollen with malignancy or weighted down with overgrown parts. Even the prose gets sick here; it becomes clotted with clinical jargon. The text’s vigorous, athletic bodies, such as the Delphic charioteer, might be read as correcting these monstrosities. The perfect forms reflect H.D.’s desire to clarify and stabilize the dynamic between mind, body, and over-mind, as well as her wish to get her “terms clear” (49). But such a reading proves to be untenable. As I noted earlier, the text impedes its own discursive progress, and in doing so it critiques the valorization of wholeness, of precision, of linearity. The sick, disabled body complements these moments of discursive self-sabotage. Like the text’s “crude” structure, the disabled body exposes the lie of symmetry by repeatedly refusing cure or realignment, and it recalibrates the terms- normal, sane, straight (in all senses)- that tend to privilege those who do conform. The able-bodied/disabled binary is replaced with a dynamic of contingency, a marriage in which one term galvanizes rather than subjugates the other.

H.D. proffers an appropriately bizarre metaphor to explain the relationship: “one must understand Euripides before one understands Aristophanes...Euripides is a white rose, lyric, feminine, a spirit. Aristophanes is a satyr. Is the satyr greater or less than the white rose it

embraces?” (32). As a “satyr,” Aristophanes possesses a form that is out-of-line: half-man and half-goat, all libido, all body, all monster. Euripides, by contrast, is a rose with delicate contours, the epitome of aesthetic pleasure and beauty. One might say that the Euripidean “rose” is perhaps what H.D.’s sea rose looked like before the wind abraded its petals. The two bodies, rose and satyr, merge in a rhetorical question that evokes the text’s earlier musings on womb/love vision. Is it easier for a woman to attain this state of consciousness than a man? Is the satyr greater or less than the white rose? Her query, which implicitly chastises those who would esteem the rose, locates true beauty at the juncture of the monstrous and the lovely. A body that is broken into being, one that is reshaped by contact with exceptional people or events, is the only privileged body in her universe. Thus, while the world may value “intelligent people of normal development, who have looked into matters of life scientifically and with a certain amount of artistic appreciation,” H.D. pointedly separates these “normal” individuals from the ranks of the “inspired” (31). Inspiration is reserved for those who resist perfection’s allure, and for those who recognize that wondrous things (and words) are borne of catastrophe.

The parable of Chinese philosopher Lo-fu, which serves as a key imagistic node in *Notes on Thought and Vision*, confirms the potential of twisted forms. Like *Sea Garden* and Pound’s *Cathay*, *Notes* traffics in the avant-garde orientalisms of the period.<sup>51</sup> The story of Lo-fu bridges a number of global traditions, “the philosophy of the Tao, philosophy of the Hebrew, philosophy of the Greek” (42), namely by imagining a communion between man and tree. Lo-fu’s mystical experience starts with a branch that could only be described as a deformed limb:

Lo-fu sat in his orchard in the Ming dynasty, A.D. 184. He sat in his orchard and looked about in a vague, casual way. Against the grey stones of the orchard wall he

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<sup>51</sup> See Wheeler for an excellent discussion of Imagism’s “botanical vocabulary” and its Asian influences. “Flowers,” she writes, “constitute a crucial idiom for imagism partly because floral imagery represents an important resource for the classical and Asian traditions the imagists drew on” (500).

saw the low branch of an apple tree. He thought, that shoot should have been pruned, it hangs too low. Then as he looked at the straight tough young shoot, he thought, no, the apples are excellent, so round and firm. Then he went on looking. (43)

His orchard is unexceptional save for the “too low” branch of the apple tree, which draws his wandering eye and holds it captive for the remainder of the story. Before he can appreciate its power, though, he must transcend his automatic response: “that shoot should have been pruned.” Disconcerted by the asymmetry, Lo-fu sees the branch as a horticultural perversion, as an out-of-bounds body that needs taming. Yet this “too low” branch yields luscious fruit. Not only does it produce perfect apples, it also produces an abundant crop of love-visions for Lo-Fu:

It was a shoot of some years’ growth. Why had it been left untrimmed? Was it some special experiment in grafting the old gardener had undertaken some years ago? Was it by accident that the limb hung there? Then his conscious mind ceased wondering and, being an artist, his intensity and concentration were of a special order and he looked at that fruit branch hanging in the sun, the globes of the apples red, yellow, red with flecks of brown and red, yellow where the two colors merged, and flecks of brown again on the yellow...(43)

And then:

He went further. There were two leaves, continents to be explored in a leisurely manner lest his mind passing one carelessly from vein to vein, should miss one rib or the small branch of one off-shoot of that exquisite skeleton. And when he knew the skeleton of that leaf, the rivers, as it were, furrowing that continent, his mind was content. But it had only begun its search. (44)

The sight of the wayward branch suspends Lo-fu’s conscious mind, thereby freeing him from the tyranny of normal, rational thought. He, in turn, acquires the unique ocular powers associated with the over-mind. He is sensitive to the regions where colors and shapes and textures overlap, and he luxuriates in the details that his “vague, casual” self surely would have overlooked. Most significantly, his brief foray into the over-mind here anticipates future moments of access, for the branch has permanently sundered his mind; having been subjected to an external horror like the deformed branch, he is now susceptible to other figures which might lead him towards the over-mind’s ecstasies (45). H.D. notes that the branch “existed to Lo-fu as the means of attaining

happiness, as a means of completing himself” (45) but the text implies that it is not his sole means. He is free to pursue *multiple* transactions with bodies and minds and things that are “in sympathy with [his], or keyed to the same pitch” (47), for he has a moral duty to seek out as many sympathetic entities as possible. When totaled up over a lifetime and multiplied by millions, spread worldwide like a contagion, one experience of over-mind can disturb what H.D. deems the most illusory tenets of Western culture: progress, beauty, order. As a harbinger of this process, the deformed branch thereby becomes one of the most evocative images in H.D.’s writing. It enables her to amend her entire conception of the body: no longer subordinate to the spirit, it merits our praise for simply being an “elementary, unbeautiful, and transitory form of life” (*Notes* 51). The branch in *Notes* likewise constitutes a site where the austerity of *Sea Garden* meets the sprawling mysticism of her later work, as it proposes a curious parallelism between the twisted brambles and flowers of her Imagist poems and the “twisted or tortured individuals” who populate her later poetry.

#### *H.D.’s Asymmetrical Flowers*

Undoubtedly H.D.’s most celebrated collection of poetry, *Sea Garden* was published by the London house Constable & Co. in 1916, in a volume whose design was as austere and handsome as the poems it contained. The work secured her place in the most rarified echelons of the English literary scene, and so it is customarily viewed as the zenith of the Imagist moment; a moment that, ironically, had passed by the time many of her lyrics made it into print. To borrow Pound’s famous barb, Imagism metamorphosed into “Amygism” during the period between 1912 and 1916, as many of Imagism’s original disciples abandoned their credo and embraced Vorticism, and American poet Amy Lowell assumed control of the movement. *Sea Garden*, an artifact from Imagism’s heady, earlier days, embodies one of poetry’s richest historical pleats: the pre-*Prufrack* era, when dueling modernisms tangled with each other like the sea-grass and shore-grass in “Hermes of the Ways.” By

imagining a series of bracing encounters between two aesthetically different forces, the text reproduces and reflects upon the conditions that led to its own genesis. *Sea Garden* doesn't merely collect broken or twisted branches: structurally speaking, it too is a stubborn branch, its snapped lines a record of the competing influences that defined its era. Such a reading, I argue, permits us to transcend the cliché of H.D.'s Imagist "precision," and to locate original and valuable connections between her early work and her later epic poems.

*Sea Garden* opens with "Sea Rose," a paean to the ultimate botanical symbol of passion. H.D. challenges the expected representation of the rose in the first line, an apostrophic sigh of "Rose, harsh rose," and then she slowly yet persistently erodes our romantic vision of the flower with each successive image. This rose is:

marred and with stint of petals,  
meagre flower, thin,  
sparse of leaf,  
  
more precious  
than a wet rose  
single on a stem-  
you are caught in the drift. (*Collected Poems* 5)

With the sea rose replacing the traditional "wet" rose as the object of worship, the poem attempts to align conventional beauty with cossetting and imprisonment. Perhaps anticipating the play of sound that she would exploit to great effect in *Trilogy* ("till *marab-mar/* are melted, fuse and join/ and change and alter,/ mer, mere mère, mater, Maia, Mary"), H.D. describes the sea rose here as "marred," and hence sanctified, by *la mer*. Likewise, the curious phrase "with stint" transforms absence into a positive attribute; "stint," paradoxically, is something that the rose possesses, and the state of having, of possession, subverts the notion that this lack is undesirable. The line "single on a stem-" also suggests the beauty of deformity through its own cleft structure. Visually and metaphorically, the dash evokes the sea rose's "stem." It is a glyph of loss and negation, for the line abruptly ends when it appears. Yet it is a symbol of fruition, too, functioning as a hinge between the

final two lines of the stanza: it connects the sea rose's singularity to its cruel environment, and it confirms that the flower's physical difference is its chief virtue. The poem, in asserting its kinship with the sea rose, thereby legitimizes its own formal disabilities.

The third stanza encourages an entirely new reading of the word "rose." Such conversions are an essential component of H.D.'s aesthetic, for they highlight the idea that language should confront rather than comfort the reader. Until this point in the poem, it is evident that the term "rose" operates as a noun. Stanza three, however, implies that it may operate simultaneously as a verb:

Stunted, with small leaf,  
you are flung on the sand,  
you are lifted  
in the crisp sand  
that drives in the wind. (*Collected Poems* 5)

The sea rose rises, "lifted" by the driving marine wind in a description that recalls a divine ascension. Also implicit here is the idea that the sea, too, is rising, and we can no longer be certain if the title of the poem refers to the flower, or to the force that is cutting it. Vibrating between noun and verb, "rose" now becomes a reminder of the instant when stem and sea meet, and of the liberating deformations produced by this encounter. The sense of openness is verified by the rhetorical question in the final stanza: "Can the spice-rose/ drip such acrid fragrance/ hardened in a leaf?"

*Sea Garden's* "Sea Lily" is an obvious sibling to "Sea Rose," and it illustrates how H.D. is able to yield maximum effect from a relatively circumscribed range of subjects. "Sea Lily" commences by acknowledging the lily's exalted status in ritual, only to undo that portrait by the end of the opening stanza:

Reed,  
slashed and torn  
but doubly rich-  
such great heads as yours  
drift upon temple-steps,  
but you are shattered

in the wind. (*Collected Poems* 14)

Much as “Sea Rose” exploits the ambivalence surrounding the word “rose,” so too does the word “reed” diffuse the reader’s interpretive energy in a few competing directions. There is, of course, the most literal level, with “reed” emphasizing the smoothness and insubstantiality of the lily’s stalk. Yet “reed” carries connotations of artmaking as well; it is a material from which instruments and styluses are crafted, and its fate in the poem is a comment on the labor of poetry itself. Before a reed can sing or write, it must be cut first, and consequently the act of composing is always carried out with a disabled limb. The possible pun on “read/reed” contributes to the self-reflexive force of the lines by implicating the reader in the destruction. Reading a piece such as “Sea Lily” requires the violent type of “reeding” staged within the poem. The reward, H.D. suggests, is a “doubly rich” trove of meaning that is only accessible to those who apprehend such parallels.

In the second stanza, the sea lily’s wounds are recorded through a unique process of accumulation via diminution. Each time the lily is stripped of another scale or petal, the topography of its reed becomes more fascinating:

Myrtle-bark  
is flecked from you,  
scales are dashed  
from your stem,  
sand cuts your petal,  
furrows it with hard edge,  
like flint  
on a bright stone. (*Collected Poems* 14)

The violence multiplies the number of surfaces available for contact, thereby heightening the intensity of the interaction between stem and shore. Parts of the lily that were once under a protective layer of bark are now subjected to the wind, so that the concept of an impregnable interior is rendered obsolete. As in “Sea Rose,” H.D. draws our attention to the formal implications of this metamorphosis: the poem, like the wind, performs its own productive “dashing” in lines 3 and 18, where the dashes act as channels for currents of meaning. They enable movement between

opposing connotative registers. For instance, the dash in line 3 marks the lily's "double" richness, linking the battered lily with its scattered sisters on the temple steps, and thereby implying that the sea lily's endurance is divine. The "dashed" scales work in a similar fashion, as they introduce the simile that concludes the second stanza: the friction of sand on petal is likened to "flint on a bright stone," which is a surprising analogy indeed in a marine environment. By igniting this figurative blaze, the poem creates an image that simultaneously evokes genesis and destruction. The petal's cuts are offset by the potential for redemptive physical transformation, so that what appears to be a disability is actually a "furrow:" a groove that directs where seeds should be planted, or, more intriguingly, a line that creases the brow of one engaged in deep thought.

The final lines maintain the antagonisms that are brought to the fore in stanza two. Words such as "yet" and "though" maneuver the reader back and forth between polar verbs: "Yet though the whole wind/ *slash* at your bark/ you are *lifted* up" (*Collected Poems* 14). The wind's last action is a particularly uncanny one: "it hiss to cover you with froth." Whereas earlier the wind was stripping layers from the sea lily, now it is re-covering (and hence recovering) its surface with a new material. The poem juxtaposes the "froth," light and effervescent and white, against the lily's shredded bark to create a palimpsestic effect. H.D. is fond of palimpsests, for they allow her to compress a multitude of spatial and temporal crossings into a single image. The littoral "froth" provides a record of contact between the wind and the lily. The image also affirms that such encounters disrupt the border between agony and pleasure. A sexually suggestive word, "froth" consummates the poem. Yet "froth" and foam are also generated by injury, by disease; one only need think of a rabid dog or a person with the flu to be reminded of that fact. "Sea Lily's" ending keeps all of these possibilities in suspension, ensuring that the read is always as uncomfortable as, well, "the reed."

While "Sea Rose" and "Sea Lily" immortalize the strange loveliness of their eponymous flowers, H.D.'s "Sheltered Garden" envisions an alternative to the blooms that grow throughout the

other poems in the volume. The speaker is cloistered in a clifftop Eden, suffocated by the perfume from a profusion of “border-pinks, clove-pinks, wax-lilies,/ herbs, sweet-cress” (*Collected Poems* 19).<sup>52</sup> Her physical captivity engenders a meditation on the pleasures of the cut limb. The poem’s structure turns upon the interplay of the sheltered garden’s delicate reality and the fantasy of brokenness:

O for some sharp swish of a branch-  
there is no scent of resin  
in this place,  
no taste of bark, of coarse weeds,  
aromatic, astringent-  
only border on border of scented pinks. (*Collected Poems* 19)

Bereft of “coarse” vegetation, the speaker attempts to create her own ugliness with the alliterative hiss of “sharp swish,” and her wish for the “scent of resin” pays curious tribute to a substance known for its yellow-brown ooze. The resin, viscous and residual, symbolizes everything that H.D.’s “crystalline” Imagism supposedly disavows: languor, fluidity, amorphousness. Yet the poem does not valorize these qualities per se. What is truly prized in “Sheltered Garden” is the possibility of material difference: the chance that one will encounter a weed amid delicate flowers, or a delicate flower amid the brambles. For our bowered speaker, both scenarios are equally desirable, but they exist only in her mind.

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<sup>52</sup> Cassandra Laity interprets H.D.’s harsh landscapes of *Sea Garden* as being evocative of a post-Swinburnian romantic modernist sublime: H.D., she claims, turns Swinburne’s decadent aesthetic into a means of exploring “alternate forms of desire,” namely the possibility of “Sapphic communities of creative power” (114-116). Donna Krolik Hollenberg likewise emphasizes the gynocentric mythology of the poems in *Sea Garden*, observing that some of H.D.’s “rebellious” poems “celebrate lesbian love as a refuge from the pain of heterosexual engagement” (*H.D.* 71). Yet Hollenberg chooses to place greater emphasis upon how the poetry reflects H.D.’s experience of reproduction. The poems of *Sea Garden*, which she notes “must have been written between 1913 and 1916, the years between H.D.’s marriage to Richard Aldington and the immediate aftermath of their stillborn child,” are records of a profound psychological ambivalence about the experience of childbirth: “some poems enact the miscarriage of psychic qualities associated with childbirth and the archetype of the child...in others, she attempts to controvert these feelings of stricken imagination by divorcing female creative power from the ideologies of gender and the institutions of marriage and motherhood that circumscribe it” (71).

Central to the poem's exploration of difference is the image of the ripening fruit. "Wadded" and "smothered" is how the poem describes fruit that ripens in a controlled environment; by recalling the speaker's feeling of suffocation in the opening stanza, the language rejects this method of ripening. Better to let the fruit wax and fall in the unforgiving air:

Why not let the pears cling  
to the empty branch?  
All your coaxing will only make  
a bitter fruit-  
let them cling, ripen of themselves,  
test their own worth,  
nipped, shrivelled by the frost,  
to fall at least but fair  
with a russet coat. (*Collected Poems* 20)

As in "Sea Rose," here the poem formally mirrors the physical awkwardness that is produced by exposure to the elements. For instance, the verb "cling" does precisely that, dangling from the end of the first line like a pear suspended from a branch. The word also enacts its own meaning by "hanging on" in a different fashion: it repeats in the fifth line. Moreover, the verbs imbue the stanza with a dynamism that is absent from earlier lines. "Cling," "ripen," "test," and "fall:" they inscribe the corporeal trajectory that is familiar to any reader of H.D.'s verse, in which the unblemished body gradually becomes disabled and/or disfigured by its surroundings. This process, unlike less painful modes of growth, is "fair" in multiple senses. Its violence produces sumptuous textures and colors, epitomized by the blood-hued "russet coat" of the fallen pear, and it honors the natural cycle of death and rebirth. Most significantly, physical imperfection suggests that the person or thing can direct his/her/its own body. H.D. personifies the tree-ripened pears so as to emphasize their agency, an agency that is explicitly contingent upon the experience of deformation. They "ripen of themselves" and "test their own worth" when they sacrifice their smooth skin.

The climactic final stanza issues a plea for such sacrifice to occur in the sheltered garden. Another fierce sequence of verbs- "scatter," "snap," "fling," "spread," "trail," "hurl," "break", and

“leave”- ushers in the picture of an apocalypse writ in petals. The border-pinks are decapitated (“snap off their spiced heads”) and amputated (“spread the paths with twigs, limbs broken off”), and their parts are interspersed with the sort of resinous trees that the speaker fantasizes about in the fourth stanza. She drags “great pine branches” through the orchard, bringing their rough bark into contact with the soft flesh of the melons and quinces. The ending is careful not to privilege one type of vegetation over another. Rather, the words that signal hybridity, such as “with,” “across,” and “half,” are paramount. The conclusion of the poem commands us to search for these crossings, and to find meaning in the strange fruits they produce: “half-trees, torn, twisted/ but showing the fight was valiant” (*Collected Poems* 20). The deformed trees are arboreal versions of the “twisted” and “tortured” individuals that constitute H.D.’s elect in “Trilogy,” for their material distinctiveness necessitates a redefinition of ideal form: human, literary, and otherwise.

While “Sheltered Garden” hints that structural twists are *de rigueur* for modernist art, *Sea Garden’s* “The Gift” audaciously offers up itself as an example of the new poetic standard. The poem, published as “The Last Gift” in *The Egoist* in March of 1916, entreats the reader to accept “this” in lieu of tired love tokens: “pearls- a wrought clasp- a bracelet,” and the conventional poesy that values such objects. The poem’s rejection of precious things ensures that we never learn exactly what “this” is; to define the “this” would be to transform “The Gift” into an ordinary jewel. Yet the metapoetic potential is clear. “The Gift” presents itself as a search for an elastic form, a form that will be able to render scenes of delight *and* distress. It imagines the modernist poet’s dilemma as the aftermath of a traumatic evening: “you know the script- you will start, wonder: what is left, what phrase/ after last night? This:” (*Collected Poems* 16). The remaining voice is that of the broken man or woman:

Do not dream that I speak  
As one defrauded of delight,  
sick, shaken by each heart-beat  
or paralyzed, stretched at length,

who gasps:  
these ripe pears  
are bitter to the taste,  
this spiced wine, poison, corrupt.  
I cannot walk-  
who would walk?  
Life is a scavenger's pit- I escape-  
I only, rejecting it,  
lying here on this couch. (*Collected Poems* 16)

The speaker acts as an emissary from a liminal world, a place where the traditional nourishments of human existence (fruit, wine, health, mobility) are available but undesirable. The fruit, no doubt coaxed from the branch, is abundant but “bitter;” the spiced wine might as well be swill. And prefiguring William Carlos Williams’s observation that beauty “escapes! / never by running but by lying still” (*Paterson* 22), the speaker “escapes” primarily by rejecting the ability to walk. For “The Gift” equates walking with naiveté: “the world is yet unspoiled for you, / you wait, expectant- / you are like the children / who haunt your own steps for chance bits” (*Collected Poems* 16). The only people with perpetually roving, perpetually seeking bodies are the young, the foolish, the uninitiated, and our speaker rejects all of those categories for herself. Lying prone on the couch, she is free to rebuke the excess that surrounds her: the myrtle that “overran” the paths, the “over-sweet” citron-lilies, the “over painted, “over lovely” house. She is also free to envision an alternate life that is somehow “more beautiful, more intense.” The intense life, however, which she associates with Sapphic ritual and mysticism, must be “contrast always to this:” the mundane, the sheltered. The poem is a “gift” because it creates a space where the difficult labor of contrast can be carried out:

a stretch of sand,  
no garden beyond, strangling  
with its myrrh-lilies-  
a hill, not set with black violets  
but stones, stones, bare rocks,  
dwarf-trees, twisted, no beauty  
to distract- to crowd  
madness upon madness.

Only a still place

and perhaps some outer horror  
some hideousness to stamp beauty,  
a mark- no changing it now-  
on our hearts. (*Collected Poems* 18)

Like the last stanza of “Sheltered Garden,” which envisages the blending of two landscapes, the ending of “The Gift” creates a complement for the overabundant garden. The resulting terrain is deformed at every turn, and so is the poem’s structure. Whereas the lines describing the garden gently “slope” and laze into each other, the lines about the ugly land are halting, pebbled with commas. The grammatical inelegance, in concert with repetitions like “stones, stones, bare rocks” and “madness upon madness,” transforms these two stanzas into the poem’s own disfiguring, indelible “mark.” The final stanza validates the shift that has occurred: “I send no string of pearls,/ no bracelet- accept this” (*Collected Poems* 18). In contrast to the interrogative opening lines, here the “gift” is a directive: “accept this.” The phrase also might be read as “except this,” which suggests that the “this” is a remainder, an enduring object, an exceptional object. Having facilitated a meeting between the ordinary world and its opposite, the poem is all of these things.

“Pursuit,” one of the lesser-known poems in *Sea Garden*, figures the poetic search for intensity as a hunt. The violent “stamps” in “The Gift” become literal here; footprints are treasured currency in “Pursuit,” whose speaker counts and catalogues the tracks of her quarry. Each print is a point of contingency:

But here  
a wild-hyacinth stalk is snapped:  
the purple buds- half ripe-  
show deep purple  
where your heel pressed.

A patch of flowering grass,  
low, trailing-  
you brushed this:  
the green stems show yellow-green  
where you lifted- turned the earth-side  
to the light:  
this and a dead leaf-spine,

split-across,  
show where you passed. (*Collected Poems* 11)

Noticing that her prey has passed through a blaze of wild-hyacinth, the speaker pauses to examine the material evidence of the passage. What she discovers is that the contact, far from destroying the flower, actually enhances its beauty. “Purple” in its unadulterated state, its color is concentrated into a “deep purple” where it has been wounded. The reference to “buds” further mitigates the destruction by suggesting potential regrowth. Likewise, the next stanza notes that the tracks have reversed the direction of the grass: the monochromatic stems are now multicolored, and the sheltered parts of the blades have been “lifted” into the light. As in so many of H.D.’s poems, this act of “lifting” reads as a benediction. The prey’s foot thereby becomes a symbol of salutary violence, of the kind of hideousness that counteracts and complicates beauty. Perhaps most intriguing of all is the reference to the “split-across” “leaf-spine.” Coyly evoking the anatomy of a book, the phrase “leaf-spine” offers metatextual proof of modernism’s hybridities. It is yet another example of how H.D. presents *Sea Garden* itself as a split structure, a souvenir of the encounter between two (or more) equally vital aesthetic philosophies.

It is appropriate, then, that “Pursuit” inverts at its midpoint: the landscape, heretofore “pressed” and “brushed” by the fleeing body, etches a few marks of its own into the flesh of the prey. He/she is subjected to the same physical violence that he inflicted upon the flowers, and a striking parallelism emerges:

This is clear-  
you fell on the downward slope,  
you dragged a bruised thigh- you limped-  
you clutched this larch.

Did your head, bent back,  
search further-  
clear through the green leaf-moss  
of the larch branches? (*Collected Poems* 12)

The “bruised thigh,” which recalls the “deep purple” of the hyacinth that succumbed to his/her pounding feet, joins the poem’s litany of battered stems. The prey’s “bent back” head also mirrors the “lifted” patch of grass that the speaker honored in an earlier stanza. These corporeal deformities are significant because they suggest a common lineage between branch and body, and in doing so they undercut the poem’s extant structures of meaning. Now the prey’s leg both stamps and *is* stamped; it is at once beautiful and hideous. The disappearance of these various binaries permits an otherworldly intervention. The prey’s body, having become a record of the extraordinary chase, must be preserved: “for some wood-daemon/ has lightened your steps. / I can find no trace of you/ in the larch-cones and the underbrush” (*Collected Poems* 12). The poem is saved concurrently, fading to its conclusion as the speaker loses the trail, and thereby ensuring that the “pursuit” will be eternal. Just as the seashore’s figurative power is inseparable from the image of the stubborn rose, the prey’s successful (albeit narrow) evasion of the speaker permits the metaphor of the hunt to retain its effectiveness.

The significance of *Sea Garden*’s botanical deformations is manifold. As I have shown, reading H.D.’s broken flowers as disabled bodies gives us a new mode of interpretation, one that does not depend solely upon her biography, nor upon the frameworks of feminist criticism, nor upon the unqualified modernist histories in which H.D. appears as Imagism’s it girl. With disability as a conceptual paradigm, we are reminded that the experiences of contact and contrast are *always* integral to H.D.’s art, and we become aware of the extent to which even her most seemingly rigorous forms are tempered by moments of fluidity and openness- and vice versa. *Sea Garden*’s structural contingencies foreshadow her later work in ways that are vital but seldom acknowledged by anyone, including H.D. herself. Despite its reputation for uncompromising clarity, the collection reveals a poet who was working through an aesthetic quandary not unlike Lo-fu’s in *Notes*: how to develop an art that would adapt to and incorporate the varied bodies around her. *Sea Garden*, which

challenges the sort of creative proscriptions that became synonymous (however inaccurately) with Pound's Imagism, is not part of a patrimony that must be escaped or overcome; H.D.'s vaunted sensitivity to the extraordinary body, and particularly to its artistic potential, originates here.

It is equally crucial to recognize that the contingencies in *Sea Garden* are not opposed to the modernist poetics of the period, or even to Imagism in particular. For in naturalizing the notion of physical difference, in persuading her reader that "contrast always" is an accurate and vivid motto for modern life, H.D. also naturalizes the idea of formal difference. This, of course, is a quintessentially modernist achievement. Years before T.S. Eliot pleads for judicious metrical breakage in "Reflections on *Vers Libre*," poems like "Sheltered Garden" and "The Gift" anticipate his point: they protest literary structures that eradicate productive oppositions. It is precisely *Sea Garden's* investment in disability that makes the protest so effective, because it calls attention to the intrinsic paradox of the modernist project itself. H.D. affirms that modernism's symbolic power is derived from its commitment to showing difference, contrast, distance; when the potential for difference vanishes, so too does the *raison d'être* of modern art. The difficult calculation, as a number of modernists discovered, is determining the point at which one's commitment to difference becomes counterproductive and dogmatic: for instance, the point at which verse becomes so "free" that it no longer resembles verse at all, or the point at which a setting becomes so wild that it loses any semblance of delicateness. *Sea Garden* seems keen to avoid such a fate. It is why a poem like "Pursuit" must end with the prey barely eluding the hunter, or why "Sheltered Garden" ultimately cherishes the material proof of a "fight" rather than the image of an unsheltered garden. It is why a poem like "Sea Rose" is visually stunted but aurally lush. And it is why it is entirely fitting that *Sea Garden* is published a few years beyond Imagism's record year of 1912-13. Her lyrical flowers, while still redolent of the Imagist experiment, received the chance to test their own worth.

“Your chastened hearts,  
your empty frames,  
your very bones  
still serve  
to praise my name.”  
-from “Ancient Wisdom Speaks,” 1943

*I could not bear to shut out sound*, she said. It was the height of the London Blitz, and the city had instituted a pilot program to offer earplugs to its besieged inhabitants. On September 27, 1940, officials distributed the devices throughout the metropolitan area, along with instructional leaflets that encouraged Londoners to “prevent the shattering effect of noise on nerves” (Harrison 108). Many of the residents had tried and abandoned their own makeshift earplugs by the time the civil authorities acted, and an estimated 90% of London’s population opted not to wear the government-issued devices; as Mass-Observation historian Tom Harrison put it, they preferred “to listen to possible death.” Or to quote a city resident: “with them things in, you’d never know if you was copping it or you wasn’t.”<sup>53</sup> H.D., who remained in her Lowndes Square flat during the war instead of fleeing to the relative safety of the United States, sided with the majority of her fellow Londoners on the earplug issue.<sup>54</sup> The raids were making her ears bleed, but she refused to follow the government edicts at first. And while she eventually *did* start wearing earplugs during the bombings, her initial embrace of the bombs’ sensation was typical of a woman who enjoyed courting potent

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<sup>53</sup> See the section “A Question of Ear-Plugs” (Harrison 108-110) for further Mass-Observation accounts of the earplug controversy.

<sup>54</sup> See Taylor’s chapter “Responses to a World Crisis (1932-46)” for a discussion of H.D.’s work with the Mass-Observation Archive. H.D. wrote of her contributions to the project: “I liked the feeling of being anonymous, but with a directed purpose, the feeling that in case of war or certain political trouble, I would in some way, have made a statement that linked on the human doctrine and human behaviour” (qtd. in Taylor 150). Rachel Blau DuPlessis, in acknowledging about her own literary debt to the “poetics of Mass Observation,” briefly mentions H.D.’s Mass-Observation piece on the coronation of George VI in 1937 (“Haibun: Draw Your Draft” 127).

forces.<sup>55</sup> In Albert Gelpi's introduction to *Notes on Thought and Vision*, for instance, he recounts how William Carlos Williams once watched H.D. caught in the middle of a thunderstorm, utterly transfixed and utterly unworried about the possibility of being struck by lightning.<sup>56</sup> Poor Williams was also present for an incident in which H.D. wandered out into the ocean and stood in the surf until it reportedly "beat her senseless."<sup>57</sup> Being in London during the Blitz was tantamount to reliving such beatings on a daily basis. H.D.'s letters to Marianne Moore from the fall of 1940 take a perverse delight in the "constant hammering" of the bombs, and she documents the ecstasy of survival in the form of an illness narrative: "every new morning is like a return from a bout of fever...and strangely I, personally, and others who have been able to stick it, seem to feel more alive and physically stronger than for years" (qtd. in Hollenberg, *Between History* 18). Penned out of this fever of siege, H.D.'s poetry acquires an unparalleled relevance and urgency during this period. Her modernist opus *Trilogy* is especially renowned for its portrayals of wartime ruin and its matching formal daring; the poem's engagement with deformed entities, corporeal and incorporeal alike, conveys both its mythical aspirations and its political trenchancy.

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<sup>55</sup> Eileen Gregory writes about H.D.'s refusal to wear earplugs in her essay "Poetry and Survival: H.D. and Carolyn Forché" from *H.D. and Poets After*. See pp. 266-67.

<sup>56</sup> Louis Martz also uses the anecdote in his introduction to the definitive *Collected Poems*: "[Williams] tells of a walk that he took with H.D. through the countryside near her home outside Philadelphia, where Ezra Pound and he (especially Ezra) used to visit often during their student days. A thunderstorm arose, and Williams looked for shelter. 'We were at the brink of a grassy pasture facing west, quite in the open, and the wind preceding the storm was in our faces...instead of running or even walking toward a tree Hilda sat down in the grass at the edge of the hill and let it come'" (xiii).

<sup>57</sup> Georgina Taylor provides a context for these vaguely masochistic anecdotes. She writes that H.D. was part of a cadre of women writers "whose interest lay in exploring the masochistic and the sadistic within the self...H.D. writes: 'am I a masochist? Up to a point, it must have been my Will to be deserted. It must have been my will to be destroyed, to that I could go on to the star-nebula, H.D.-H.D. It is all in my Trilogy, 1945-1950.' Again, in a letter to Bryher in 1932 she admitted, albeit jokingly, that she possessed a 'low sadistic side', and it is largely such a sadism that formed the basis of her explorations in her work throughout the 1930s and early 1940s" (165).

Yet her other compositions from the 1930s and 1940s are no less thoughtful in their responses to the carnage around her. I will return to *Trilogy* later, but for now it is these poems, particularly the 1941 poem “R.A.F.” and the incantatory verses of “The Dancer,” that constitute my focus. “The Dancer” and “R.A.F.” show H.D. resurrecting the symbol of the disabled limb from *Sea Garden* and exploring its poetic import within a somber new context. Here many of the limbs in question are explicitly human, and the allure of their otherness is mitigated by the realization that they have been deformed by global violence. At the same time, however, the poems collapse the causal distinctions between the various disabled limbs, so that the shared fact of physical difference ultimately supersedes the question of origin, the question of how the limbs became disabled. The central dilemma in these poems is familiar to anyone acquainted with disability studies: how to acknowledge the sanctity of an individual’s experience, while advocating an identity politics that transcends the merely personal. In their persistent attempts to communicate and/or empathize with the disabled figures around them, H.D.’s speakers demonstrate the difficulty, and, some might argue, the impossibility, of achieving this dualism. Her later poetry, then, advances a proto-disability theory wherein she explores the difficulties of forming an imagined community around the idea of physical difference.

“The Dancer,” a thirteen-part composition that sits uneasily between a lyric and a long poem, is a record of this struggle. The poem was published along with “The Master” and “The Poet” in a September 1935 issue of *Life and Letters Today*. Obviously, the publication date places “The Dancer” well before *Trilogy* and H.D.’s other verse from the early 1940s, but the poem nevertheless anticipates her war poetry in its approach to embodiment. As in *Trilogy*, here disability as literary metaphor coexists with disability as lived phenomenon. H.D.’s notion of poetic subjectivity is indebted to both realms. Not only are the poem’s modernist fantasies of breakage anchored in depictions of disabled human bodies, but the speaker identifies herself (or himself) as a

member of a marginalized group as well; specifically, a marginalized group whose deficiencies are corporeal in nature. “The Dancer” begins with an encounter between two creatures from opposing lands:

I came far,  
you came far,  
both from strange cities,  
I from the west,  
you from the east;

but distance can not mar  
nor deter  
meeting, when fire meets  
ice or ice  
fire;

which is which?  
either is either;  
you are a witch,  
you rise out of nowhere (*Collected Poems* 440)

We see beings who, for all of their differences, are united via their common “strangeness:” the ways in which they contrast each other are less significant than the idea that they are both outsiders and visionaries. The “witch” in them, their supernatural power, makes “which is which” seem irrelevant.

Facile categories of gender fall away as well:

I am a priestess,  
I am a priest;  
you are a priest,  
you are a priestess; (*Collected Poems* 440)

The chiasmic structure of the lines suggests that the two figures are simultaneously male *and* female, and moreover it depicts this physical doubleness (and potential hermaphroditism) as an embodiment of their omniscience. More specifically, positioning the self as “outside” of life’s mundane traffic creates a space for exchange and identification with other marked beings. In section II of the poem, the speaker articulates this singular type of fellowship:

I am perfectly aware,  
perfectly cold;

a girl clutches her lover's wrist,  
I do not care,  
(I am perfectly aware of what you are doing,  
of what seeds you are sowing)  
I know what this youth thinks,  
what nerve throbs in that old man,  
how that wan soldier  
back from the last war,  
feels healing, electric, in a clear bar,  
where an arm should be;

nothing is hidden  
from me; (*Collected Poems* 441)

The speaker professes to be a disciple of perfection, with phrases like “perfectly aware” (repeated twice) and “perfectly cold” emphasizing his/her detachment from the surrounding chaos. Yet the relentless process of watching and judging is sustained by contact with people who have physical deficiencies. In appreciating the dancer’s corporeal grace, the speaker acquires the capacity to speak to and *for* those whose bodies have been destroyed. This move foreshadows the speaker’s acknowledgment of her own ungainly feet in the subsequent stanzas, and it grants the disabled a privilege that is often denied them in literary representations: the privilege of complex feeling. The old man’s withered appearance, for instance, does not obviate his sensory powers, for his nerves still “throb” with his perceptions of the world around him.

Even more intriguing is the speaker’s depiction of phantom limb syndrome in the war veteran: “how that wan soldier/ back from the last war/ feels healing, electric, in a clear bar/ where an arm should be.” While the speaker refrains from naming or diagnosing the symptoms, the image of an amputee soldier who feels sensation in his nonexistent arm is a clear allusion to the experience of phantom limb, and it capitalizes upon the fact that the disorder was very much in vogue during H.D.’s career. As Dr. Joseph Herman writes in “Phantom Limb: From Medical Knowledge to Folk Wisdom and Back,” the first known print reference to phantom limb occurred in the 16<sup>th</sup>-century, but the affliction was largely ignored by the medical community until the late nineteenth/early

twentieth century. The resurrection of phantom limb in medical discourse coincided with the development of modern neurological science, as doctors began to study how human beings experience the embodied self. Of chief importance was the idea that humans possess “the ability to extend their sense of self outside of the body.” Herman quotes Henry Head, author of a neurology textbook published in 1920:

It is to the existence of ..."schemata" (in the brain) that we owe the power of projecting our recognition of posture, movement and locality beyond the limits of our own bodies to the end of some instrument held in the hand. Without them we could not probe with a stick, nor use a spoon unless our eyes were fixed upon the plate. Anything which participates in the conscious movement of our bodies is added to the model of ourselves and becomes part of these schemata...(77)

In “The Dancer,” the potential for extension of the self “outside of the body” manifests itself through the psychological phenomena of recognition and identification. The soldier’s experience of phantom limb syndrome generates an “electric” current that goes beyond his body, a current that the speaker professes to “know.” The speaker’s authority is concentrated in this extracorporeal knowledge. Moreover, the war veteran’s phantom limb troubles the customary image of the early twentieth-century amputee, in that the focus upon the visual disruption of disability (“where an arm *should* be”) yields to the primacy of shared feeling. As readers, we are encouraged to marvel at the speaker’s capacity to transcend the essentialisms of ordinary cognition. The poem suggests that our paradigms for apprehending the body are unreliable at best, and so too is the language with which we record our efforts; labeling a man “old,” for instance, denies his humanity and his complexity, and assuming that an amputee can no longer feel is equally reductive. Phantom limb syndrome, as an experience that contravenes what Head calls “the model of ourselves,” is thereby presented in a positive fashion. It is one of many subversive forces in a poem that favors non-normative modes of expression.

The speaker’s self-identification as a disabled being is made explicit in section VI, where the dancer’s unimpeachable artistry becomes a foil for the speaker’s more hesitant creative efforts. This

act of claiming an alternate perspective is critical to the poem's mission as a disability text. Otherwise, the speaker's portrayal of non-normative bodies would seem like a standard moment of ableist ventriloquism, with the able-bodied speaker voicing the experiences of his disabled subjects while they remain silent. "The Dancer" resists this pattern via the speaker's disclosures, or outings, if you will. While the dancer's feet move with precision, the "feet" that comprise the structure of the poem are characterized as unsteady; the speaker writes that her "song-note falters," and she is incapable of joining the other artists who accompany the dancer.

I claim no precedence among the flute-players,  
for I could not maintain  
presence enough to stand,  
there at your feet  
with the rest,  
making that music. (*Collected Poems* 444)

As in so many poems, the ability to "stand" is associated with eloquence. The dancer's feet produce a "poem/ writ in the air" (442) that contrasts with the speaker's crippled, and hence unheralded, verses. Yet the speaker's inability to identify with those who have steadier feet does not attenuate the force or the endurance of her language. On the contrary, the poem's mysterious prophet says:

"you are my arrow,  
my flame;  
I have sent you into the world;  
beside you,  
men may name  
no other;  
you will never die;

nor this one,  
whom you see not,  
sitting, sullen and silent,  
this poet." (*Collected Poems* 445)

Our speaker, whom he pointedly describes as "sitting" rather than standing, achieves the same immortality as the dancer. In fact, the prophet's monologue quite literally grants the last word to "this poet," a curious choice in a passage that supposedly is dedicated to the dancer alone. His

invocation of the poet is also notable in that he recognizes a defect in the physically splendid dancer: she is blind to the poet's presence. What appears to be a straightforward tribute to the dancer, then, is actually a complex interrogation of art, embodiment, and the systems with which we classify and/or diagnose individuals. Like the gender trouble in the opening stanzas, the various images of disability disrupt the poet/dancer binary in such a way that the poet's defects become advantageous. Moreover, the poem itself, which praises verse structures that defy ordinary categorization ("I can not name/ the Doric nor the Ionic/ measure"), represents a counterpoint to the dancer's faultless performance. The formal variation conveys the sensation of rapture, which for H.D. is a consequence of breakage and deformity; hence the poem's call for "words that men may pause / and kneel, / broken / by this pulse we feel" (448). The word "broken," separated from the rest of the phrase, embodies the idea of desirable fracture. To claim brokenness is to become empowered as a writer and a witness.

#### *H.D.'s Ribbon For Valor*

In World War Two-era London, the notion of a shocking, humbling "pulse we feel" became synonymous with experience of blitzkrieg. One of the most striking psychological effects of the Blitz, along with the air war known as the Battle of Britain, was the erasure of the distinction between the home front and the front lines. As historian Amy Helen Bell has observed, London itself became the conflict's most visible battlefield. Bell repeats a popular example of gallows humor to illustrate her point: "Thank Gawd," said one old lady, as she inspected the ruins of her local shopping street. "Thank Gawd Jack's safe in the army!" (13). Tom Harrison cites a similar example from the Mass-Observation Archive, quoting a Cockney resident who exclaims, "We're in the front line! Me own home- it's in the Front Line" (76) while surveying the post-raid damage. The potential for urban civilian casualties also ensured that the so-called "knowledge gap" (Bell 13)

between those at the front and those at home was nonexistent in England; unlike the Great War, in which those who fought in the trenches were the privileged observers (consider Aldington's lengthy missives to H.D. about the state of the front), the record of this conflict would be generated by soldiers *and* ordinary civilians alike.<sup>58</sup> In broadening the category of "combatant" to include Londoners such as H.D. herself, the Blitz upset numerous established systems of cultural, military, and literary authority. The bombardment of London transforms everyone into a war poet. H.D.'s poem "R.A.F." is her most explicit claim to this mantle, for the poem insists that the wartime "there" of London is as perilous as the skies above the English Channel.

The poem re-enacts the dissolution of the civilian/soldier divide by imagining a conversation between two train passengers, one of whom is a convalescing R.A.F. pilot. A series of miscommunications transpires as the two attempt to find mental and physical balance, and these failed dialogues and silences become the emotional center of the poem. Though the emphasis upon defective verbal communication is a familiar modernist tactic, H.D. puts it to novel use. Unlike, say, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," where the lines "that is not what I meant at all / that is not it, at all" are emblematic of modern alienation, "R.A.F." concludes that human fellowship *arises* from

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<sup>58</sup> The epistolary archive of H.D. and Aldington offers a detailed account of many of the traumas and diseases associated with trench warfare. For instance, Aldington writes of his bout with "pyrexia," or trench fever:

I daresay you've heard of it, this new mysterious disease which is going over Europe, especially the armies, like the old plagues. Fortunately it is quite harmless and only lasts a few days- one has a dreadful head and back ache, legs like lead, a high temperature and a rapid pulse. (69)

He details his fitful recovery in a series of letters from June of 1918, telling H.D. that "the little fever is progressing normally," and commemorating the end of his bed-rest with an allusion to Quasimodo in *Notre Dame de Paris*:

I've got over my little fever fit and am walking about again, rather slowly as my head feels a little queer still and my legs shake a bit. But I'm better, much better; very terribly tired of the war though and rather tending toward discouragement. There is just the hillside and its trees and the white bend in the road that one seems to cling on to frantically as the man in Notre Dame clung to the bending lead gargoyle. In the end of course one must let go but for the time being...(70-1)

our inability to articulate precisely what we mean. Disability is central to the poem's depiction of this process, for it reminds us that our bodies generate a language of their own: a language that can be just as expressive as the oral or the written word. The pilot's speech impediment does not discourage the speaker from interacting with him, nor does it render him incapable of communication:

pretending not to notice  
  
his stammer  
and that now, in his agony to express himself  
  
his speech failed  
altogether,  
  
and his eyes seemed to gather  
in their white-heat  
  
all the fires of the wind,  
fire of sleet,  
  
snow like white-fire pellets,  
congealed radium, planets  
  
like snow-flakes:  
and I thought,  
  
the sun is only a round platform  
for his feet to rest upon. (*Collected Poems* 485)

The instant when his "speech failed altogether" marks the beginning of their psychic union. What she sees in him are all the shapes and colors of her own wartime experience: the falling bombs figured as a blizzard of "pellets," the impact blast as a fiery wind. The language also anticipates the images of architectural collapse that predominate in *Trilogy*, where the "hissing shingles" on the roof herald the revelation of "other values" (*Collected Poems* 520) and other types of human bonds. It is her intimate familiarity with war that allows her to be receptive to the veteran's pain, as she comes to recognize her own "agony to express herself" in another:

I had said,  
I want to thank you,

he had said,  
for what?

I had said,  
it is very difficult

to say what I want,  
I mean- I want

personally to thank you  
for what you have done;

he had said,  
I did nothing,

it was the others;  
I went on,

for a moment infected with his stammer  
but persistent,

I will think of you  
when they come over,

I mean-I understand- I know-  
I was there the whole time

in the Battle  
of Britain. (*Collected Poems* 486-7)

The speaker's disablement is a potent metaphor for the cultural recalibrations that occurred during the Blitz. Part of the reason she stammers is that there is no precedent, and therefore no appropriate vocabulary, for the experience of the urban air raid. What she wants to say, what she means to say, is that she has been at war, too. She thanks him not as a civilian but as a fellow combatant, and so the usual euphemisms and bromides of the civilian populace are insufficient. She must explain herself and justify her halting claim to fellowship: "I was there the whole time / in the Battle / of Britain." A simple statement, though it affirms her veteran status in a few subtle ways. For instance, using the word "in" rather than the more equivocal "during" or "for" affects the tenor

of her confession: it converts her from mere observer to participant. The phrase “the whole time” also confers legitimacy upon her experience. To say that she was in London “the whole time” allays the possibility that the speaker was a transient witness or gawker. This suggests that the poem itself is a front line, a place where the traditional roles of protector and protected are effectively blown apart.<sup>59</sup>

The concept of the contagious stammer is essential to the poem’s depiction of a society in flux. The speaker describes her inarticulacy as pathological: “I went on, / for a moment infected with his stammer.” Echoing lines from *Trilogy*’s “The Flowering of the Rod,” in which the speaker declares that “this reality / is infectious- ecstasy” (*Collected Poems* 584), here the metaphor of human connection as disease initiates a re-examination of how modernity affects intimacy. Early twentieth-century literature is rife with examples of unwelcome intimacies: accidental pregnancies, cases of venereal disease, scatological horrors, the press of another rider on an overcrowded subway or bus, thin tenement walls that fail to muffle the sound of neighbors who are fighting. As Georgette says in *The Sun Also Rises*, “everybody’s sick.” Certainly the moment of infection in “R.A.F.” has the potential to become one of those regrettable encounters. Yet the experience is a positive, if solemn, one. In H.D.’s poetry, the contagion itself *is* the communication. Their stammer, which H.D. approximates with dashes, reinforces their shared memory of war, and it offers an alternative to the banalities of ordinary human interaction. Indeed, the speaker seems grateful that she has caught his disease:

Fortunately, there was no time

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<sup>59</sup> See also Collocott’s chapter “What is (not) said’: Lesbian Poetics,” in which she analyzes H.D.’s fragmentary aesthetic and discusses how H.D. alludes to “the ritual practices associated with heroic sacrifice” (209) to link masculine acts of comradeship and warfare with female heroism “in resistance to societal pressures.” Collocott’s reading of the poem “I said” is especially apropos here, as she notes how H.D.’s speaker claims a typically male code of martial conduct and courage for women: “‘it seems to me Greek rather / to live as you lived, / outwardly telling lies, / inwardly without swerving or doubt’” (qtd. 210).

for lesser intimacy

than this-  
instantaneous flash,  
recognition, premonition, vision;  
fortunately, there was no time,

for the two-edged drawn-swords  
of our two-separate twin-beings  
to dull. (*Collected Poems* 488)

The “instantaneous” nature of the flash means that the processes of recognition, premonition, and vision, ordinarily experienced as discrete phenomena that occur over a period of time, are compressed into a single moment (and into a single line). Identifying with the other wounded “twin-being” produces a charge that is not unlike the skeleton-rattling force of a bomb. Yet this shock does not register as an alienating experience, but rather as a type of privileged “intimacy.” The contagious stammer is the embodiment of that intimacy, and as such, it transcends its purely pathological associations. It is a “fortunate” gift instead of an affliction to be treated or eradicated.

The oral bond between the speaker and the pilot is mirrored in their physical movements. The train car setting enables H.D.’s speaker to pursue the sort of voluntary trauma that so fascinated H.D. herself. Noting that the pilot is uncomfortable and “huddled up” in his opposite corner, the speaker performs a temporary self-disablement so that he might extend his legs a bit:

I said, put your feet up here  
and I wedged myself tighter

and dozed off in the roar  
and the train rumble.

VII

In the train jolt  
our knees brushed

and he murmured, sorry:  
he was there;

I knew in the half-daze,

in the drug and drift,  
the hypnotic sway  
of the train, that we were very near;  
  
we could not have been nearer,  
and my mind winged away;  
  
our minds are winged,  
though our feet are clay. (*Collected Poems* 489)

Their joint discomfort is expressed through their literal joints, with the knee-to-knee “jolt” prompting the speaker to meditate on the nature of their closeness. The knee bump, which is an attenuated version of the violent contact produced by a bomb, affirms that they “could not have been nearer.” Fittingly, the poem’s structure is transformed by this realization; their contact is felt in the rare instance of rhyme that draws together the last six lines. The rhyme also augments the emotional force of the paradox with which the section ends: “our minds are winged,/ though our feet are clay.” By linking physical immobility with creative potential, the poem is able to move from the specific scenario in the train car to a more general pronouncement about the mysteries of the body-soul relationship. A concurrent tense change from past to present (“our minds *are* winged”) quietly encourages this shift from the particular to the general. Their two “wedged” bodies are emblematic of the great human “defect:” mortality. Ultimately, even those who can walk and run (and speak without stammering) have feet of clay.<sup>60</sup>

This is not to say that “R.A.F.” does not acknowledge key differences between those who identify as disabled and those who do not. What distinguishes the disabled from the non-disabled is the capacity to detect value where others merely see imperfection or fragility. In “R.A.F.,” that

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<sup>60</sup> Willis suggests that H.D. associates mental “winging” with the sounds of the air raid: “the bombs H.D. heard were mostly unmanned airplane bombs...called alternately V-bombs, flying bombs, buzz bombs, and ‘doodlebugs.’ They had their own combustion engines and in flight made a ‘duv-duv-duv’ sound followed by a silence just before impact...the repetitive “duv” sound of German bombs was perversely akin to both the lyric aspect of poetry H.D. describes as a ‘wing beat’ and the symptomatic ‘beating in her brain’ (*TTF* 13) that prompted her to seek analysis” (89).

beauty takes the form of a supernatural vision that recalls H.D.'s own visits to Scilly and the Greek isles:

My thoughts in the train,  
rushed forward, backward...  
  
there was the camellia-bush  
the stone-basin with the tiny lilies  
  
and the pink snails; I remembered  
the Scilly Islands off the coast,  
  
and other islands,  
the isles of Greece... (*Collected Poems* 491)

As in *Notes on Thought and Vision*, where contact with an unruly "limb" produces an epiphany, the speaker's encounter with the pilot initiates a series of images that coalesce into a global vision. This figurative peregrination, from Cornwall, to Scilly, to Greece, and then back to Britain and the rings of Stonehenge, is what allows the speaker to claim that she, like the pilot, knows how to fly. The poem does not just describe her mission; it *is* her mission, her dogfight, the space wherein she acquires the right to call herself a war veteran. Consequently, the rhetoric of camaraderie and identification grows bolder as the poem concludes:

the invisible web,  
bound us;  
  
whatever we thought or said,  
we were people who had crossed over,  
  
we had already crashed,  
we were already dead.

XII

If I dare recall  
his last swift grave smile,

I award myself  
some inch of ribbon

for valour,

such as he wore,  
  
for I am stricken  
as never before,  
  
by the thought  
of ineptitude, sloth, evil  
  
that prosper,  
while such as he fall. (*Collected Poems* 491-92)

Returning to the concept of contagion, the ending asserts that her recollection of the pilot causes the speaker to be “stricken.” The act of inscribing the memory in verse, then, is presented as analogous to his failed flight, with his “fall” and her “recall” thematically and formally bound. This analogy has significant implications for how H.D. envisages human disability. By granting the speaker a figurative ribbon of valour, the poem audaciously declares that poetry, too, is a war. It is an event that endangers wholeness, an event that challenges the social formulae with which we understand disablement and disfigurement. And just as a returning soldier embodies the distinctive narrative of his war (the tactics, settings, weapons), the persona’s claim to historical and poetic legitimacy is made manifest through physical difference. Jim Ferris has remarked that one fundamental feature of disabled poetry is that it “seeks to redefine what it means to have and be a body in the world.” “R.A.F.,” which describes the singular fellowship between those whose legs and tongues defy the bounds of normalcy, does precisely that.

*“Non-Utilitarian” Modernism: Trilogy*

A resilient skeleton: it is a central image in H.D.’s “The Walls Do Not Fall,” and it is also an evocative symbol for the state of modernist literature in the early 1940s. For by the time the first parts of *Trilogy* were published in 1944, the avant-garde posturings of high modernism had been consumed by fire, leaving behind a battered frame of a movement. *The Waste Land* gave way to *Four Quartets*. Auden’s “September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1939,” that exemplary eulogy for a time of “clever hopes,” ends

with a prayer for a flame of affirmation and purpose, a flame to counteract the unfortunate consequences of modern ambition.<sup>61</sup> Then there is the inferno of *Trilogy*, which transmogrifies and reshapes the modernist pursuit of a more visceral language into a philosophy with decidedly different aims. Intensity of expression, once an end in and of itself, becomes the founding principle of an ambitious new order, in which “twisted and tortured” individuals develop a coded poetics to protest their marginalization, to redefine the experience of living with a “marked” form, and to challenge the idealization of social constructions such as health, sanity, and productivity. The result is a text that is “progressive” rather than “overtly political;” it asks, “what will we do with the past we have inherited- and what are we to make of those accounts that have not yet been heard?” (Willis 103).

As the poem crisscrosses temporal and geographic boundaries, moving from the immediate aftermath of the bombs in central London to a mythical Levantine past, H.D. records the evolution of what she clearly believes to be a timeless poetics of pain. So *Trilogy* is a war poem, yes, but perhaps not in the way it is ordinarily imagined to be. It conceives of human history as a conflict between those who are deemed normal and those whose bodies are routinely condemned for being “out of line” (*Collected Poems* 586). Moreover, although the specific terms and tools of condemnation may change, the poem points out that “so-called progress” does not ameliorate the systematic disenfranchisement and silencing of the disabled. If anything, *Trilogy* implies that the deification of certain types of “progress” *prevents* us from recognizing alternate narratives of embodiment,

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<sup>61</sup> See Friedman’s chapter on *Trilogy* in *Psyche Reborn* for a discussion of H.D.’s late poetics vis-à-vis the work of her male contemporaries, including Eliot, Yeats, Pound, and Williams. Her summary of Williams’s “androcentric” aesthetic in *Paterson* is especially worth noting, as it reiterates many of the standard readings I will refute in my study of Dr. Paterson’s physical limitations. Friedman claims that Williams “anthropomorphized the fertility of mind-less nature in the passive figure of the Goddess, reclining in the form of the city’s beautiful but often desecrated park. Out of the dualism of nature and culture arises the active figure of Paterson: the man Paterson whose mind is a chaos of ideas, the poet-questor Paterson who seeks order through union with nature...” (211).

including (but not limited to) the various disability narratives in the poem itself. The epic scope of the poem also reinforces this message. *Trilogy's* diffuse, iterative structure, which Elizabeth Willis describes as “flexible repetitions and *mutations* of the lyric” (102) (italics mine), is itself an endorsement of the nonlinear body. Despite some critics’ protestations to the contrary, the overwhelming range of “mutations” is what gives the poem its vigor, not to mention its sense of historical gravitas. *Trilogy* frequently and frankly acknowledges its own inability to provide a definitive form of salvation. As Nathaniel Mackey writes in his essay entitled “Palimpsestic Stagger,” the poem is driven by “apprehensions of desertion or destitution...[there is] a sense of unremitting extremity, susceptible to endless revisitation and variation” (230-31).<sup>62</sup> Yet the absence of a definitive form does not undercut the value of the poetic endeavor. It simply means that the poem demands another mode of reading. A “persistent” mode, the speaker in “R.A.F.” would say.

In order to dismantle the belief that normalization is an unequivocally positive phenomenon, H.D. presents a formidable succession of bodies (human and otherwise) that are, to borrow Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s term, extraordinary. Accordingly, this section traces a few of these extraordinary forms through the poem. I will attempt to historicize these representations, and to frame them in a way that elucidates how and why H.D.’s metaphorical commitment to extremity becomes aligned with a politics of physical difference at this juncture in history. Her writing suggests that the redefining of the normal body is a fitting culmination of modernism. By

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<sup>62</sup> Adalaide Morris, comparing H.D.’s work with that of Mackey, similarly emphasizes the “improvisatory, self-reflexive, over-the-top” style of *Trilogy*; in its “operatic extremity,” it creates a “radical modernism” that “challenges ‘natural,’ ‘realistic,’ or scientific epistemologies by situating language as an entity with properties of its own rather than as an instrument to be used neutrally or transparently to transmit a pre-given communication. At the same time, however, radical modernism challenges postmodern notions of epistemic randomness by insisting on a fit- albeit, in Mackey’s words, a ‘rickey, imperfect fit,’ a ‘discrepant engagement’- between word and world” (*How to Live* 189). Neither Morris nor Mackey, however, considers how disability studies might inform our understanding of “operatic extremity,” particularly in those poems where material extremities (legs, hands, branches) are foregrounded.

appropriating the rhetoric and the techniques of early modernists, the documentarians of World War Two are able to present the disabled body as a site of cultural negotiation, and to envision a postwar society in which those with so-called “impediments” are not marginalized or silenced.

*Trilogy*’s “The Walls Do Not Fall” is a tribute to the power of brokenness, with H.D. claiming that radical art flowers out of corporeal destruction. Many Blitz chronicles invoke this notion of fertile ruin; the Mass-Observation Archive is a trove of jokes, puns, pastiches, verses, songs, sketches, etc. in which ordinary citizens celebrate the abnormalities and disfigurements of war. Consider the shop owners who turned their misfortune into a cheeky advertising coup:

Both contemporary and historical accounts of the Blitz delight in quoting from the humorous signs placed on bombed-out stores: “more open than usual” is often cited. One window used modernist metaphors in its response to the destruction of London. A twenty-year-old male civil servant drew a picture in his diary of a shop window in Coventry Street on October 18, 1940, in which a mannequin’s naked and upside-down legs protruded from a placard that read “BLAST.” Not described in the diary, but next to this segment of the display was a damaged female mannequin wearing a gas-mask and torn clothes. (Bell 23)

Regardless of whether or not H.D. ever passed the shop window in question (likely not, Coventry Street being somewhat of a hike from Knightsbridge), the anecdote does recall *Blast* magazine and the Vorticist interlude of the early twentieth-century, when Pound and Wyndham Lewis figuratively “blasted” England for its “climate” and its assorted “sins and infections.” The ironic resurrection of this term in the window display, particularly when paired with the image of a dismembered mannequin, suggests that wartime has literalized the modernist language of yore in such a way that metaphorical breakage (or blasting) cannot be divorced from the lived experience of trauma, of disablement. Or, in the words of one observer, blitzed London is like a man with soon-to-be missing limbs:

Dear London! So vast and unexpected, so ugly and so strong! You have been bruised and battered and all your clothes are tattered and in disarray...we know what is coming to you. And our eyes slip along your old untidy limbs, knowing that the leg may be gone tomorrow, and that tomorrow the arm may be severed. Yet

through all this regret and dread pierces a slim clean note of pride. “London can take it.” (qtd. in Bell 25-6)

Like the mannequin’s askew legs in the BLAST display, the image of London as a double amputee re-imagines physical difference as a point of “pride” rather than a deficiency. The metaphor is at once symbolically vivid *and* attuned to the real dangers of the raids. A Londoner would read it and instantly be reminded of the possibility that his or her flesh-and-blood leg might be “gone tomorrow,” obliterated right along with London’s imaginary one.

*Trilogy* is quite cognizant of its place in the tradition of war reportage. For instance, the opening of “The Walls Do Not Fall” features a familiar conflation of the cityscape and the human body. Just as the bombs estrange people from their familiar surroundings, turning “known street-corners” into indistinct ruins where “we know not nor are known,” the experience of physical pain remaps an individual’s sense of his or her own body: its shapes, its capacities, its limitations, its identifying marks. *Trilogy*’s speaker articulates this corporeal transformation with the same awed tone that she uses to describe the sheared-off walls and ceilings:

Pressure on heart, lungs, the brain  
About to burst its brittle case  
(what the skull can endure!):

over us, Apocryphal fire,  
under us, the earth sway, dip of a floor,  
slope of a pavement

where men roll, drunk  
with a new bewilderment,  
sorcery, bedevilment:

the bone-frame was made for  
no such shock knit within terror,  
yet the skeleton stood up to it:

the flesh? it was melted away,  
the heart burnt out, dead ember,  
tendons, muscles shattered, outer husk dismembered,  
yet the frame held: (*Collected Poems* 510)

Though the poem begins with a portrait of architectural collapse (“the fallen roof / leaves the sealed room / open to the air”), it metamorphoses into a reflection on the amazing resiliency of the human body. The parenthetical exclamation of “what the skull can endure!,” the remark about the skeleton standing up to forces that exceed its normal function: these are signs that the speaker’s sense of her own embodiment has been altered profoundly. What the body was “made for” is eclipsed by the revelation of what it *can* do under duress. The physical dismemberment in the final stanza above has a liberating effect, for it is proof that the body’s potential only emerges when it is compromised.

*Trilogy*’s vision of embodiment is not without controversy, though, and the poem repeatedly confronts those who espouse a more conservative position. H.D.’s representation of this debate is where she makes her boldest pronouncements about the hegemony of medicine and science in the twentieth-century.<sup>63</sup> To defend the role of poetry in a skeptical postwar age, she assumes the guise of a person who, having a “dead shell” for a body, is condemned as worthless. The ensuing diatribe against utilitarianism is fierce:

So we reveal our status  
with twin-horns, disk, erect serpent,  
  
though these or the double-plume or lotus  
are, you now tell us, trivial  
  
intellectual adornment;  
poets are useless,  
  
more than that,  
we, authentic relics,

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<sup>63</sup> Morris’s chapter “Strange Attractors” gives a comprehensive account of H.D.’s attitudes towards the sciences. Morris argues that until 1927, H.D.’s relationship with her botanist father compelled her to seek an assimilative dynamic between science and poetry: “the poet takes up a position as a practitioner who contributes to knowledge in his or her own right. The claim of this strategy is not that poetry is *like* science but that in some fashion it *is* science” (*How to Live* 159-60). By the time H.D. wrote *Trilogy*, however, she had dismissed her father’s influence, opting instead for a “mythopoeic” vision that led her away from classical sciences and towards the emerging disciplines of chaos theory and quantum mechanics.

bearers of the secret wisdom,  
living remnant

of the inner band  
of the sanctuaries' initiate,

are not only 'non-utilitarian',  
we are 'pathetic':

this is the new heresy;  
but if you do not even understand what words say,

how can you expect to pass judgment  
on what words conceal? (*Collected Poems* 516-17)

The speaker believes that poets constitute a culturally significant minority, for their experience in war has endowed them with “authenticity” and omniscience. These gifts are manifested in what she calls the “living remnant:” the poets themselves are fragmented beings, identified by their unorthodox corporeality. Yet society ostracizes those who are marked in such a fashion. Because their forms are “useless” and “non-utilitarian,” they are dismissed as “pathetic.” *Trilogy* combats this fallacy by re-establishing the distinction between objective appraisal and judgment. The poem shows us that the apparent synonymy between utility and “goodness” is a social construction: a seductive one, but a construction nonetheless. The poem is therefore able to introduce the radical possibility that a form (or body) can be both “non-utilitarian” *and* valuable.<sup>64</sup> Unsurprisingly, H.D.

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<sup>64</sup> H.D. writes about the origin of these lines in a letter to Norman Holmes Pearson. Though it is undated, Donna Krolak Hollenberg places it between letters from October and November of 1943: “now here it is, very stark and written at the last- a sort of vindication of the writer, of the “scribe”- as VIII for instance, that was really “tapped out” in a sort of exhilaration of rage at the stupidity of someone who had written me from USA- and I do not blame them at all- someone who did not know and could not, what we were doing, how we had moreover been waiting for this to happen for years and years before it happened- some nice and kind and perceptive person, who remarked, apropos of a not-very-good poet and some not-very-good poems, that after all, it did seem strange to think of anyone troubling to try to express world-issues now, it was really so “pathetic.” It was the word “pathetic,” the sort of patting-on-the-head, the suave patronizing manner- that got me...But it was an English girl who made me still madder- with a letter to B[ryher] at *L[ife]* and *L[etters]* questioning the status of the poet, the writer in the future world-reconstruction- that is the “non-utilitarian” touch in the same VIII” (*Between History* 32).

implies that modernist language is an ideal example of how such a form might work. The lines “but if you do not even understand what words say,/ how can you expect to pass judgment/ on what words conceal” acknowledge a tendency to devalue words that are unintelligible, or unfamiliar, or resistant to categorization. Yet just as the disfigured poets are not intrinsically “pathetic,” alien words are not intrinsically bad. Such language exists beyond ordinary patterns of comprehension, but it does not merit disapproval or censure.

Those who do understand what is “concealed” in words share a tacit bond, and *Trilogy* draws provocative parallels between their confraternity and the relationships that disabled individuals create with each other. Of particular importance here is the poem’s acknowledgment of pride, pride in an identity that others regard as shameful or abnormal:

So, in our secretive, sly way,  
we are proud and chary  
  
of companionship with you others,  
our betters, who seem to imply  
  
that we will soon be swept aside,  
crumpled rags, no good for banner-stuff,  
  
no fit length for a bandage;  
but when the shingles hissed  
  
in the rain of incendiary,  
other values were revealed to us,  
  
other standards hallowed us;  
strange texture, a wing covered us...(*Collected Poems* 519-20)

Or consider the zealotry that imbues these lines:

we are these people,  
  
wistful, ironical, willful,  
who have no part in  
  
new-world reconstruction,  
in the confederacy of labour,

the practical issues of art  
and the cataloguing of utilities. (*Collected Poems* 522)

*Trilogy* is nothing less than a new constitution, the “we the people” for a fledgling nation of misfits. The poem records the development of a robust subaltern identity, and it does so by invoking the now-customary tactics of civil revolt: emphasis upon subversive, “sly” modes of communication, re-appropriation of terms that promulgate intolerance, and an embracing of deviant bodies and behaviors.<sup>65</sup> Specifically, the language suggests that the “others” are engaged in a fight to dictate the terms of their own materiality. The descriptions- “crumpled rags,” “no good for banner stuff,” and, most intriguingly, “no fit length for a bandage”- foreground a culture’s obsessive search for material to fuel its economic, martial, and medical progress.<sup>66</sup> According to H.D., poets do not fit such undertakings; they aspire to a world vision that is characterized as “other” (twice) and “strange.” Their poetry, in turn, is best understood as a radical discipline: inassimilable, resistant to the dominant values of its time, and generated by a sublimely gorgeous violence that is “rare as radium” (*Collected Poems* 520).

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<sup>65</sup> Miranda Hickman explicitly links H.D.’s views of her visionary powers to her disdain for conventional poetic and intellectual canonicity. H.D., she notes, is keen to redefine her creative capacity as “not just an *inferior ability* (italics mine) as measured against standard ‘intellectual endowments,’” but rather as a different skill that generates alternative, perhaps superior, knowledge: “...other people are respectable, officially endorsed, canonical, where she is “uncanonically seated,” but she suggested that she is nonetheless strong, perhaps even stronger than they” (229). It is in *Trilogy*, I suggest, where H.D. transforms this notion of being “uncanonically seated” into a literal, corporeal affair.

<sup>66</sup> The language here echoes H.D.’s description of Freud’s speech in *Tribute to Freud*: “the tone of his voice, the singing quality that so subtly permeated the texture of the spoken word, made that spoken word live in another dimension, or take on another color as if he had dipped the grey web of conventionally woven thought and with it, conventionally spoken thought, into a vat of his own brewing- or held a strip of that thought, ripped from the monotonous faded and outworn texture of the language itself, into the bubbling cauldron of his own mind in order to draw it forth dyed blue or scarlet, a new color to the old grey mesh, a scrap of thought, even a cast-off rag, that would become hereafter a pennant, a standard, a sign again, to indicate a direction, or fluttering aloft on a pole, to lead an army” (*Tribute* 69).

*Trilogy* addresses its own formal stubbornness at a few key interludes. The most salient is towards the end of “The Walls Do Not Fall,” when the speaker promises the “elixir of life” to those who abandon “sterile logic, trivial reason” (533). How does it feel to drink this elixir? Well, the poem pours out a tantalizing sample for us, offering a head-spinning brew of images, metaphors, and allusions that all defy rational thought:

obvious sentiment,  
folder round a spiritual bank-account,  
  
with credit-loss too starkly indicated,  
a riot of unpruned imagination,  
  
jottings of psychic numerical equations,  
runes, superstitions, evasions,  
  
invasion of the over-soul into a cup  
too brittle, a jar too circumscribed,  
  
a little too porous to contain the out-flowing  
of water-about-to-be-changed-to-wine  
  
at the wedding; barren search,  
arrogance, over-confidence, pitiful reticence,  
  
boasting, intrusion of strained  
inappropriate allusion,  
  
illusion of lost-gods, daemons;  
gambler with eternity,  
  
initiate of the secret wisdom,  
bride of the kingdom,  
  
*reversion of old values,  
oneness lost, madness. (Collected Poems 533-4)*

In terms of its poetics, the section mirrors the strange bodies that populate H.D.’s myths. The diction is exhaustively worked. She overuses words such as “over” and “too,” and the italicized chant in the final two lines is an echo of the previous section (“illusion, reversion of old values, / oneness lost, madness”). Rhyme proves to be an excessive force as well. For instance, the triple end

rhyme of “imagination/equation/evasion” is carried over to the first word (“invasion”) of the next line, thwarting the traditional patterns of sound and creating a bizarre singsong effect. The poem also moves irregularly between various images of uncontrollable bodies and substances: an unbalanced bank ledger, a roving, “unpruned” imagination (which, incidentally, recalls the parable of the unpruned branch in *Notes on Thought and Vision*), cryptic marginalia, an overflowing wine bowl, a forced allusion. The futile attempt to metaphorize what she calls “the infinite” enhances the sense of formal disability. By performing incoherence, and by flaunting its own representational deficiencies, the text is able to express the power and the dynamism of an incoherent world.

*Trilogy*'s observations become increasingly self-reflexive in the following stanzas:

Depth of the sub-conscious spews forth  
too many incongruent monsters

and fixed indigestible matter  
such as shell, pearl; imagery

done to death; perilous ascent,  
ridiculous descent; rhyme, jingle,

overworked assonance, nonsense,  
juxtaposition of words for words' sake,

without meaning, undefined; imposition  
deception, indecisive weather-vane;

disagreeable, inconsequent syllables,  
too malleable, too brittle,

over-sensitive, under-definitive,  
clash of opposites, fight of emotion

and sterile invention-  
you find all this? (*Collected Poems* 534-5)<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> H.D. writes to Pearson of this section: “XXX, XXXI, XXXII may seem rather long- but oddly, XXXI, XXXII actually did tap-off all in one- rather startled me to just write all that in one fell swoop and made no changes, save for ordinary tidying-up- it rather startled me, so I let the thing stand...but it does snap-shut neatly- with (XXXII) ‘you find all this?’” (Hollenberg, *Between History* 33).

The profusion of poetic jargon confirms the similarities between the poem's structure and the abnormal body. What emerges is a guide to *Trilogy's* many stylistic offenses, ranging from vowel-on-vowel crime ("overworked assonance") to inexplicable strings of words that don't have any obvious relation to each other ("juxtaposition of words for words' sake"). It encourages promiscuous couplings: ascent/descent, malleable/brittle, over-sensitive/under-definitive. Moreover, the poem is guilty of harboring "too many incongruent monsters," presumably a reference to the worms and serpents and horned creatures that embody the "secret wisdom" of the poets.<sup>68</sup> "You find all this?" it asks, challenging the reader to locate each moment of transgression. Yet the question is more than a metapoetic gesture. *Trilogy* subsequently claims that the process of rebuilding should encourage greater understanding of abnormal forms, both in terms of their aesthetic value and their historical relevance. The poem's indeterminacies *do* communicate a political message.<sup>69</sup> "We were caught up by the tornado/ and deposited on no pleasant ground," H.D. writes, and it is upon this unpleasant ground that we learn to critically evaluate our beliefs about what constitutes normality. When that occurs, we can discern patterns and meaning and value in things that once seemed deviant: excessive rhyme, "nonsense," random "jottings," architectural rubble, poetic madness. *Trilogy* puts it thus: "we noted that even the erratic burnt-out comet/ has its peculiar orbit" (*Collected*

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<sup>68</sup> The "indigestible" shells and pearls signify material monstrosity as well. In her article on clitoral metaphor in the work of H.D. and Virginia Woolf, Simpson writes: "the meanings and associations of pearls and gems are mobile, proliferating, ambiguous, and contradictory, just as pearls themselves are palimpsestic in structure and gems multi-faceted. As such, pearls and gems signal a resistance to a denotative mode and seem to suggest a recognition that representations of anatomy are always culturally coded and inscribed" (38).

<sup>69</sup> von Hallberg's introduction to "Libertarian Imagism" is helpful here. He points out that many formal principles of early modernism- "fragmentation of syntax, the breakdown of meter, the banishment of discursive language-" were neither devoid of political ideology nor representative of essentialist political positions. Instead, "the truth is more that formal procedures were understood by poets and readers as implicitly but importantly expressive of political ideas" (63).

*Poems* 535). The line, which evokes earlier descriptions of a human form burned by “apocryphal fire” (*Collected Poems* 510), implies that the erratic body has an orbit, too. Corporeal awkwardness is actually a kind of grace; grace in the sense of fluidity of form, yes, but also a divine grace, a conviction that all bodies (heavenly and otherwise) operate in accordance with their own unique function in the cosmos. The poem’s symbolic recovery of the “burnt-out comet” portends a new spirit of interpretive generosity. Surely H.D. hoped that the peculiar forms of *Trilogy* would be afforded the same kindness.

It is important, however, to remember that disability is no mere formal metaphor for H.D., nor is it a titillating aesthetic fetish. *Trilogy*’s engagement with the idea of disability is nuanced, historically aware, and attuned to the contradictions and disputes that arise whenever a group demands recognition. Its sensitivity to such matters is what distinguishes it from those texts where disability is a convenient but ultimately one-dimensional device. As befits a poem composed of antinomies, each romantic image of disability has its opposite: a disabled figure who is equivocal about his/her physical difference, or an account of ongoing social discrimination against non-normative bodies. She writes of people who are destroyed by their disabilities: “we have seen how the most amiable, / under physical stress, / become wolves, jackals” (*Collected Poems* 536). The poem even confesses that those who are proud of their “twisted” bodies experience moments of pain, discomfort, and frustration:

Yet we, the latter-day twice-born,  
have our bad moments when

dragging the forlorn  
husk of self after us,

we are forced to confess to  
malaise and embarrassment;

we pull at this dead shell,  
struggle but we must wait

till the new Sun dries off  
the old-body humours; (*Collected Poems* 521)

Despite its considerable poetic force, there are junctures where the rhetoric of empowerment fails. The image of a person “dragging” and “pulling” her dismembered “husk” along is a reminder of how the lived experience of disability can, and often does, conflict with the figurative possibilities of disabled form. There are times when poetry makes nothing happen, when we are forced to admit that all of the beautifully amputated lines in the world cannot lessen the agony of, say, phantom limb pain. Yet for H.D., this contradiction is why the choice to love one’s disabled body anyway, to be proud of that body, and to have faith in that body, is so precious. With *Trilogy*, H.D. acknowledges that the extraordinary body’s privileged status is a hard-won achievement. It is a deliberate stance rather than a given condition. And in a historical period where people were beginning to question the provenance of the “normal” body, her adoption of this stance was culturally and poetically invaluable. “Rare as radium,” indeed.

## Chapter Three

### The Perfectly Adequate Poetry of William Carlos Williams

“At times there is no other way to assert the truth than by stating our failure to achieve it.”

-William Carlos Williams in a letter to Marianne Moore, June 19, 1951

“It was a *lost* dream, a bridges and heights / and headed home dream, but too long, / far too long and mazy and all the wrong tone.”

-August Kleinzahler, “Self-Portrait”

In his 1997 poem “Self-Portrait,” northern New Jersey native and Williams heir August Kleinzahler fashions a travelogue out of local detritus, turning a sense of urban alienation into the stuff of eighteenth-century South Pacific adventure. Exiled from himself, stuck in what Kleinzahler has called “city nature”- in a train station in Queens, near the singularly bizarre littoral zone of marshland and concrete where the borough disintegrates into Jamaica Bay- the speaker likens his situation to that of “Captain Cook in the Marquesas” (176), so that the insistently local, insistently postmodern “self-portrait” acquires temporal and geographical heft. And this, too, is the process of Williams’s *Paterson*, though Williams needs about two hundred more pages of verse to arrive there: by the time Paterson heads home at the end of Book Four, emerging from the sea and taking stock of his clothes (“got into a pair of faded / overalls, slid his shirt on overhand (the / sleeves were still rolled up) shoes, / hat...”) in much the same way that Kleinzahler’s speaker records his mismatched shoes and plaid flannel shirt, the poem that begins with “only one man- like a city” (7) has asserted its awesome proportions, shifting form and even genre to encompass an array of men, women, places, and times.

Kleinzahler himself has acknowledged that his relationship to Williams transcends the mere biographical fact of their shared New Jersey origins. In an interview with *The Paris Review*, Kleinzahler opined that in tandem with Pound, Williams is the “other great pillar of modernism,” and he cited Williams’s re-conception of the poetic line as an integral component of his legacy:

Williams concentrated more on the visual aspect of the thing, how the poem appeared on the page, altering the line and typography to highlight certain elements, and especially to create a sense of movement; to get one involved in the activity of perception, what happens along the way in the assemblage of a line: the hesitations, reversals, veerings. He understood that the mind and world are restless and disinclined to strike an artful, self-conscious pose for very long.

“The hesitations, reversals, veerings:” Kleinzahler means that Williams’s writing enacts uncertainty both at the level of perception and at the most fundamental level of prosody. For Williams, the minute refinements and adjustments and changes and mental stumbles that one makes when processing an experience must be translated into the mechanics of the line; the incredible variety of moments in the perceptual process, and the relative equality of these moments, is what ensures poetic vitality. And Williams’s poems are always revising, always probing the tenacity of metaphor, always working to generate the feeling of being rhythmically and existentially out of time. Or, as Charles Altieri has said of Williams’s approach: “he [changed] his fundamental attitude toward sensation, learning to treat it as an active mode of attention and apprehension rather than simply a passive register of existence” (41).

This democratization of the perceptual process, if you will, is also the quality that makes Williams’s poetry resolutely American. The phenomenological restlessness somehow coexists with a profound devotion to staying on one’s plot of ground. World traveler Kleinzahler confesses in “Self-Portrait:” “Now I was far from anything, Jersey especially. / I always head back to Jersey in a pinch” (177). One can imagine Williams replying: “Well, why the hell did you leave in the first place?” His 1914 poem “Invitation,” as formally spare and compact as the “flat blue basin” upon which the townspeople live, broaches these issues of locality, movement, and epistemological doubt:

We live in this flat blue basin,  
We and the meadow things, my townspeople,  
And there beyond where the snow lies  
In ochered patches float the smoke-grey towers.  
Has it never struck you as curious  
That we do not all leave this place?  
Surely we are blest

With a noteworthy wisdom, my townspeople!  
Let us be conscious and talk of these things. (*Collected Poems Vol. I* 40)

Embedded within the ultimate line of “Invitation” is a gentler anticipation of the famous line that would come to be regarded as Williams’s maxim: “Say it, no ideas but in things.” The commitment to acts of speech, to “talking” and “saying,” even at the expense of making the listener uneasy (with brash questions like “has it never struck you as curious / that we do not all leave this place?”), affirms the value of plain talk. At the same time, the poem acknowledges (and incorporates) the pleasures of wide-ranging, contradictory thought. The seemingly circumscribed parameters of the town, much like the spartan, repetitive lexicon of the poem, prove deceptive: with a gist of “consciousness,” one needn’t go anywhere (especially not to the abysses of Kennedy or Newark “Liberty” International Airport, August), to discern originality in landscape, in language. On the contrary, the local “things” and the “townspeople” contain the spirit of “invitation,” which is coaxed out by the poet. Within the space of the poem, they can encourage imaginative freedom, curiosity, heightened consciousness. Such phenomena are crucial in a modern world where “Americans are saying little of all they feel pressed to say, the *paideuma* intense but tacit” (Kenner 513).

While “Invitation” might be a nascent expression of Williams’s concrete brand of modernism, the aesthetic developments evinced in more mature works like *Sour Grapes* and *Spring and All* in no way diminish his faith in local “wisdom.” Indeed, the intervening years, marked by war, the expatriate exodus, publication of *The Waste Land*, and the attendant stratospheric rise of Eliot’s literary reputation, crystallize Williams’s determination to find poetry in familiar, American ground. His philosophy likewise persists amid the equally robust cultural vectors generated by the Great Depression and New Deal politics. As he explains in a 1932 letter to Kay Boyle, because it “[makes] its form of what it finds,” (*Selected Letters* 131), poetry appears to be a “social eye,” but he

refuses the demand for art that makes social commentary its primary subject.<sup>70</sup> Wary of the increasingly tenacious belief that poetry had to articulate explicit sociopolitical aims, Williams expounds on the relationship between poetic innovation and locality to defend his position: “I live where I live and acknowledge no lack of opportunity because of that to be alert to facts, to the music of events, of words, of the speech of people about me. As well as to the speech of the muse, the intangible perfection of all excellent verse” (*Selected Letters* 131). Clearly Williams was aware of the fact that to some, his stubborn embrace of the local looked like a deficiency, a “lack of opportunity,” or, perhaps even more damning in the political climate of the early 1930s, a sign of ideological disengagement or apathy.<sup>71</sup>

### *Redefining Locality*

Yet for him, what appears to be parochialism is actually a form of alertness, and overtly political art (however well-intentioned) is suspect because it privileges abstraction over the anchoring, immediate material of lived experience. Consequently, some topics are thought to have greater intrinsic worth than others. Attention to the local is essential because it destroys the illusory hierarchy: “everything we know is a local virtue- if we know it at all- the only difference between the force of a great work and a lesser one being lack of brain and fire in the second” (*Selected Letters* 130). He reiterates this notion throughout his essays and correspondence. Here, for instance, in an exchange with Marianne Moore in the mid-1930s: “always, to me, poetry seems limitless in its

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<sup>70</sup> Michael Szalay, in *New Deal Modernism*, characterizes Williams’s political stance as a form of “left localism” that, while progressive, was fundamentally hostile to excessive government spending and the reforms of the New Deal. For instance, he quotes the lines from Book I of *Paterson* where Williams asserts, “My doors are bolted forever (I hope forever) against all public welfare workers, professional do-gooders and the like,” and he refers to the famous money-obsessed prose sections in the middle of the epic (143).

<sup>71</sup> For further discussion of Williams, form, and his engagement with the politics of the 1930s, see Rozendal and von Hallberg’s “The Politics of Description: William Carlos Williams in the Thirties.”

application to life. If a man were able there is no subject or material which can rightly be denied him. But if he fails, he fails through the lack of power not through the material he employs" (*Selected Letters* 156). The "greatness" of art, then, is not determined by the nature of the materials, which is always neutral, but rather by the poet's fidelity to his perceptions. And what is local, then, is not just New Jersey: it is what is apprehensible.

Such a vision of modernist poetic achievement is radical for a number of reasons. Charles Altieri has pointed out that devoting so much attention to locality can be risky; speaking of Williams's 1912 essay "French Painting" (like "Invitation," the essay is proof that even early in his career, Williams was intent on revolutionizing notions of perception), Altieri remarks that "jingoism may seem a large price to pay for a new realism" (42). Similarly, Kenner writes that the "no ideas but in things" credo is a "statement of American limitation" (510). In the 1946 poem "A Unison," for example, Kenner compares the poem's "grove of gnarled maples" to the temple at Delphi, a beloved subject of poets throughout history (including Williams's good friend and contemporary H.D.), and he asserts that one consequence of the poem's locality is, paradoxically, a sense of vagueness: "Of Delphi a poet might write with some assurance, since it gathered an articulated cult. The American poet ("no ideas but in things")...can only note the mysterious grove of trees, and writing for them the chorale they would enunciate, call his poem 'A Unison'" (512). The substitution of the "gnarled maples" for a traditional, mythical structure that connotes poetic communion can leave the reader feeling bereft. These statements affirm the fragility of the materialist aesthetic. Unlike what Williams referred to as the "hard" "detailed" knowledge (*Selected Letters* 194) of literary history, as pursued by Eliot et. al., the epistemological payoff in Williams's poetry can be comparatively difficult to discern: when is a vision fresh, and when is it simply madness, blindness, a manifestation of what most would regard as "limitation?" Williams suggests that producing modernist art necessitates constant negotiation of these boundaries. As he writes in

a 1913 letter to Harriet Monroe: “*Poetry* I saw accepting verse of this kind: that is, verse with perhaps nothing else in it but life- this alone, regardless of possible imperfections, for no new thing comes through perfect. In the same way the Impressionists had to be accepted for the sake of art’s very life- in spite of bad drawing” (*Selected Letters* 24).

By the time he is in the midst of composing *Paterson*, Williams obviously has come to understand and accept the perils of his mode. In the same letter where he contrasts his labor with that of the “hard students of literary history,” he argues that the search for alternative forms of knowledge sometimes requires appearing faulty or inadequate to those who continue to enforce a less subjective epistemological ideal:

Of course the conscious writers, who know everything and must keep everything in perfect order...they despise me. But I say and I believe it is true that in despising me (microscopic as I am) they are in reality despising an essential part of the poetic process, the imaginative quota, the unbridled, mad- sound basis of all poems. They won’t even consider me or what I intend. So be it. The academy must be served.  
(*Selected Letters* 194)

There isn’t time enough in the world to address that last line, though suffice it to say that Williams was a prescient man, because there are still those in the academy who believe that modernist poetry begins and ends with *The Waste Land*. What is most significant here is Williams’s insistence upon what we might call the force of the fragile. It is instructive to think of the famously strange last lines from “The Rose:” “The fragility of the flower / unbruised / penetrates space” (*Collected Poems Vol. I* 196). The poem emphasizes that it is the “fragility” of the flower (our inability to know it) that revives its metaphorical potency and hence enables it to combat obsolescence. Within the space of the poem, what seems like a material limitation is shown to have potential value. It’s a familiar modernist strategy, wherein, say, Imagist concision becomes a sign of force rather than paucity, or the apparently tenuous construction of a Woolfian sentence engenders space for nonlinear processes of return and memory: “negative conditions are not simply stages for...positive realizations; rather the negatives are to be seen as exercising an equal energy” (Altieri 44). Or, as Edward Said describes

the force of artistic “negativity” in his appraisal of Beethoven’s late style, “irresolution and unsynthesized fragmentariness are constitutive, neither ornamental nor symbolic of something else” (12). A poem such as “The Rose” makes plain the constitutive nature of negativity by formally concentrating energy in its various “ends,” from the enjambed lines to the final evocation of blankness or “space,” and by choosing to engage with material that others regard as creatively expired: in this case, it is the rose, whose reign as a symbol of romance has “ended” in triteness.

*Disability and Williams’s Inclusive Poetics*

As Ann Mikkelsen posits in her work on *Paterson* and the pastoral genre, Williams’s emphasis upon the poetic value of all materials doesn’t merely open his work to such materials, but rather implicitly encourages an examination of how society assesses the relative worth of things. The myriad examples of grime and waste that smudge the poem, for instance, urge the reader to “embrace the foulness of the world, and, experiencing it, to consider how determinations of foulness and purity are socially constructed- and can thus be re-imagined through poetry” (603). Just as picking up the “obsolete” rose offers a lesson in how to regenerate a symbol that society has incorrectly deemed moribund, the narrator’s trek through urban waste in *Paterson* proves the steep artistic cost of silencing or ignoring that which appears spent, imperfect, sick: “- the times are not heroic / since then / but they are cleaner / and freer of disease” (230). Paradoxically, it is considered “heroic” to retain some dirt and disease because these imperfections prove the limited nature of what *all* of our bodies can do, the limited nature of what we can know, the limitations of communicating with language.

One key consequence of this view, I argue, is that Williams’s poetry becomes genuinely inclusive of phenomenological experiences that are outside of the norm, and so a range of bodies (and minds) are granted space to exist freely there. The inescapable presence of these

phenomenologically “extraordinary” bodies encourages a re-examination of how we determine what constitutes a “normally” functioning body, and it questions the considerable cultural value attached to the bodies that subscribe to this category. After all, if one of the characteristics of modernism is an abandonment of realism, and a gradual shift from art that values “descriptive accuracy” to art that celebrates “evocative adequacy” (Altieri 42), then what does this mean to those for whom “descriptive accuracy” is not a possibility or a priority? Given the fallibilities of human perception, aren’t we all a bit impaired? Is any art ever truly “descriptively accurate?” From a disability studies perspective, Williams’s modernism is historically relevant because it asks such questions. Rather than bifurcating humanity into the categories of able-bodied/disabled, he asserts that all people live along a dynamic continuum of the “peculiar” (*Autobiography* 362). Yet we tend to be ignorant, sometimes willfully so, of this fact- that is, until something (in Williams, some “thing”) alerts us to the immense cultural and personal sacrifices we’ve made to promulgate the fiction of our own normalcy. Disabled bodies often initiate this process of reckoning in Williams’s poetry.<sup>72</sup>

Moreover, Williams’s own extensive lived experience with disability, which includes both his work as a family physician and the continuation of his writing career following a series of strokes towards the end of his life, ensures that his artistic engagement with disability is an intricate one. Linda Welshimer Wagner’s commentary about Williams’s integration of real speech into *Paterson*, and the differences between Williams’s technique and that of his contemporaries, provides a useful analogy here:

...he confronted again and again the problem of using real speech so that it was more than local color. There was a great difference between Williams’s concept of “using” speech, of *finding* the character through his speech, and of just mixing in

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<sup>72</sup> For further perspective on the interrelatedness of modernist form and disability studies, in particular in Williams’s *Spring and All*, see Durgin. He notes that “what should equally interest the hitherto separate discourse communities of radical modernist poetics and disability studies is that the tradition of poetics of radical interdependence does not necessarily stem from the work of poets who, directly or indirectly, identify as disabled” (169).

flavorful slang or idiom as relief in more formal poetic diction. Here is the most important difference, I believe, between Williams and poets like Vachel Lindsay, Sandburg, Cummings, the earlier Eliot, and even Whitman who- for all his interest in the American character- always managed to write in the same heavily traditional vocabulary. (xii-xiii)

Just as Williams sees local speech as valuable American material, something to be documented, heard, worked through on its own terms and on its own ground, so his presentation of disability in poems like *Paterson* transcends mere tokenism and what is known as the “crip ex machina” phenomenon (Davidson 15). The disabled and deformed figures aren’t there to provide enlightenment for the able-bodied, or to symbolize diversity, or to signify the trauma of modernity. At the risk of sounding Steinian, they are there because they are there. The disabled are in his office, in his delivery room, in the seat next to him when he goes for speech therapy following his stroke. And merely being there means that their experience of the world is worthy of poetry. For Williams’s vision of the poet’s task is to “take things as it finds them- mutilated and deformed” (qtd. in Mariani 497) and, instead of correcting these things, or omitting them because they are unreliable poetic material, to offer them to his reader in a form that will illumine their previously unacknowledged potential. His commitment to the “found” allows him to assign disability a prominent poetic role without fetishizing, romanticizing, metaphorizing, or generalizing.<sup>73</sup>

So it is not just that Williams encourages us to become attuned to those moments in our own perceptual processes that we miss or suppress for the sake of order, normalcy, sanity- though his poetry surely does this. Rather, his poems, especially *Paterson*, draw the reader into intimate contact with characters whose various illnesses, monstrosities, deformities, etc., have led to the *systematic* devaluation and de-legitimization of their bodies and their language; their perspectives are

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<sup>73</sup> See Schuster. Schuster’s redefinition of the primitive is instructive: for Williams, “the primitive is not, as is often the case for modernists, one who has access to the primal, natural meanings of words. Rather, here, the primitive means the ability to undergo imagination as an experience in itself, bridging the gap between mind and world” (128).

often suppressed or covered by the duller, albeit more accessible, language generated by what we would call normative discourse, or what Williams called “common news” (*Autobiography* 360). The sort of news that “Asphodel” declares is “difficult” to get from poems. Because the injustice is systematic, it demands an epic redress: the celebration of all the “bad habits, perversions, amputations, falsehoods” (qtd. in Mariani 460) that have been censored by history. And because, as Michael Davidson has reiterated in his work on crippled poetics, “matters of aesthetics are deeply implicated in social attitudes towards disabled persons” (7), Williams’s laborious efforts to develop *Paterson*’s “passionately communicable form”—a poetic style that would earnestly and urgently speak to all, with the capacity to transmit feeling as if it were contagious— are part of the project of redress as well. Williams recognized that literary form, particularly epic form, is never ahistorical or apolitical. *Paterson*’s formal irregularities register his disdain for the proliferation of standardized, assembly-line, normative language, or what he called “tinkered phrases,” (qtd. in Mariani 432). “What an unimaginable pleasure it would be to read or to hear lines that remain unpredictable,” he once wrote. Unlike “tinkered phrases,” which sate readerly desire for a sense of completion and epigrammatic truth but ultimately convey nothing, lines that cannot be predicted generate suspense and novelty through their refusal to cohere into a definitive, unified message.<sup>74</sup> His aesthetic

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<sup>74</sup> The matter of *Paterson*’s formal unity is a contentious one. Perloff, who argues that Williams’s career follows an increasingly conservative trajectory as he moves away from the surrealist constructions of earlier works such as *Spring and All*, contends that *Paterson* follows an “orderly plan” (*Poetics* 152); it is, she writes, a “much more ‘closed’ poem than either Williams or his best critics care to admit” (151). Alternately, Paul Mariani’s readings have privileged the poem’s apparent moments of structural openness, the moments where it seems to evoke a “*process* of unfolding, of discovery” (234) rather than a preordained plan. James Breslin concurs with Mariani: the poem, he writes, “[records] the consciousness of its creator, whose dual fidelity to the *world* and to the *poem* constantly forces him to turn back and start all over again” (171). As my chapter will show, I agree with Breslin and Mariani in their assessment of *Paterson*’s relative disorderliness, though not for the reasons they cite. Perloff’s failing seems to me to occur in the unwillingness to interrogate what she sees as the poem’s retrograde “tendency to turn image into symbol” (153). For not only is this tendency present throughout his career, even at Williams’s most avant-garde, “Parisian” moments, but it is less a failure than a conscious strategy. See also the chapters on *Paterson* in *Copestake*.

preference for irregularity acquires still more significance for Williams as he becomes increasingly disabled, as his physical experience of composing poetry is transformed into a process of continual adjustment and prosthetic experimentation; different people, machines, and therapies allow him to engage with the “new” unpredictability of his body in a creatively rich way.<sup>75</sup> This is the story of how *Paterson*, itself a literal product of Williams’s own disability, becomes a five-book, roughly 236-page tribute to the power and beauty of limitation. For Williams to have aspired to a more definitive vision would have been to compromise his faith in the potency of unknowing.

*Your Thighs Might Be Appletrees Whose Blossoms Don't Quite Touch the Sky: Bodies and The Limits of Knowledge*

Williams’s earliest works offer his most succinct vision of the struggle over what kind of epistemological authority would triumph in the modern age, and I want to show how certain types of bodies invariably function as the loci of this struggle. In a number of poems, we witness the construction of a corporeal metaphor, only to see it fail during a multifarious and contentious process of exchange. The speaker’s inability to control the language through which the body (sometimes that of another, sometimes his own) is expressed becomes emblematic of the rifts in modernist aesthetics, as well as proof that the human body itself is very much a contested, in-process site in Williams’s poetry. Part of what is occurring in these poems is Williams acknowledging moments of what we would call intersubjectivity: the notion that an individual’s relationship to his world is one of mutuality rather than hierarchy. Williams is frequently accused of advancing medical paternalism, racism, and sexism in his poetry, but the fact is that the subaltern

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<sup>75</sup> While tracing the history of objectivist poetics in his chapter “Missing Larry: The Poetics of Disability in Larry Eigner,” Davidson briefly asks: “Was William Carlos Williams’s development of the triadic stepped foot in his later career a dimension of his prosody or a typographical response to speech disorders resulting from a series of strokes?” (119).

(and I use that term more broadly than Spivak) bodies he portrays can and often *do* talk back.

Though they may seem verbally and/or physically compromised, these bodies “exercise an equal energy” (44), to borrow Altieri’s phrase; they figure out ways to resist others’ attempts to get them in line, so to speak, and Williams, far from censoring their efforts, turns this resistance into the stuff of his verse.

“Portrait of a Lady,” first published in *The Dial* in August 1920, is customarily read as an example of Williams at his voyeuristic best/worst. The erotic play here cannot be denied, and dangling provocatively through the core of the poem are the legs of an unnamed woman. There is ample precedent in both Williams’s poetry and prose to suggest that legs are used as shorthand for female sexuality. His autobiography perhaps provides insight into the origins of this motif, as Williams’s account of a summer in upstate New York reveals the metonymic nature of his sexual awakening: “Once at a small lake near Esopus, New York, I was deeply in love with a girl’s legs I met underwater there. Their father was suspicious of me” (*Autobiography* 47). The progression of their teenage romance is told in terms of access to the legs: “one rainy day those white legs and I found the barn, with a full hayloft, and under that rattling roof lay quietly together listening...how can a pair of legs defy their father under such circumstances?” (48); “those lovely white legs were hanging in the water side by side with mine, good enough legs for a guy about my shape, moving a little back and forth in the cool lake” (48). The adolescent memories of the lively legs underpin poems such as *Al Que Quiere!*’s “The Old Men,” which begins with a salute to the eponymous beings “who have studied / every leg show / in the city” (*Collected Poems Vol. I* 96). Also in *Al Que Quiere!* is the poem “The Ogre,” written from the perspective of a man who heeds Williams’s advice to appreciate the urban “leg show” while he still can. The speaker addresses a girl presumably on the cusp of womanhood: “little girl with well-shaped legs / you cannot touch the thoughts / I put over and under and around you” (*Collected Poems 1909-1939* 95). The “ogre” then tells the girl that if

exposed to his thoughts, her “petals would be quite curled up,” a double entendre which signals the girl’s impenetrability and yet also anticipates her maturation into a lady not unlike the one in “Portrait,” whose thighs are “petals from an appletree.” Dotage apparently does not quell the leg lechery; the speaker in “The Cold Night,” for instance, a later poem, admires the “round and perfect thighs of the Police Sergeant’s wife.” Most significantly, as I will discuss in more substantive detail later, *Paterson* is rife with references to both male and female legs, including the “scarred” (126) legs of the Beautiful Thing. Carl Eby claims that the proliferation of legs in *Paterson* is a sign of thwarted or taboo erotic encounters: “frustrated voyeurism tends to find outlets by displacing sexual attention from the genitals, and for Williams this displaced attention is almost always directed at the legs” (41).

So one might reasonably ask: what, if anything, redeems these poems from being relegated to the “musings of a dirty old man” pile (and in poetry, it is a vast pile indeed)? If legs are mere stand-ins for unmentionable parts of the female anatomy, then Williams is not doing anything so novel. While I grant that the legs in Williams’s poetry are often sexualized, his keen interest in mutilated, absent, and marked legs suggests that the paradigm of erotic voyeurism is an inadequate model for understanding the dynamics in many of these poems. For Williams, the turn towards the “beautiful thing,” and the ensuing pursuit of evocative language, is often prompted by the realization that our bodies have physical faults and limitations. His initial interest in poetry, for instance, coincides with his acknowledgment that his own body is defective. During a training race in his sophomore year at Horace Mann, Williams is sprinting when he collapses:

The local doctor was called and that ended my running. “Adolescent heart strain” was the verdict. From that time on, I was told, I would never be able to take part in athletics again; the most that I could do would be to take long walks in the country. I had to quit all my hopes, all thoughts of an athletic career vanished, I was, at a moment’s notice, considered to be little better than an invalid. That, too, played a major part in determining my career. Mentally I was crushed...

My first poem was born like a bolt out of the blue. It came unsolicited and broke a spell of disillusion and suicidal despondency. (*Autobiography* 46-7)

Though it seems restrictive at the time, contained within the local doctor's prognosis is the method of composition that would give rise to *Paterson*: it is the "long country walks" through the park, the deliberate revisitation of the same fertile ground, that provides the material of the poem. When he recalls this formative period in a 1950 interview, he makes the association between poetic labor and physical disability even more emphatic:

I even remember the first thing I ever wrote, because it was a sudden...it was a crisis. It was shortly after I had been forbidden to go into athletics, told that I shouldn't undertake anything too strenuous in life. I spontaneously said to myself:

A black black cloud  
flew over the sun  
driven by fierce flying  
rain.

Well, immediately I thought, "That's the most stupid thing I've ever said because, after all, the rain doesn't drive the clouds," so at the same moment I was born a poet and a critic instantly. (Wagner 8)

Williams's suggestion that poetry allows him to narrativize his body's unpredictabilities anticipates one of the major concepts in contemporary disability theory: narrative prosthesis. A term that entered academic parlance following the publication of David Mitchell and Susan Snyder's groundbreaking *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, narrative prosthesis investigates the idea that "all narratives operate out of a desire to compensate for a limitation or to reign in excess...the very need for a story is called into being when something has gone amiss with the known world, and thus, the language of a tale seeks to comprehend that which has stepped out of line" (53). Williams's poems that engage disabled experience, as well as his multiple retellings of the track incident, all qualify as prosthetic narratives, for they question how we deploy language to reorder and revive things that have "gone amiss" and "stepped out of line."<sup>76</sup> Moreover, according

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<sup>76</sup> To allay any doubts that Williams saw his art prosthetically, consider the following quotation from Williams's notes on Edward Dahlberg's novel *The Flea of Sodom*. Paul Mariani writes that "though these notes were focused on Dahlberg's novel, they clearly touched on Williams's own preoccupations as he put the final touches on the poem that had obsessed him for so long. Dahlberg, he said- and we can substitute Williams's own 'Dr Paterson' for Dahlberg here- 'despises

to Mitchell and Snyder, this desire for a textual form of compensation is inextricably entangled with social and historical contexts: “the judgment that a mechanism is faulty is always already profoundly social” (6). This relationship between individual narrative and history is especially important for a poet who works from particulars, for examining and revealing the machinations that render specific bodies, styles, genres, techniques, or writers “faulty” is thereby tantamount to a sociocultural critique.

Yet whereas Mitchell and Snyder’s formulation of narrative prosthesis is a fundamentally skeptical one, meaning that they seek to criticize the very compensatory impulse itself, Williams is more sanguine about the radical artistic possibilities of this tendency. I would argue that it is this prosthetic conception of his art- as a process that locates a “faulty” object and examines it not for the sake of spectacle, but for the sake of comprehension- that saves Williams’s poetry from prurience at times. For example, the complexity of a work like “Portrait of a Lady” reveals that an apparent act of voyeurism is in fact a process of interrogation, and furthermore, it illuminates how Williams’s embodied poetics operate. Our speaker’s opening metaphor seems unobjectionable enough: “Your thighs are appletrees / whose blossoms touch the sky” (*Collected Poems Vol. I* 129). By the third line, however, another voice has intruded to challenge the speaker’s language, to demand more specificity: “Which sky?” Whether this second voice is the voice of the lady, an imagined respondent, or the internal voice of the speaker is unclear, but the effect is unmistakable. The request for specificity, for language and knowledge that is antithetical to the world of blazon and allusion and symbolism, makes the body of the poem by unmaking the initial metaphor that unites the legs and the trees. It has been said that “Portrait” is a depiction of ekphrastic crisis, with “the voyeuristic, masturbatory fondling of the ekphrastic image is a kind of mental rape that may

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the suave language that is used for the blather of our slickness. He wants us to be aware of the difficulties; he is making a thing, a replica, as the maimed make a replica of a lost limb to hang in a chapel where they go for relief and comfort’... ” (623).

induce a sense of guilt, paralysis, or ambivalence in the observer” (Mitchell 38). This reading, however, like so many others, is in part driven by the seductive allusions that beckon from the opening few lines. Craving an external reference for orientation, we are reassured by the other “portrait:” “it helps, of course, to know that the poem probably alludes to Fragonard’s *The Swing*, a sensuous rococo pastoral depicting a young swain delightedly looking up the dress of a young woman on a swing” (Mitchell 38). Yet of course such information does not help us at all, and in fact, the exchange “what / sort of man was Fragonard? / -as if that answered / anything” hints at the vacuity of this knowledge. The actual content of the portrait in question is less significant than the aesthetic failure of allusion.

The devaluation of the initial speaker’s language coincides with the reconstitution of the lady’s body, as the dismembering force of the blazon tradition is turned upon the first speaker. “Ah, yes- below / the knees, since the tune / drops that way” (*Collected Poems Vol. I* 129) acknowledges the traditional head-to-toe trajectory of the swain’s amorous gaze, with the word “drop” intimating that the technique is often deployed mindlessly, uncritically. And it is surely no coincidence that it is at this metapoetic juncture that Williams’s “Portrait” is compelled to “drop” its initial mission. The questions from the second speaker “Which shore?” “Which shore?” grow so insistent that the final (and most poetically relevant) parts of the lady never enter the poem: her feet. The speaker is rendered mute at the exact moment when we would expect the consummation of the blazon: he mutters, “the sand clings to my lips-” (*Collected Poems Vol. I* 129), an image which suggests that his own figurative language (“the tall grass of your ankles / flickers upon the shore”) has come back to distort his own body, and his assured speech has been broken into interjections, interrogations, qualifications: “Agh, petals maybe. How / should I know?” (*Collected Poems Vol. I* 129) The absence of the feet, I want to suggest, also perhaps refers to one of Williams’s chief critiques of allusive modernism: its misuse of feet, of prosody. In *Spring and All*, he attacks what he calls “crude

symbolism,” which is “to associate emotions with natural phenomena such as anger with lightning, flowers with love...such work is empty” (*Collected Poems Vol. I* 188). His poetry will pursue “an escape from crude symbolism, the annihilation of strained associations, complicated ritualistic forms, designed to separate the work from ‘reality’- such as rhyme, meter as meter and not as the essential of the work, one of its words” (*Collected Poems Vol. I* 189).<sup>77</sup> In “Portrait,” the omission of the lady’s feet keeps the allusive voice away from them and thus makes them the sole (hehe) part of her that fully eludes the beautifying, corrective, “ritualistic” language of the initial speaker. They continue their imperfect existence elsewhere, maybe even showing up a few years later in the pages of *Spring and All*: “The imagination, freed from the handcuffs of ‘art,’ takes the lead! Her feet are bare and not too delicate” (*Collected Poems Vol. I* 185). The fight over who possesses the power to control another’s body through language thus represents the climax of the struggle for modernist authority, the question “which sure?” echoing every repetition of “which shore?”. That the poem effectively becomes a portrait of the speaker’s own inarticulacy rather than a portrait of the lady suggests a direct relationship between the adoption of a Williamsesque aesthetic and the experience of disability. The poem’s performance of the narrative prosthetic impulse, in other words, is what enables its radical break from its symbolist origins.

### *Sick Bodies*

The creative possibilities of illness are made explicit in Williams’s two versions of the poem “Last Words of My English Grandmother.” Williams’s grandmother is a recurrent figure throughout his corpus of work, sometimes appearing as herself, sometimes emerging in other

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<sup>77</sup> Perloff, noting that Williams echoes Apollinaire in his insistence upon “pure painting” rather than mimetic art, reminds us that the rejection of symbolism has its own limitations: “signification, in and of itself, can never wholly disappear” (*Poetics* 91).

incarnations. Williams, in fact, cites her as the inspiration for the poem “The *Wanderer*,” the piece which served as the basis for *Paterson*:

This was the genesis of *Paterson* and started as the idealization of my grandmother, Mrs. Wellcome...the figure of my grandmother in “The Wanderer” was semi-mythical...in “The Wanderer” I identified my grandmother with my poetic unconscious. She was the personification of poetry. I wanted to identify myself with something good and philosophical- with a perfect knowledge of the world. (Wagner 76)

In addition to being Williams’s poetic conscience, Emily Dickenson Wellcome also represents the story of his family’s American origins: “it was the passion, the independence and the determination of this woman...that had begun our whole history in America” (*Autobiography* 167). Her body, its disabilities catalogued so unflinchingly in poems like “Last Words” and *Paterson*, is accorded the status of a historical record in its own right, much in the same way that the body of Elsie, whose “broken brain” and hips are familiar to legions of liberal arts students, is its own kind of news; it bespeaks “the truth about us” (*Collected Poems Vol. I* 218). While Williams eventually abandons the version of his grandmother he creates for “The Wanderer,” rejecting the work as “too stilted, too romantic” (Wagner 76), his poems from the 1920s and 1930s reveal him experimenting with newer versions of her in poetic settings more conducive to the messiness of *Paterson*, with its “greater realization of immediate surroundings” (Wagner 76). These post-“Wanderer” grandmothers are recognizably the doppelgangers for the grandmother who speaks in Book IV of *Paterson*, reminding him that “the past is for those who lived in the past” (186). As in “Portrait of a Lady,” where the normative poetic structures and bodies must be challenged so that a new vision can emerge, Williams’s grandmother intones her most resonant message at the moment when her faculties seem the most compromised. Yet the two versions of the poems differ markedly in their introductions, and the nature of the difference, I want to suggest, reveals quite a bit about how the relationship between body and language evolved in Williams’s poetic practice in the years between 1924, when the first version was published in *the transatlantic review*, and 1939, when the second version made its

appearance in the summer issue of *Furioso*. The 1924 version contains an eleven-stanza narration of the events leading up to the moment when Williams's cousin Bill, who was staying with Wellcome at her shore house, cables Williams for assistance. It opens:

She stayed over after  
the summer people had gone  
at her little shack  
on the shore, an old woman

impossible to get on with  
unless you left her alone  
with her things- among them  
the young grandson, nineteen

whom she had raised.  
He endured her because  
he was too lazy to work  
too lazy to think and

had a soft spot for her  
in his bright heart, also a  
moustache, a girl, bed  
and board out of the old lady

the sea before him  
and a ukulele-...(*Collected Poems Vol. I* 253)

Aside from the observation that Grandmother Wellcome is “impossible to get on with / unless you left her alone / with her things,” which clearly (and rather humorously) marks her as part of the Williams family, the poem's attempt to generate an emotional momentum that will prepare the reader's ears for her “last words” seems artificial. Williams has not yet pared away the excessively “romantic” stylings evinced in “The Wanderer;” the first version is reluctant to accord the grandmother's moment of illness and abjection a discrete expressive space. The 1939 version, by contrast, excises the sentimental backstory of cousin Bill and his ukulele, whittling Grandmother Wellcome's history down to a prefatory note that was published with the poem in *Furioso*: “Born Emily Dickinson, at Chichester, England, 1837: died, Grace Hospital, New Haven, Dec. 1, 1920)” (*Collected Poems Vol. I* 548). Consequently, the second version of the poem begins in the fashion of

an American epic: *in medias res*, starting with the material that was buried in the middle of the initial version:

There were some dirty plates  
and a glass of milk  
beside her on a small table  
near the rank, disheveled bed-

Wrinkled and nearly blind  
she lay and snored  
rousing with anger in her tones  
to cry for food,

Gimme something to eat-  
They're starving me-  
I'm all right- I won't go  
to the hospital. No, no, no  
Give me something to eat! (*Collected Poems Vol. I* 464-65)

The 1939 opening compels the reader to confront how illness distorts the routines of quotidian life. When the body is ill, its contingencies sometimes necessitate the subversion of once sacrosanct ideals like hygiene: it means that “dirty plates” pile up, it means that the “disheveled” bed doesn’t get made in the morning because there is a body in it. This, Williams suggests, is what it is to be sick sometimes, particularly if one wishes to convalesce at home instead of in the sterilized corridors of a hospital. Omitting or attenuating these details would constitute a lie; it would contribute to the perpetuation of a limited, romanticized narrative of illness; and it would be inimical to Williams’s philosophy of material inclusiveness.

“Last Words of My English Grandmother” shows us that the bedcovers aren’t the only thing in the house to be wrinkled by illness, though. The very language with which routines are described and enforced becomes alien, as the grandmother’s illness generates productive disjunctions between what is uttered and what is real. The final stanza is where Williams most vividly displays the poetic potential of such disjunctions, but we are already in a confusing world at the beginning of the poem. The details of the setting do not correspond with the sick woman’s sensations. Her “dirty plates”

and “glass of milk” on the table are evidence of cousin Bill’s attentive care, but Grandmother Wellcome incorrectly complains of being starved. These expressions of hunger (“Gimme something to eat-”) enclose our first exposure to her voice, and factually inaccurate though they may be, they hint at a more urgent, universal hunger. As the poem proceeds, it becomes obvious that there is a metapoetic component to his grandmother’s alleged starvation, and what might be dismissed as the raving of a distressed woman is actually an articulation of a frustrated longing for artistic sustenance. The implicit message in her cries is made lucid as she is lifted into the ambulance:

By now her mind was clear-  
Oh you think you’re smart  
you young people,  
  
she said, but I’ll tell you  
you don’t know anything.  
Then we started. (*Collected Poems Vol. I* 465)

“Then we started,” which seems like an odd line to have in the final stanzas of a poem, is actually quite appropriate in this circumstance.<sup>78</sup> The grandmother’s observation literally starts the ambulance ride, marking the beginning of her transition from her home to the hospital, but it also “starts” the poem in multiple ways. It initiates the poem’s fulfillment of the title’s promise, segueing into the section that will give us the “last words.” It also “starts” in the sense that it jars the poem’s body past its own point of no return, into the realm of epistemological and expressive uncertainty. For Williams, this is the point at which the revival of language begins:

On the way  
  
we passed a long row  
of elms. She looked at them  
awhile out of  
the ambulance window and said,

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<sup>78</sup> It is worth noting that the 1924 version does not formally reproduce the “start” that occurs in the poem, but instead keeps that phrase in the penultimate line of the stanza: “she said to us, but I’ll tell you / you don’t know / anything- Then we started. / On the way” (*Collected Poems Vol. I* 255).

What are all those  
fuzzy-looking things out there?  
Trees? Well, I'm tired  
of them and rolled her head away. (*Collected Poems Vol. I* 465)

The last words of Williams's grandmother are a defiant summation of Williams's own poetic practice: "it was the poet's task...to stare hard at the welter of things until their inner radiance and significances exploded in upon him and made him see the thing before him with new eyes: new words rinsed of their borrowed and hackneyed connotations" (Mariani 497). His grandmother's blindness, which ensures that the trees look like blurs, paradoxically gives her the sort of new vision to which the poet should aspire. Her description of the elms as "fuzzy-looking things" is almost childlike, and yet when juxtaposed with the word "trees," her language is somehow richer, more knowing.<sup>79</sup> Williams must have concurred, for he pays quiet homage to the power of these last words in Book Three of *Paterson*: the rejuvenating conflagration lifts off a tin roof that sails "upon the air, easily and away over / the frizzled elms that seem to bend under / it" (122).

### *Digging as Prosthetic Art*

If Williams's grandmother is the disabled alter-ego who provides the historic vision for his poetry, the figure of the digging wanderer is the one who provides the action. The notion of poetry as an art of "digging" is one to which Williams preserves a remarkable fidelity throughout his

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<sup>79</sup> In "The Editors Meet William Carlos Williams," Dorothy Tooker discusses the perception of Williams as naïf: "He has a breathless attitude, a quality that is nothing so simple as naivete. It is a complex wonderment expressed in a long-drawn exclamation of-gosh...but with Doctor Williams there is something further- the understanding and comprehension of a man who has seen more of life and death than the average person. Critics who have described this characteristic of his as childlike have overlooked the insight, the penetration, and cosmic viewpoint from which it stems. It is not a baseless wonder, like that of the young; it is a freshness of viewpoint and outlook arising from clinically minute and meticulous observation coupled with the deep understanding of experienced maturity" (Wagner 31).

career.<sup>80</sup> Certainly he was more faithful to this metaphor than he was to the long-suffering Floss, though he curiously does refer to her as “hard and useful as the handle of a spade” (Mariani 435) in one letter, suggesting that she, too, is an indispensable part of his archaeological project. So many of Williams’s poems, stories, and personal anecdotes involve scenes of excavation; opening up the body in the operating room or pulling babies from the “muck” of their mothers; the view from his window during his convalescence from one of his strokes, where he watches the sparrows dig “both feet together, vigorously, then back up into the patch where they have been scratching to search for grubs or worms of whatever they can find” (qtd. in Mariani 692); his appreciation for a performance by Marcel Marceau in February of 1956, where what reportedly “fascinated him the most had been Marceau’s uncanny ability of giving the impression of walking across the stage without in fact moving from the same spot” (Mariani 692)- in other words, Marceau’s performance of digging. Or even Williams’s description of his time at a hospital overlooking the construction site of the new Penn Station, which starts off in unremarkable fashion but turns into an account of how the rubble pile yields strange treasure: a burly injured construction worker who is revealed to be a cross-dresser when the hospital staff remove his work clothes for treatment.<sup>81</sup> There is also, of course, the digging lame dog at the beginning of *Paterson*, though since a number of aspects of disabled experience coalesce in this figure, I will address him separately later. What links the various “diggers” with Williams’s grandmother is the capacity to spot potential in discarded materials, to find sustenance in

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<sup>80</sup> See Park, who writes of Williams’s “Mesoamerican modernism”: “Williams calls upon “the avant-garde American artist to embrace a native land and indigenous forms of knowledge, yet the work of excavation that he calls for...exhibits the truly modernist act of archaeology” (37).

<sup>81</sup> Williams writes that upon discovering the man’s undergarments, “the girls [the nurses] wouldn’t have anything more to do with him. I called the orderly, and that was that! He was still unconscious and obviously in bad shape. His wife was notified of the accident and when told of her man’s unusual dress, said merely that he liked that sort of thing, that he was a good husband and that she had no complaint of him. She was genuinely broken up by his critical condition and went away weeping” (*Autobiography* 82). The story receives a layer of intrigue when a prominent New York man shows up at the hospital and requests that all of the man’s bills be sent to him.

things that others have abandoned as fallow or abject. Or, as Williams pithily put it: “the commonest situations in the world have the very essence of poetry if looked at correctly” (Wagner 60). Like Williams’s grandmother, whose toxic, noisy body is in the process of being lifted out, processed, treated, and eventually silenced when she observes the “fuzzy-looking things,” the diggers themselves often have been discarded because their bodies are incommensurate with dominant narratives of health and hygiene; therefore, despite the cultural value inherent in their labor, they carry out their work on the margins of society, and their creations and language tend to be dismissed as failures. In *Paterson*, Williams unearths all of the stories of his fellow diggers and puts them at the center of his poetry, granting legitimacy to both their work and their bodies. As Seamus Heaney would affirm twenty years later, the job of the poet is to preserve the history of the mundane labors that often go unnoticed, to discern the “living roots” of language that cling to the dirt: “Between my finger and my thumb/ The squat pen rests./ I’ll dig with it” (4).

One of the images that hints at an implicit disability component in the metaphor of digging is the walking stick. For Williams, the walking stick is simultaneously a tool for excavation/sorting and a prosthetic that makes physical limitation visible; it exposes the instability of the foot and defamiliarizes the “natural” mechanics of human locomotion. It also can function as a potential weapon, a fact Williams knew all too well. One day when he went to visit Ezra Pound at home during college, Pound, who was on the Penn fencing squad (as was Williams) met him at the entrance to the family home:

...as I entered the front door he greeted me with an offer for a friendly bout with two of his father’s walking sticks. I took one, made a few formal flourishes and placed myself *en garde*. But he, before I could do more than laughingly provoke him, came plunging wildly in without restraint, and hit me with the point of the cane above my right eye to fairly lay me out. I imagine I told him what I thought of him and threw down my stick. He felt triumphant that he had put the whole team of the University of Pennsylvania behind him with that single stroke. You can’t trust a guy like that! (*Autobiography* 65)

One doesn't want to overanalyze the college-boy shenanigans, but the image of two scions of modernism jousting with canes is too delicious to ignore (not to mention that the story confirms what most of us already suspected about Pound's morality). Obviously it was significant enough for Williams to include it in his autobiography, and given Williams's hearty sense of humor, it's likely that he derived some pleasure from symbolically re-appropriating the item with which Pound had wounded him. Moreover, the walking stick fight truly does encapsulate the later battles over modernist technique: Is it better to approach language violently? Or is it more fruitful to proceed by examination, engagement, empathy? Whose attitude towards the material of the world would win out? And who would get poked in the eye, figuratively speaking?

Williams's 1938 poem "Morning" shows us his choice, elucidating the prosthetic nature of his approach by effacing the boundaries between the body of the scavenger in the poem and the materials that are "scavenged" from local ground. "Morning" itself, in fact, is something of a discard, as it represents one of Williams's many attempts to start *Paterson* (Mariani 415). Retrospectively reading the poem alongside the introduction to *Paterson*, one immediately notices that what Williams chose to pluck out of the poetic dross was the concept of the physically disabled "digger" scratching at his/her home turf. In this instance, the "digger" is not the lame dog of *Paterson* but rather an elderly Italian woman who hobbles through her blighted neighborhood: an "old hag stumbling about, poking into junk, like that other hag/goddess his English grandmother" (Mariani 415). As in "Last Words of my English Grandmother," where the disintegration of the home (the dirty plates and disheveled bed) signals a zone of corporeal and linguistic instability, the urban landscape in "Morning" is defined by its failing structures:

#### MORNING

on the hill is cool! Even the dead  
grass stems that start with the wind along  
the crude board fence are less than harsh.

-a broken fringe of wooden and brick fronts  
above the city, fading out,  
beyond the watertank on stilts,  
an isolated house or two here and there,  
into the bare fields.

The sky is immensely  
wide! No one about. The houses badly  
numbered. (*Collected Poems Vol. I* 459)

While the poem dawns in concord with the day, the rapid appearance of “dead” grass intimates that the homonymic echo of “mourning” is also present. The second stanza does little to dispel the elegiac tone; like the first line itself, fringed with a dash, the neighborhood is “broken” and separate from the rest of the city, as if dismembered, and it “[fades] out” into the barrenness of the countryside. “Badly numbered” houses confound any pedestrian’s attempt at establishing orientation and linear progress. The entire neighborhood seems to have been designed to impede rather than encourage mobility: “rough/ cobbles and abandoned car rails interrupted/ by precipitous cross streets” (*Collected Poems Vol. I* 460). Moving through this terrain, the poem’s trajectory adapts to accommodate the imperfections of the local material, with varied stanza lengths (not unlike the “all lengths and qualities” of firewood that fuel the neighborhood stoves), and meter that can negotiate the precipitous syllables of local language: “(Keep out/ you)” and “scatubitch!” and “Kid Hot/ Jock.” It is an experiment with the pronouncement that would govern the construction of *Paterson*: “...Let the words/ fall any way at all- that they may/ hit love aslant” (142).

What hits us aslant in “Morning” is that by the end of the poem, the speaker has become absorbed into the landscape to such an extent that he is initially indistinguishable from the old woman with the stick, which suggests a potential moment of self-identification as a disabled figure:

And with a stick,  
scratching within the littered field-  
old plaster, bits of brick- to find what  
coming? In God’s name! Washed out, worn  
out, scavengered and rescavengered-

Spirit of place rise from these ashes  
repeating secretly an obscure refrain:

This is my house and here I live.  
Here I was born and this is my office-

-passionately leans examining, stirring  
with the stick, a child following.

Roots, salads? Medicinal, stomachic?  
Of what sort? Abortifacient? To be dug,  
split, submitted to the sun, brewed  
cooled in a teacup and applied?

Kid hot

Jock, in red paint, smeared along  
the fence.-and still remains, of-  
if and if, as the sun rises, rolls and  
comes again. (*Collected Poems Vol. I* 461-62)

The conspicuous absence of an identifying pronoun renders the reader mystified as to who is doing the “scratching” here, particularly since the previous stanzas have carried out the very sort of repetitious “scavengering” being described. The poem’s explicit transformation of “scavengering” into a prosthetic act likewise obscures the distinctions between the speaker and the neighborhood hag. For what has he been doing from the opening stanza but attempting to locate something using the “sticks” of his setting? The “dead grass stems;” the slats of the “crude board fence;” the watertank “on stilts;” the “truncated poplars;” the cords of “firewood, all lengths / and qualities;” the “church spire sketched on the sky.” These are the images, the props upon which the speaker’s imagination, moving and picking its way through a refuse-filled landscape, has “passionately [leaned]” over the course of his examination. The hag’s probing “stick,” which doubles as the cane that supports her body while she investigates, engenders a transcendent moment because the speaker recognizes that he has been advancing a prosthetic poetics. It is the vision of the elderly woman with the stick that permits him to move from appreciative observer of local idiosyncrasies (“These Wops are wise”) to a man enjoying an instant of identification. Williams once remarked

that “mutual recognition can flare up at a moment’s notice:” the encounter with the old woman veritably ignites this poem.

For it is after the appearance of the old woman that Williams manages to enact the total union of poem and place that *Paterson* achieves on an epic scale. Emerging out of the crookedness, the “obscure” incantation “This is my house and here I live. / Here I was born and this is my office-” (*Collected Poems Vol. I* 461) perfectly aligns the space of the poem and the space of the city, and it asserts vital symmetries between the realms of home and the imagination. In “Morning,” having conviction of origin (“here I was born”) legitimizes and enriches whatever acts are performed in that local space, so that even the most ordinary routines (the two men walking “round again,” the old woman’s digging, the cat’s peregrinations) acquire a sacred mien. The word “office” is where these multiple meanings find their most potent concentration; it affirms that local ground is not merely a place to be “born,” but rather is a place where avid effort yields rewards. “Office” also perpetuates the quasi-religious tone set forth in the lines “Spirit of place rise from these ashes / repeating secretly an obscure refrain” (*Collected Poems Vol. I* 461) by suggesting that the role of the poet/digger is a calling, a holy post. In the ensuing stanzas, the intermingling descriptions of the old woman as a scavenger, a physician (albeit maybe a holistic one?), and an occult priestess clarify the spiritual dimension of this “office,” so that the meaning of the materials she acquires (“Medicinal, stomachic? / Of what sort?”) becomes contingent upon her intercession: “But every day, every day / she goes and kneels-” (*Collected Poems Vol. I* 462). Yet in characteristic Williams fashion, even this claim to transcendence is attenuated by a baser, though no less apt, meaning for “office:” the noun “office” can refer to a repository for waste, an outhouse, a privy, and it also can refer to the *act* of generating or discarding human waste. To say “this is my office” is to say, “yes, this is my mess;” “these are the dirty products of my body and mind;” and/or “I choose to work amid filth.”

That the speaker, too, has opted to engage in such work becomes apparent when we see what he does with the graffiti phrase “Kid Hot Jock.” He turns out to be an attentive disciple of the old woman’s obscure magic: “to be dug, / split, submitted to the sun, brewed / cooled in a teacup and applied?” (*Collected Poems Vol. I* 462) He enjambes the quotation to “split” it across the line break (“Kid Hot / Jock,” maybe designating the tagger’s identity) and then splinters it once more with the line “the fence.- and still remains, of-.” The phrase, which recalls the “crude board fence” in the opening stanza, leaves the word “remains” tottering ambiguously between noun and verb and positions “still” in similarly unstable territory; the fence is comprised of “still remains,” but it “still remains.” These splintered letters are then “submitted to the sun:” “if and if, as the sun rises, rolls and / comes again” (*Collected Poems Vol. I* 462). Here the redness of the graffiti is transmuted into the crimsons of the sunrise and sunset, so that the disfiguring splash of paint becomes a symbol of continuous renewal through language. One might even read the line “rolls and / comes again” as not referring to the sun but rather to what graffiti artists (and poets, for that matter) do under the cover of darkness: they return to re-inscribe their message, which means that their canvases grow patchworked but their words are always fresh. The stanza’s inclusion of “Kid Hot Jock” constitutes its own sort of tagging, as the speaker poetically accomplishes what the kids do with their paint, what the old woman does with her trash: evoking endurance through ruin.

*Being Local, Being Late, Being Lame: Paterson*

“...it is social, the poem is a social instrument- accepted or not accepted seems to be of no material importance. It embraces everything we are.”

-Williams on *Paterson* in a letter to Henry Wells, April 12<sup>th</sup>, 1950

By July of 1945, William Carlos Williams had completed a version of the long poem that would become *Paterson* 1. The manuscript, most of which was compiled during a feverishly productive period between January and March, most likely included a plan for four of the books in

*Paterson*, a “Preface,” “The Delineaments of the Giants,” and the *nota bene* from Symonds’s *Studies of the Greek Poets*, which he reportedly read that May; the section on “crabbed” verses and “distorted” subjects therefore would have been an appendage itself, supplemented after the first version of the poem was sent to James Laughlin on March 18<sup>th</sup>. Initially pleased at having sifted through the copious materials for what he called his “impossible poem *Paterson*” (*Selected Letters* 230), Williams’s sense of accomplishment waned as his publisher cautioned him about the critics’ likely responses to his epic. Williams was already anxious about how readers would respond to the unorthodox structure of *Paterson*. Writing to Laughlin in February of 1945, a few weeks before he submitted the initial version of the typescript, he confessed: “it frightens me a bit...I wonder if it’s really there—among those pages of words. It doesn’t seem likely. And if so, WHAT is there—gravel for critics? I hope it cuts their hearts out” (*Selected Letters* 236-37). Unfortunately, it was Williams’s heart that would be flayed by *Paterson*’s gravel, with the late summer of 1945 bringing confirmation of his fears about the poem’s accessibility. As Williams saw it, the perennial idealization of order made readers intolerant of any work that did not reify familiar forms. *Paterson* 1 certainly didn’t participate in such reification, and according to him, that left the work susceptible to charges of intellectual vacuity and irrelevance. He wrote an impassioned letter to Norman Macleod regarding the response to the poem’s alleged “formlessness:”

My poetry appears to most as formless, to the neo-orthodox as an offense to be safely ignored. The God-damned fools. That’s why I despise the crew!...The first part of *Paterson* begins my detailed reply of which I want only to live to complete the full four parts— but already I have been informed that *Paterson* will not be accepted because of its formlessness, because I have not organized it into some neo-classic *recognizable* context. Christ! Are there no intelligent men left in the world? (*Selected Letters* 238-39)

Even before its publication, then, *Paterson* 1’s formal recalcitrance and its badness (in the way that the houses in “Morning” are “badly” numbered) mean that it is discussed as if it were a freak: something “offensive,” something requiring treatment and, as Williams put it to Macleod, something

requiring “[taming]- a little” (*Selected Letters* 239). Williams would in fact spend much of the latter half of 1945 cutting up the galleys of *Paterson*, trying to balance public expectation with his own conviction that “the only intellectual recourse for an artist [was] to make, to make, to make and to go on making- *never* to reply *in kind* to their strictures” (*Selected Letters* 239). Fundamentally, though, and in part because of the impossibilities of his own body, his “impossible” poem would never be shaped into a consistent form. This unusual convergence of theory and lived experience, I argue, is why it is such a potentially rich text for both disability studies and Williams scholarship; for after a certain point in the composition of *Paterson*, Williams’s famous notion of the poem as an “attempt, an experiment, a failing experiment toward assertion with broken means” (*Selected Letters* 286) becomes enmeshed with authorial health and mobility.

By now it’s somewhat of a truism to say that *Paterson*, particularly Book Five, is about human aging and mortality, the story of what happens to erotic and philosophical and political commitments when a person admits his corporeal and mental frailties, but the poem is equally preoccupied with how Williams’s kind of *modernism* is aging. When Williams’s own body breaks down, he must reformulate his long-nurtured narrative about the poetic virtues of being willfully formless. In his Author’s Note to his edition of *Paterson*, Christopher MacGowan includes the partial text of a letter Williams wrote to New Directions press about the composition of *Paterson* Five:

“Were I younger, needless to say, it would have been a different poem. But then it would not have been written at all. After *Paterson*, *Four* ten years have elapsed. In that period I have come to understand not only that many changes have occurred in me and the world, but I have been forced to recognize that there can be no end to such a story I have envisioned with the terms which I had laid down for myself. I had to take the world of *Paterson* into a new dimension if I wanted to give it imaginative validity. Yet I wanted to keep it whole, as it is to me...” (xv)

To take *Paterson* into a “new dimension” and yet “keep it whole as it is to me.” Whereas the healthier Williams railed about the “god-damned fools” and their attempts to impose “neo-classical”

standards upon his epic, here the seventy-five year old Williams is solely concerned with Book Five's relationship to the "terms which [he] had laid down for [himself]" in the earlier books of *Paterson*. Yet his personal sense of the poem's "wholeness," and the concord between form and his imaginative vision, transcend doubts about consistency (including those for which a younger, less forgiving Williams might have criticized himself). Much like the ambulance ride in "The Last Words of My English Grandmother" renames the basic elements of the surrounding landscape, Williams's letter suggests that his personal experience of disability instigates a search for new language that differs from his previous formal experimentation. Edward Said's notion of "timeliness," which Said penned while he was diagnosed with cancer in the final years of his own life, is potentially elucidating here, as Said offers an utter and provocative redefinition of late style as that which upends what is healthy and "appropriate." We recognize, Said observes, that "both in art and in our general ideas about the passage of human life there is assumed to be a general abiding *timeliness*, by which I mean that what is appropriate to early life is not appropriate for later stages" (5). The usual trajectory of artistic development culminates in a sense of resignation, resolution, progress. Yet Said reminds us that for many artists, the processes of aging and disease and disability initiate stylistic and philosophical changes that are not so uncomplicatedly valedictory in nature. Rather, the body's travails sometimes generate a late style that "involves a nonharmonious, nonserene tension...a sort of deliberately unproductive productiveness" (7). This framing of late style, I suggest, is ideal for understanding the history of *Paterson*. In 1950, when Harvey Breit interviewed Williams for *The New York Times Book Review*, Williams insisted that "we have to reject the standard forms of English verse and put ourselves into chaos on purpose, in order to rediscover new constellations of the elements of verse in our time" (qtd. in Wagner 60). The consequences of this communicative liberation are potentially manifold: "'to free the language'- Williams's project in *Paterson*- implies a personal, economic, and political freedom that is Williams's utopian goal" (Bremen 162). His stroke in 1951,

however, adjusts this rhetoric of purposeful chaos, and it introduces a new humility and a new receptivity to his art. Nothing shakes one's commitment to the model of "purposeful chaos" so profoundly as the experience of being spontaneously transformed into an object for someone else's inquiry; Williams's stroke compels him to acknowledge that his own body, too, is a "natural curiosity," to borrow the term used for the hydrocephalic "monster" in *Paterson*. If *Paterson* begins with the ubiquitous analogy of digging, resurrecting the idea of the poem as a junk-strewn field for experimentation and "action" and even "combat" (to borrow the verbs Williams used in a letter to Horace Gregory in 1944), it ends by throwing aside the stick and exulting in its contrapuntal dance. So what occurs in the intervening years to turn the digger into the dancer? What does the shift in Williams's "digging" metaphor suggest about the limitations of his earlier vision of language? What does it reveal about the limitations of prosthetic technology, the limitations of mid-twentieth-century medicine and its investigative approach? And how does Williams's own body wind up being the "thing" from which a tentative, or, one could even say tender, postmodern language is constructed?

Sniffing the trees,  
just another dog  
among a lot of dogs. What  
else is there? And to do?  
The rest have run out-  
After the rabbits.  
Only the lame stands- on  
Three legs. Scratch front and back.  
Deceive and eat. Dig  
A musty bone.

-Preface to *Paterson*

"I have given a name to my pain and call it dog. It is just as faithful, just as obtrusive and shameless, just as entertaining, just as clever as any other dog- and I can scold it and vent my bad mood on it, as others do with their dogs, servants, and wives."

-Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

Williams once said that his goal as an American poet was to "bring poetry out of the clouds and down to earth" (Wagner 63), and like "Morning," which concludes with the old woman kneeling

upon her dirty altar, his preface to *Paterson* is truly “down-to-earth” in every sense of the phrase. Pound’s *Cantos* opens with a description of a maritime voyage in which everything, from the stars to the sails, “stretches” out towards distant and mythical realms. *The Waste Land*’s declaration that “April is the cruellest month” alludes to the revered English literary tradition of springtime-inspired verse. *Paterson*, after a series of halting, false starts, claims its place in the pantheon of modernist poetry with a description of a dirty, three-legged dog. The dog, as the raw thematic material of the opening, confirms that *Paterson* will offer a new, albeit grimy alternative to the high modernist long poem. Yet Williams does not stop there. By suggesting that the dogs are canine incarnations of himself and his fellow poets, Williams encourages the reader to deconstruct the very allegory that anchors the preface. The image of the dog cracks open the door to the “office” of Williams’s poetics in that it immediately necessitates a confrontation with the idea that “the poet thinks with his poem, in that lies his thought, and that in itself is the profundity” (*Autobiography* 390-91). Williams’s maneuver, which allows him to name the feeling of being the “cripple” in his own movement (“calling it dog”), and to fashion it into a poetic device, is at once a statement of his considerable ambitions and a sly introduction to the history of modernism.

By identifying his poetic method as “defective” in *Paterson*, Williams establishes a clear concordance between disabled subjectivity and the art of defying certain kinds of literary and cultural authority. His artistic vision is borne of the contradictions of being “out of time:” that is, “out of time” as an expression of finality, of defeat, of error, of mortality, and conversely, “out of time” as a slogan for the individual who does not wish to, or cannot, follow the rhythms or patterns of society. As I will discuss later, this notion of an “out of time” poetry would achieve its apotheosis in the image of the satyr in the final lines of *Paterson*, dancing “to a measure / contrapuntally, / Satyrically,

the tragic foot” (236).<sup>82</sup> Yet from the lines of “The Late Singer,” a poem that provides a deeply self-conscious opening for the 1921 collection *Sour Grapes*, onward through the apologetic and elegiac ruminations in “Of Asphodel, That Greeny Flower,” Williams’s preoccupation with communicating “out of time” illuminates the uneasy relationship that he shared with his more precocious modernist brethren, and with the “rare” (Wagner 63) Eliotic brand of modernism that most of them eventually embraced.<sup>83</sup>

Williams, who claimed that he “never had an audience until [he] was past fifty,” (Wagner 31), believed that his status as a relatively late bloomer simultaneously distinguished him from and eternally yoked him to Pound, Eliot, and their contemporaries.<sup>84</sup> When asked about his creative kinship with Pound, for instance, Williams remarked that he and Pound “never have had any task I know of in common...but between the two of us, we’d like to uproot poetry and start it on its own,

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<sup>82</sup> Said’s discussion of how the contrapuntal functions radically in the musical compositions of Bach and Gould is equally applicable to Williams: I would suggest that like Gould’s style, Williams’s prosody endeavors a “full realization of a protracted and sustained contrapuntal invention, disclosed, argued, and elaborated rather than simply presented, through performance” (130). It is the self-conscious performance of counterpoint in works such as *Paterson*, paired with Williams’s acutely clinical sense of “count” as a measure of health, that confirms the contrapuntal as a disabled aesthetic.

<sup>83</sup> Of *Sour Grapes*, Williams writes in his *Autobiography*: “[The title] brought the psychiatrists about my head, if not the Freudian analysts. ‘*Sour Grapes!* Do you know what that means?’ they said. ‘No. What does it mean?’ ‘It means you are frustrated. That you are bitter and disappointed. You are too...too...you don’t really let yourself go. You think you are like the beautiful god, Pan. Ha, ha, ha, ha! The young Frenchmen, yes, they really let go. But you, you are an American. You are afraid’ (this from the women and the men also) ‘you are afraid. You live in the suburbs, you even *like* it. What are you anyway? And you pretend to be a poet, a POET! Ha, ha, ha, ha! A poet! You! I got it from all quarters: ‘*Sour Grapes*, yes, that’s regret. *Sour Grapes*- that’s what you are and that’s what you amount to.’ But all I meant was that sour grapes are just the same shape as sweet ones: Ha, ha, ha, ha!” (157-58).

<sup>84</sup> Kenner writes of the publication of *Spring and All*: “...words written in New Jersey, printed in Dijon, published in Paris, distributed-----? Not distributed, really. There were 300 copies, Paris bookshops were not interested, American customs held up shipments for months, American reviewers based 12 miles from Rutherford merely sneered at expatriates when they noticed such books at all. ‘Nobody ever saw it’- Williams, 35 years later- ‘it had no circulation at all.’ The fragility of the flower, unbruised- there was nothing but empty space for it to penetrate” (385).

on its proper tracks in this country” (Wagner 10). In another interview, Williams hails Pound as the “beginning of modern American verse,” only to refer to him as “Old Ez...a pain in the ass” in the next breath (Wagner 43). Williams’s opinion of Eliot was decidedly more antagonistic; when “Prufrock” appeared in 1916, Williams said that he “had a violent feeling that Eliot had betrayed what I believed in. He was looking backward; I was looking forward...I knew he would influence all subsequent American poets and take them out of my sphere...my contemporaries flocked to him-away from what I wanted” (Wagner 64). Wry gestures, such as calling Pound a “pain in the ass” or selecting the title of *Sour Grapes*, became Williams’s signature mode of discussing this profound sense of artistic betrayal and isolation.

Despite his anxieties about Eliot’s derailment of the modernist movement, Williams acknowledged the creative benefits to writing and working on the periphery of modernism, and he embraced his status as an outsider. In his informal bibliography *I Wanted to Write a Poem*, he observed that his increasingly strained relationship with the movement in which he’d once been so invested is precisely what “forced [him] to be successful” (Wagner 64). Williams saw the tension that is created by being included and then discarded, a tension that he often describes in terms of centrifugal and centripetal forces, as a potential catalyst for the regeneration of the American idiom. He claimed that:

...the way to discover...is to be an iconoclast, which means to break the icon, to get out from inside that strictly restricting mold or ritual, and get out, not because we want to get out of it, because the secret spirit of that ritual can exist not only in that form, but once that form is broken, the spirit of it comes out and can take again a form which will be more contemporary. (Wagner 26)

Williams’s investment in redefining “defects” is thus not merely a personal affair. Playing the role of the iconoclast permits him to challenge conventional “aesthetic and social concepts of purity, value, and truth” (Mikkelsen 605), and to lay the groundwork in *Paterson* for a contemporary and radical form of American poetry. Williams forces the reader to limp across the land that Eliot found so

culturally and literarily disconcerting: the oft-ignored *terra infirma* that stretches between the apparent poles of beauty and ugliness, dynamism and immobility, annihilation and amelioration. He urges us to consider how things become seen as polluted or deformed or dirty, and to ponder how some of these things can acquire new cultural value because of, not in spite of, their dirtiness. To put it in Mitchell and Snyder's terms, he "exposes prosthesis as an artificial, and thus resignifiable relation" (9), as *Paterson* repeatedly confronts and dismantles the dominant cultural narratives that are used to control bodies and words which defy measurement.

We can discern disability's role in *Paterson*'s acts of defiant self-creation by looking back at some of Williams's lyric poetry. In "The Late Singer," for instance, which despite its earliness manages to anticipate the isolation and insecurity in *Paterson*'s preface, Williams conveys a fable about empowerment, language, and identification. The mechanism of the poem converts the speaker's dismay at his lateness, as well as his fear about the imaginative paucity of his local material, into an impetus for discovery. To be late, to be singing out of time, can make one feel inadequate if one assesses achievement by the measure (here the virtuosic "cadenzas") of one's contemporaries, but it can also compel one to recognize other systems of value:

Here it is spring again  
And I still a young man!  
I am late at my singing.  
The sparrow with the black rain on his breast  
Has been at his cadenzas for two weeks past:  
What is it that is dragging at my heart?  
The grass by the back door  
is stiff with sap.  
The old maples are opening  
their branches of brown and yellow moth-flowers.  
A moon hangs in the blue  
in the early afternoons over the marshes.  
I am late at my singing. (*Collected Poems Vol. I* 137)

Such contradictions are embedded in the plaint of our early "late singer," whose Miltonic anxieties ("My hasting days fly on with full career, / But my late spring no bud or blossom sheweth") are

tempered with a recognition of the luxuries of tardiness. The singer's lateness is what enables him to observe the natural phenomena that are "on time" with the season. While the sparrow (who, frankly, seems like a rather annoying bird) warbles his cadenzas, the silent late singer records the beauty of that which is immediately around him: the grass by the back door, the trees, the moon over the marshland. The poem suggests that these particularities might be seen as uninspiring, stultifying, even corporeally disabling, with the speaker's sense of mental confinement seeping through, not unlike the sap, to permeate his sense of the physical world. The harbingers of spring appear as deformities: the sap "stiffens," the moon "hangs," the maples are "old." These are what "drag" at the speaker's heart. Perhaps Williams is also remembering his teenage bout of "adolescent heart strain" here, mobilizing the language of his diagnosis to express the agony of being late in a ruthlessly measured world. Yet this "drag" is also the tug of love, of community. To have an impaired heart is to be connected to the ground, and this fact, coupled with the intervening production of a "song" that is quite distinct from the sparrow's cadenzas, fundamentally transforms our assessment of the poem's language. If the first iteration of "I am late at my singing" is a lament, the repetition of the phrase in the final line is a declaration of *intent*. The alleged impairments of locality, lameness, and lateness emerge as persuasive alternatives to, rather than degradations of, other artistic virtues. The speaker ultimately rejects the seductions of a more cosmopolitan, mobile aesthetic for the soil of his familiar landscape. Yet the poem would not have been brought into being without the cycle of doubt, paralysis, and imaginative recuperation. The cardiac "drag" that the speaker endures is precisely what infuses the old with new vitality, and as such, it is a locus of poetic strength. It also signals his allegiance to what he views as a renegade strain of modernism, one that stands in place instead of crossing the Atlantic. As *Paterson* would later put it: "Beauty 'escapes! / never by running but by lying still" (22).

*Paterson* asserts the value of possessing a body or mind that appears defective but in fact enables one to defy authority, to “get out from inside that strictly restricting mold or ritual.” It is in his epic poem that Williams truly becomes what Marjorie Garber, speaking of Richard III, has called “deformity’s theorist and manipulator” (39). In the preface, he uses deformity to construct an unflattering portrait of his expatriate contemporaries, at the same time as he self-identifies with the crippled dog who has been abandoned in his seemingly meager American yard. The lame dog reveals Williams “embracing his deviance” “as a value” (Mitchell and Snyder 35) in an act of transgressive reappropriation. Consequently, what happens in *Paterson* is that via deformity, epic self-creation becomes explicitly tied to the sort of anti-Eliotic aesthetic that was examined and discarded in early poems like “Portrait of a Lady.” Williams’s endorsement of this “anti-poetic” mode of reading, as Thomas Bertonneau puts it, is one characteristic that distinguishes *Paterson* from its modernist long poem predecessors. For Williams, Bertonneau argues, history is a “struggle between humanism...and power abetted by false language or myth; for power so abetted invariably argues that someone must die for the good of the rest, and undertakes various rhetorical strategies for devaluing the radically unlucky party” (34). The dog, by playing the dual roles of sacrificial lamb and ironic stand-in for Williams himself, enables Williams to schematize this struggle between humanism and dangerous forms of rhetorical currency.<sup>i</sup>

The instability of the dog allegory in particular belies a double meaning behind Williams’s preference for “defective means.” Garber’s analysis of the word “defeature” in *The Comedy of Errors* is helpful here: “the wonderful word *defeature* means both “undoing, ruin” and “disfigurement; defacement, marring of features”...it offers a superbly concrete picture of the effects of ruin, the visible, readable consequences of being- or coming- undone” (29). The equally wonderful word “defective,” which derives from the Latin *deficere* (to undo), paints a similar picture in *Paterson* by duly implying an undoing and “an imperfection or weakness.”

*Paterson*, as a poem that “stages its own contingency” and “reflects on its own madeness,” (qtd. in Beck 136) is dependent upon, marked by, and undone by its “defective” particularity, by the materials out of which it is constructed. Calling his means “defective” in the preface gives Williams the poetic latitude to acknowledge the rewards *and* risks of working with this paradox. It allows him to reify the validity of his local perspective (“to make a start,/ out of particulars”) and to declare the poem’s epic intentions, while at the same time alluding to the charges of intellectual deficiency that dogged him (pun fully intended) throughout his career. Like the lame dog, whose “pride lies in his attachment to the home ground and in his cynical willingness to cadge and scrape for his living” (Bertonneau 37-8), Williams scoffs at fellow creatures that continually seek out superficial novelties and cheap forms of power. He wrote of his reasons for beginning *Paterson*: “...the critics would have it that I, the poet, am not profound and go on with their profundities, sometimes affecting to write poems in their very zeal as thinkers. It all depends on what you call profound” (390). That *Paterson* begins by subverting the very concept of “defective means,” instead choosing to assert the potential for profundity and beauty in all things, indicates the tenacity of the poem’s commitment to undoing the cultural devaluation of that which is imperfect.<sup>85</sup> Its integration of “broken means” into prosodic form as well as content allows *Paterson* to reveal the ingrained cultural bias against “broken” people and things, a bias Williams explicitly acknowledges in his 1939 essay “Against the Weather: A Study of the Artist:” “obviously- all defects are officially neglected by those in power; never studied or even mentioned- for clear reasons!” (*Selected Essays* 213). So the means might appear “defective,” but the quest for beauty gets going anyway. In *Paterson*, there is movement, however awkward it may be; there is progress; and, as in “The Last Words of My English Grandmother,” there is a “start,”

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<sup>85</sup> See Mark Payne’s description of Williams’s dog: “...in his ordinary isolation from his fellows, he is neither a lone wolf nor a pack dog...confined by incapacity to the local scene, he is a source of home truths: a dog like this one “blows the gaff,” in William Empson’s phrase, on cultural pretensions which are to him mere spoors of self-assertion, to be obliterated by the never-ending stream of newcomers” (41-42).

both in the sense of a commencement and a startling into new, provocative modes of examination and communication.

Tellingly, Williams himself encouraged his readers to take acute notice of the dog motif, writing to Horace Gregory in 1948: “And, if you’ll notice, dogs run all through the poem and will continue to do so from first to last. And there is no dog without a tail. Here the tail has tried to wag the dog. Does it? (God help me, it may yet, but I hope not!)” (*Selected Letters* 266). The particular association between Eliot, Pound, and the wayward expatriate pack emerges in a number of other writings. For instance, writing of his Europe-based contemporaries in his 1922 essay “Yours, O Youth,” Williams links the expatriate phenomenon with the loss of local perspective: “being inclined to run off to London and Paris it is inexplicable that in every case they have forgotten or not known that the experience of native local contacts is the only thing that can give that differentiated quality of presentation to their work...Pound ran to Europe in a hurry...” (*Selected Essays* 35). Likewise, when asked about the American idiom in a *Paris Review* interview in 1962, Williams invokes the dog to register his place in the modernist “establishment:”

Williams: ...I would gladly have traded what I have tried to say, for what came off my tongue, naturally....

Interviewer: Was this in line with that the others in the group were trying to do?

Williams: I don’t think they knew what they were trying to do; but in effect it was. I couldn’t speak like the academy. It had to be modified by the conversation about me. As Marianne Moore used to say, a language dogs and cats could understand. So I think she agrees with me fundamentally. Not the speech of English country people, which would have something artificial about it; not that, but language modified by *our* environment; the American environment. (qtd. in Wagner 59)

Here “a language dogs and cats could understand,” which Williams pointedly opposes to the parlance of the academy (and to the type of Anglophile poetry favored by the academy), becomes shorthand for language that embodies the latent local potential of “the American environment.”

Indeed, in *Paterson*, the lame poet-dog “barks” to alert the reader to those instants which prove that no native ground is ever truly fallow, that “No defeat is made up entirely of defeat- since / the world

it opens is always a place / formerly / unsuspected” (78). The “fall” into the unintelligible, primitive garble of canine talk at these junctures is actually an acknowledgment of the wonder one feels when loss is redefined positively:

Bow, wow! A  
departing car scatters gravel as it  
picks up speed!

Outworn! *le pauvre petit ministre*  
did his best, they cry,  
but though he sweat for all his worth  
no poet has come .

Bow, wow! Bow, wow! (79)

Both stanzas model the process of exposing a poetically productive, “unsuspected” space: in the first stanza, this is achieved through the metaphor of the departing car, which disrupts the surface of the environment and “scatters” old material in a new constellation as it retreats. In the second, the exposure is enacted formally, as the poet-dog undermines the lamentation that “no poet has come” by generating extra space between the final word of the line and the punctuation that ends it. In fact, a redeeming poet has come; it’s merely that no one recognizes him as such, because his “movements / are towards new objectives / (even though formerly they were abandoned)” (78). When he spatially deforms that line, he is, in essence, both opening up a place for himself and compelling the reader to recalibrate his/her expectations about what constitutes poetic authority.

As Beck points out, Williams often employs unorthodox punctuation to construct a visual approximation of his themes. By liberally sprinkling colons into the passages in which he discusses money, for instance, Williams literalizes the process of mentally “weighing” interpretive possibilities (152). His use of the delayed period achieves a similar effect by transcribing the “scramble” for a cultural prop onto the page, and he employs it most strikingly in those passages where prosthesis is the subject at hand. Consider the following excerpt from *Paterson*:

Look for the nul

Defeats it all

The N of all  
Equations .

That rock, the blank  
That holds them up

Which pulled away-  
The rock's

Their fall. (77)

Thematically, the passage plays with the concepts of lack and prosthesis by manipulating our culturally-dictated perceptions of the “nul,” the “blank.” Instead of being an imperfection that destabilizes and prompts the search for something to “hold them up,” the “nul” is reimagined as something that is essential to the function of an equation. Yet Williams suggests that the very lack that is necessary in an equation, and indeed necessary in his poem, is at once creatively fruitful and destructive: “the rock’s their fall.” The boundary between the lack and the prosthetic, to borrow a biological term, is selectively permeable.

Williams’s use of the delayed period confirms that his belief in relative stability extends to form as well as content, for the period acts as a grammatical equivalent of the fourth table leg (or fourth dog leg). Williams’s prosody reveals how we have been conditioned to believe that a sentence is incomplete without one. By wedging a space between the last word and the period, Williams forces the sentence to wobble a bit before he shores it up. The delay induces a temporary crisis for the reader; has the sentence ended? Will it continue? Williams’s well-documented love for enjambment, which dovetails quite nicely with his interest in legs, further complicates the reader’s quandary. We are so accustomed to seeing phrases break over lines in his poetry that we are truly not sure if the sentence is finished.<sup>ii</sup> Our hesitation coincides with the thematic reconceptualization of what it means to be “lacking.” Fittingly, the “pulling away” of the “nul” necessitates a return to normal grammatical structure, with the period immediately following “their fall.” The aural and

visual echoes that connect “all” to “fall” affirm that deformity can prompt poetic innovation: “deformity- / to be deciphered (a horn, a trumpet!) / an elucidation by multiplicity, / a corrosion...” (61). The disconcerting symbiosis between multiplicity and corrosion, between “all” and “fall,” is thrilling and beautiful. By inducing a poetic version of the same sense of panic that we feel when confronted by individuals or things that “lack,” and then showing us the cultural mathematics behind this response, Williams’s delayed periods bring the problem of prosthesis to a truly microcosmic level.

### *Community and City Spaces*

Yet as Williams repeatedly insists throughout *Paterson*, the revelation of these previously concealed literary spaces is meaningless if those who are moving “towards new objectives” cannot find each other. Without their own systems of community and exchange, those who embrace a more oblique vision of aesthetic beauty endure trials- unwanted solitude, existential doubt- that are unfamiliar to their contemporaries who “run off / toward the peripheries- / to other centers, direct- / for clarity (if/ they found it) / loveliness and / authority in the world-” (*Paterson* 35). Hence the paradox of the preface, where the lame dog simultaneously feels like an undistinguished member of the masses (“sniffing the trees, / just another dog / among a lot of dogs”) and a public spectacle (“only the lame stands- on three legs). As Williams explains in a 1936 letter to Marianne Moore, the solution is to redefine modernist exile so that it encompasses what he calls movement “without formality:”

If only- I keep saying year in year out- it were possible for “us” to have a place, a location, to which we could resort, singly or otherwise, and to which others could follow us as dogs follow each other- without formality but surely- where we could be known as poets and our work be seen- and we could see the work of others and buy it and have it! Why can’t such a thing come about? It seems so brainless and spineless a thing for us to be “exiles” in too literal and accepted a sense. Being exiles might we not at least, as exiles, consort more easily together? We seem needlessly isolated and we suffer dully, supinely. I am not one for leading a crusade, but I’d

lead a little group through the underbrush to a place in the woods, or under a barn if  
I thought anyone would (or perhaps, could) follow me. (*Selected Letters* 165)

Williams's dream of an artistic community predicated upon movement "without formality" is, I argue, brought to fruition in *Paterson*, as the rote narrative of transatlantic exile is replaced by a series of stories by and about people whose corporeality troubles literal, regimented modes of "following." It is through these disability narratives that Williams asserts the vast and untapped exilic potential of the local. When literal, deliberate movement, here associated with expatriate Anglophilia, ceases to be an ideal, the cultural and intellectual maneuvering behind all seemingly intuitive aesthetic hierarchies can be exposed, and the bodies that move in a distinctly non-deliberate fashion (or, indeed, cannot move at all sometimes) are no longer pathologized, de-valued, ignored.

Accordingly, the deformed body, as the incarnation of Williams's fundamental principle of "movement without formality," a principle that is as much prosodic as it is philosophical, becomes the definitive site of linguistic and social recuperation in *Paterson*. The three-legged dog is merely the first in a series of deformations that challenge the tyranny of measure in modern life. For instance, the poem's depiction of the act of walking, so crucial in a work that has been described as "pedestrian" in form (Levine 30), juxtaposes a formal account of locomotion with the unpredictable meanderings of the people and dogs that populate the park on Sunday. Williams deliberately reminds us that a clinical ideal of the body, and, by association, a quantitative denotation of "counting," persists even in this pastoral landscape, as the human body's motions are always compared with the precise model. Williams excerpts a definition of walking from a piece entitled "Dynamic Posture" in a 1946 issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*:

Walking-

The body is tilted slightly forward from the basic standing  
Position and the weight thrown on the ball of the foot,  
While the other thigh is lifted and the leg and opposite  
Arm are swung forward (fig. 6B). Various muscles, aided . (45)

Yet in the corporeal chaos of the park, it is the fluidly elegant JAMA description that seems like an eccentricity.<sup>86</sup> The “ugly legs of the young girls,” moving like “pistons” up the hill, rebuke the formal definition of walking in that their motion leads to “the flower of a day!” The implication here is that beauty blooms when the human body moves in ways that defy normalcy. The visitors’ labored climbing, moreover, finds a prosodic analogue in Williams’s own metrical and syntactic experimentation. In a 1960 interview, Williams discusses the difficulty of trying to arrange a marriage between language and meter:

In my language I can find some release with hard effort, which is invention, hard effort when I want to say something, to speak in some way, to construct a poem that will not be a sonnet and not be a quatrain at all but very sensuous and that wanders over the page in a very curious way that has never been encountered. (Wagner 48)

Insisting that effortful, “curious” structure (here figured as a wanderer) is synonymous with creative release, Williams suggests that conventional poetic forms cannot permit the sort of digressions and hesitations wherein novelty flourishes. According to this definition, and in fact throughout *Paterson*, “sensuous” walking is chiefly a phenomenological process.<sup>87</sup> It is less about lust than it is about

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<sup>86</sup> The function of the JAMA excerpt is a matter of debate. Some scholars, like Mariani and Bremen, read it critically; Mariani writes that it is an “ironic foil to the theme of walking, of foot following foot outward, leaving the track of the new measure” (536), while Bremen sees a latent attack on the fastidious Eliot in the passage’s endorsement of “precision and following form as a ‘way of life’” (180). Charles Tomlinson, by contrast, cites a later passage from the “Dynamic Posture” article to suggest that this model would have appealed to Williams: “the good walker should be able to change pace, stop, start, turn, step up or down, twist or stoop, easily and quickly, without losing balance or rhythm” (qtd. in *Selected Poems* viii).

<sup>87</sup> Other critics, however, argue that the sexual connotations of the “sensual” pastoral walking in *Paterson* overshadow the phenomenological concerns, and that Paterson’s stroll is in fact tantamount to an act that reasserts masculine dominance, perhaps even aggression. Ecopoetics critic George Hart, for instance, working off of Michael Davidson’s work on Larry Eigner, cites Eigner’s influence upon Charles Olson and Williams as “objectivist-projectivist examples of a much longer tradition that associates walking and poetry” (158). Yet Hart claims that Williams’s portrayal of walking in *Paterson*, especially the JAMA excerpt, indicates “Dr. Paterson’s motion as he imposes masculine desire onto the feminized park and thus delimits the pastoral space of *Paterson*” (163). This reading, of course, ignores the fact that Dr. Paterson’s progress through the park is anything but “upright” and steady for much of the journey, so perhaps the binary imposition that Hart imagines is more

learning to understand and to value one's own sensory faculties, and then articulating these discoveries in such a way that they endure against the formidable, normalizing, censoring forces of "those in power," as Williams put it.

Among the park walkers, of course, is Dr. Paterson, whom Paul Mariani calls "Williams's secret image of himself: the monstrous, hydrocephalic poet" (464). I'd aver that the secrecy of this self-image is questionable, but what cannot be denied is that Paterson's progress up the mountain is ugly, even injurious. In other words, his walking style embodies the spirit of arduous invention that Williams would later describe as the cornerstone of his aesthetic. He "arrived breathless, after a hard climb" (44) then detours from the path "half tripping, / picking a way..." (47) across a field scored by signs of long-past cultivation, the field now overgrown with "file-sharp grass" (47) that punctures the structure of the line that contains it (and, presumably, the soles of Paterson's feet as well). This kind of walking through the world, Williams implies, is contingent upon a non-literal interpretation of the word "counting:" "-and goes by the footpath to the cliff (counting: / the proof) / himself among the others, / -treads there the same stones / on which their feet slip as they climb" (43-4). Peripatetic accuracy is subsumed by Paterson's recognition of community, human fellowship, the ability to "count" one's self as part of a group that moves over the same topography in a habitual, dogged, but various manner. Thus the language of regularity is not wholly jettisoned so much as it is tempered and revised by the accumulation of somatic experience, a distinction that proves crucial for Williams both in life and in his poetry.

Establishing a prosody that would reflect the anatomical irregularities of the "present-day world" (*Selected Letters* 269) was, in Williams's view, the paramount aim of *Paterson* and a key step in the rejuvenation of American poetry. In the "Paterson" section of his *Autobiography*, Williams refers

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complex. See also Roger Gilbert's readings of Williams in *Walks in the World: Representation and Experience in Modern American Poetry*.

to his desire “to *make* a poem, fulfilling the requirements of the art, and yet new, in the sense that in the very lay of the syllables Paterson as Paterson would be discovered, perfect, perfect in the special sense of the poem, to have it...for it is in that, that it be particular to its own idiom, that it lives” (392). To make *Paterson* would involve espousing an alternate, dynamic sense of “perfection” that was entirely distinct from, and in most instances explicitly opposed to, earlier, more prescriptive prosodies. The need to liberate language from the ideal of English prosody was especially acute: “we’ve got to *begin* by stating that we speak (here) a distinct, separate language in a present (new era) and that it is NOT English,” he declares. When Americans assume that the elements of English prosody are “surely adventitious” (*Selected Letters* 269) without questioning the provenance of these assumptions, they are, in essence, condemning themselves to a state of eternal aspiration. They are condemning themselves to a life of running after rabbits.

*Paterson’s* form implies that an imperfect but “living language” (*Selected Letters* 304) is preferable to such futile, interminable striving after an ideal. Complementing his hydrocephalic, eponymous double and the lame dog, Williams imagines mid-century American verse as a deformed but persistent body that bears witness to the tumult of its age. He writes to John Holmes in 1952:

What shall we say more of the verse that is to be left behind by the age we live in if it does not have some of the marks the age has made upon us, its poets? The traumas of today, God knows, are plain enough upon our minds. Then how shall our poems escape? They should be horrible things, those poems. To the classic muse their bodies should appear to be covered with sores. They should be hunchbacked, limping. And yet our poems must show how we have struggled with them to measure and control them. And we must SUCCEED even while we succumb. (315-16)

Whereas the “classic muse” would have ignored and omitted the “horrible things,” it is the duty of the modernist poet to ensure that hunchbacked and limping forms are “measured,” to ensure that they are validated, that they “count” in the democratic sense evoked by the scenes in “Sunday in the Park.” In *Paterson*, the struggle to carry out these processes is associated with conspicuous acts of metrical rebellion, most notably “lame iambs” and the development of the “variable foot.”

Book One of *Paterson* ends with an oft-discussed *nota bene* from John Addington Symonds's *Studies of the Greek Poets* that pays homage to Hipponax, inventor of the "lame iambic" form. In contrast to the artificiality of what Williams referred to as "that cussed iambic pentameter," "lame iambs" destabilize and deform meter by substituting spondaic or trochaic endings for the usual iamb, thereby bringing poetry closer to the cadences of common speech. These deformed feet, moreover, are the poetic versions of the physically deformed in society, prosodic analogues for the "dwarf or cripple" (40). The Hipponax reference allows Williams to identify "himself as the recipient of a moral vision, and as the bearer of a moral mission or obligation: to speak for the universality of the human in an historical moment" (Bertonneau 49). Yet the passage does more than establish Williams's "moral mission;" in demonstrating the relationship between "utmost violence" and prosodic inventiveness, it gives his postmodern successors a model for turning corporeal trauma into a source of poetic inspiration rather than shame. Whatever moral urgency exists here is partnered, as it always is for Williams, with a relentless attention to the particularities of how the poetry is marked: "until in fact you have a new frame," he once wrote to Jean Starr Untermeyer, "something consonant with our times demands an adjustment to liberate us all *in the poem*. Philosophy may and in fact must follow the poem. The poet is first" (*Selected Letters* 269). As the Hipponax excerpt observes, the Greeks hewed to an aesthetic standard that privileged "harmony" between verse and subject matter (a standard derived, in part, from the satiric tradition) over a bowdlerized poetic oeuvre. Pointedly lauding the Greeks' belief that "halting meter" merited its own lexicon and method of measurement, Williams suggests that twentieth-century American writers are hampered by their unwillingness to adopt a more expansive vision of form. Their hostility to perversion leads them to discard potentially valuable prosodic elements, and it also precludes the integration of the narratives that are best told in an unorthodox fashion; narratives, for instance, such as the article from the *Bulletin of the Passaic County Historical Society* that describes a

hydrocephalic Revolutionary War-era man with “small and much deformed” limbs. This Paterson doppelganger, whose “rough and sonorous” voice issues forth with clarity, certitude, and even humor in the prose passage that contains his story (he jokes with General Washington that he’d “never taken an *active* part” in the political rifts of his time), embodies Williams’s efforts to achieve a Hipponax-like propriety for his poem. Williams himself suggests that the prose sections in *Paterson* might be read as the poem’s equivalents for the deformed iambs, for he responds to Ralph Nash’s 1953 article “The Use of Prose in *Paterson*” by invoking the Hipponax passage:

A man must, without relinquishing any of the reasons for the poetry with which he surrounds himself and with which the great of this world, at their most powerful, surround him, fight his way to a world which breaks through to the actual. This has always been my most pressing concern, not always clearly envisioned but there nevertheless. It has always stood between me and Ezra Pound for instance. In my reference to Hipponax, the Greek in *Paterson*, you can again see it breaking out. You have spotted it in my insistence on the use of prose *within the poem itself*. . . it has much to do with the whole of poetry, and what must be its place, its modern place, in our world, which is not its classic place. (*Selected Letters* 323-24)

*Paterson*’s form reveals that at times the only way to orient poetry away from its “classic” place and into its “modern” one is to take Hipponax’s example to the extreme. Instead of merely bringing “the meter still more within the sphere of prose and common speech” (40), Williams does the utmost “utmost” violence to his poetry by interspersing prose with verse. Positioned at the conclusion of a section of *Paterson* that has engaged the subject of deformity via a correspondingly manifold set of poetic forms, including a number of forms that some would not categorize as poetry at all, the meditation on limping iambs thereby transcends the particular significance of the choliambi (which, though provocative, are not a truly contemporary prosodic option for Williams) to become a defense of Williams’s quest for his own “crusty” (*Paterson* 40) kind of form: a form that would encompass humanity in all of its awkward, imperfectly lovely totality.

When an elderly Williams was asked what he thought his greatest poetic legacy would be, his response was unequivocal. “The variable foot,” he replied, “the division of the line according to a

new method that would be satisfactory to an American” (Wagner 70). *Paterson* serves as the test site for this new method, with Williams organizing the poem in three-stepped, descending lines: “I follow a certain loose pattern of verse, following three lines, allowing a certain relativistic foot” (Wagner 68). Williams carefully qualifies his definition of the variable foot so that its relativism is not mistaken for free verse, claiming that “there is no such thing as free verse...the variable foot is measured. But the spaces between the stresses, the rhythmical units, are variable” (38). The effect of the variable foot, he suggests, is accomplished by a messy form of propulsion that is not unlike *Paterson*’s lung-taxing, “half-tripping,” “hard going” progress through the landscape; Williams says that “the sounds are strung in their variety-slipping, clinging, overreaching, triumphing but always going forward even through moments of total disorder in the advance” (Wagner 67). The “strung” form allows the verse to remain variable enough to accommodate moments of indeterminacy that are dangerous but ontologically and epistemologically essential to the poem. Consequently, it produces a more complete historical narrative. If “to count the syllables is but the bare makeshift for the appreciation of elapsing time” (Wagner 68), the alternative method of measure necessitated by the variable foot, in which the metronomic counting of syllables is jettisoned for Williams’s more flexible concept of rhythm as “motion” in space rather than sound, allows for the documentation of events that would not have fit into a more rigorously linear form. For “it restricts our lives as well,” Williams wrote, “to be measured after the standard and so, unless we become aware of it, our poems rather than freeing, as they should do, throw us back on old modes of behavior” (*Selected Letters* 321).<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> For more on the relationship between Williams’s conception of the variable foot and the standardization of the twentieth-century American body, see Golston. Opining of the relativity of the variable foot, Golston writes, “the new measures of modern American poetry will reflect a national language, the tempos of which will have been generated by heterogeneous American bodies” (215).

We can see how Williams experiments with the possibilities of the variable foot during a central episode from Book Two, the account of the dwarf who lives under the falls. The dwarf, “hideously deformed” (83), appears to Dr. Paterson during one of *Paterson’s* frequent moments of creative stasis, as Dr. Paterson pauses alongside the falls and contemplates the state of language. Like the three-legged dog in the Preface, the dwarf exemplifies zealous attachment to one’s locality, so much so that his body actually has merged with the features of his environment. The initial section describing the dwarf unfolds in a block of loosely choliambic pentameter that visually and aurally approximates prose:

His anger mounts. He is chilled to the bone.  
 As there appears a dwarf, hideously deformed-  
 He sees squirming roots trampled  
 under the foliage of his mind by the holiday  
 crowds as by the feet of the straining  
 minister. From his eyes sparrows start and  
 sing. His ears are toadstools, his fingers have  
 begun to sprout leaves (his voice is drowned  
 under the falls) .

Poet, poet! sing your song, quickly! or  
 not insects but pulpy weeds will blot out  
 your kind.  
 He all but falls . . . . (83)

The dwarf’s supposedly hideous deformities are sites of activity and fecundity in a troubled landscape, just as his voice, keyed to the same pitch as the falls, carries a potentially transformative message for the poet who can detect the words amid the din. The dwarf’s message, and in fact much of the ensuing action in the episode, is expressed in the three-line stanzaic variable foot structure that Williams employs (albeit not consistently) throughout Books Two and Three of *Paterson*. The poem suggests that Dr. Paterson’s anguished position can be ascribed to self-created anxiety rather than to an actual paucity of options; the dwarf intuits this because of, not despite, the fact that his body has confined him to a single, isolated location.

-divorced



“there will be / nothing clear, nothing clear .” are, paradoxically, the clear things. So it is only when Dr. Paterson abandons his polar thinking and discovers how to approach “-obscurely / in to scribble” (86), as he does a few stanzas later, that he is able to fulfill the dwarf’s commands: “-saying over to himself a song written / previously . . . inclines to believe / he sees, in the structure, something / of interest:” (86). The variable foot form of these lines embodies the “obscure” nature of the return to the familiar structure, and Williams even suggests that Dr. Paterson has been bent in the process, with the notion of being “inclined to believe” linked with the physical state of inclination. Leaning forward can appear to be a deformity in need of correction, but it is also the default position for discovery, for reading, for searching, for a doctor who is examining the body of a patient- not to mention the default position for a writer, leaning over the words generated on his or her paper or typewriter, seeking something interesting in what has been done.

*“I Didn’t Expect THAT:” Finding New Words and “The Sweet Thing”*

“Poets seem to be tough (although they are left, sometimes, with the inability to hit the correct keys of their machines).

-Williams in a letter to Marianne Moore, June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1951

“This is the first time I have used a typewriter again for a letter in a month. It’s a major thrill,” Williams wrote to Wallace Stevens in April of 1951, while recovering from a stroke that had sent him to the intensive care unit at Passaic General Hospital in late March. He continued wryly:

It’s been a month today since the damned thing hit- perhaps I shouldn’t say “damned,” as that might involved repercussions which I can’t afford. Let me say the “sweet” thing kicked me in the slats. It was a great surprise to me, for although I know I am far from invulnerable, I didn’t expect THAT! Quite a surprise. (*Selected Letters* 295)

At this point in his career, the Patersonian prescription to hit “love aslant” had been transformed from poetic ideal into a somatic fact for Williams. His body was twisted by the effects of his first major stroke: his vision impaired, his speech slurred, his fingers unable to administer injections or palpate glands or work the keys on his writing machine. From 1951 until the end of his life, the poet

who, thirty years earlier, wrote the lines “I am confused, twisted four ways and- left flat, unable to lift the food to my own mouth” would find that his lived experience of disability did not, for better and worse, quite match his fictive (if empathetic) engagements with disability and deformity in his poetry. His letter to Stevens, with its irreverence about whether to name his disability the “damned” or the “sweet” thing, actually hints at a very genuine and genuinely laborious effort to find expression for his altered perceptions of the world. Williams conceived the final book of *Paterson* as a record of this post-stroke evolution, an embodiment of “everything I’ve learned of ‘the line’ to date” (*Selected Letters* 312-13), with a structure that would permit what was previously unknown “to shine, like a sunrise” (313).

The difference between *Paterson V* and the earlier books is that distinguishing what Williams *wanted* to achieve formally from what he *could* achieve with his limited body becomes an increasingly impossible task. But the impossibility, I argue, constitutes a key critical narrative in its own right. Williams had entered a period when the aesthetic conundrum of a “worn out” or clotted mother tongue could no longer be his sole preoccupation. Now he had to address more immediate, visceral matters like the delinquency of his own tongue, which slurred his speech and rendered his voice inaudible at readings. Williams’s public appearances from this period are as crucial to our understanding of his embodied poetics as his habits and methods of composition. Robert Lowell recalls attending Williams’s reading of “Asphodel” at Wellesley College: “The poet appeared, one whole side partly paralyzed, his voice just audible, and here and there a word misread. No one stirred...somehow he delivered to us what was impossible, something that was both poetry and beyond poetry” (qtd. in Mariani 677-78). As his speech became increasingly compromised, the poet’s close friend and fellow poet Denise Levertov advocated a course of classes in public reading at the Reading Improvement Center in midtown Manhattan. Williams did concede to Levertov’s suggestion, and according to his wife Floss, the lessons ameliorated his speech; she even went so far

as to declare that Williams's reading was "100% more effective" (qtd. in Mariani 681) after lessons, because he had learned to read in a more deliberate fashion. The poet's insistence upon continuing to give readings after his strokes puts his paralyzed limbs and tongue onstage, and, in doing so, compels public recognition of the disabled authorial body. The record of these difficult appearances constitutes a messy narrative of embodied experience that, I argue, challenges (or at least complicates) the sense of stateliness and reconciliation that many critics discern in his later works.

We see Williams sifting through these new corporeal anxieties in *Paterson* V, where he yokes the expressive and erotic crises that were once metaphorized by the image of a "tongue-tied" man to the experience of neurological shock. He writes his own disability narrative into the poem with the translation of Sappho's Fragment 31:

It is this that rouses a tumult  
in my breast. At mere sight of you  
my voice falters, my tongue  
is broken.  
Straightaway, a delicate fire runs in  
my limbs; my eyes  
are blinded and my ears  
thunder.  
Sweat pours out: a trembling hunts  
me down. I grow paler  
than dry grass and lack little  
of dying. (215)

Without the context of Williams's disability, and given the sexual dueling that occurs throughout *Paterson*, the fit might be mistaken for mere lovesickness. Yet there are elements- the immediacy, the simultaneous horror and wonder at the body's capacity for sensation, the sense that the speaker has become profoundly alienated from his body and his words- which allude to Williams's uncertain physical condition. At the same time, the claims to inarticulacy ("my voice falters, my tongue/ is broken"), which are fittingly, classically laconic, are mitigated by the fact that the poem functions prosthetically. Its structure provides a place where the fragment "talks" anew. So the brain isn't grafted on such a good "root," the end of Book One laments, but the "root" of language can still

offer consolation when the body goes awry. In this sense, one could say that the space of *Paterson V* is not unlike the Reading Improvement Center on East 46<sup>th</sup> Street in Manhattan, which is where Williams, at Denise Levertov's urging, took public reading lessons to counteract the effects his strokes had upon his speech. Both the poem and the center are places where fragmented language is treated and restored to functionality.

Williams's stroke potentially affects the construction of *Paterson V* even at the material level of the line. For instance, are we to read his embrace of the contemplative, step-down triadic structure in the final book as a calculated, anti-Whitmanian strategy? Williams certainly described his pursuit of the abbreviated line in this fashion: "I have been trying to approach a shorter line which I haven't quite been able to nail. I wanted the shorter line, the sparer line, and yet I want to give a measured line, but the divisions of the line should be shorter" (Wagner 39). The "more terse" structure was, he claimed, "very definitely" an advance in his poetic development. Or did Williams turn towards spartan, "little flashes of beauty" because he was now living with his own set of scarred limbs? We know from correspondence that his strokes often hampered Williams's use of his right hand and that he was acutely sensitive to his limited typing abilities. He occasionally had use of both hands, but the sporadic failure of his right hand caused him to train himself to write and type with his left hand for long periods of time, often using just the forefinger. This method was taxing, though; describing how he completed his *Autobiography* in 1951, he observed that he had "to hammer out the sheer text with one finger and couldn't check everything as I should have liked to" (qtd. in Mariani 837). We will never know whether the structure of *Paterson* can be attributed to the effects of his disability or to a newfound commitment to prosodic brevity.

But then knowing seems largely beside the point. In the spirit of Williams's belief in things "interrelating," I would suggest that we must consider the value of deferring such inquiries, and instead we should take a cue from one of the passages from *Spring and All*: "the only realism in art is

of the imagination.” What can we know is this: Williams’s late work is a portrait of a man who, until the end of his life, was committed to examining how the fragility of the material world could produce beautiful things. It is only in *Paterson V* that he is able to imagine gazing squarely back at his incapacitated English grandmother during her last moments, and to contemplate a poem that will contain the “last words” which constitute his loving reply to her. The reappearance of lines from “Last Words of My English Grandmother” in the coda to *Paterson* suggests that Williams’s illness initiates him into a realm of knowledge, and more significantly, into a realm of language, that was inaccessible to him as an able-bodied person.

She was old when she saw her grandson:  
     You young people  
                                 think you know everything.  
 She spoke in her Cockney accent  
                                 and paused  
                                 looking at me hard:  
 The past is for those that lived in the past. Cessa!  
 -learning with age to sleep my life away:  
 saying . (235)

In “Last Words,” Williams the young person cannot provide a rejoinder. In *Paterson V*, however, having become “wrinkled and nearly blind” himself, Williams finally has found something to say. His reworking of his grandmother’s words introduces his famous pronouncement about the “satirical” relativity of measure:

We know nothing and can know nothing  
   But  
 the dance, to dance to a measure  
 contrapuntally,  
     Satyrically, the tragic foot. (236)

Ending with a deformed foot that keeps dancing to its own weird measure, Williams’s poem achieves something rarer than knowledge: it achieves self-reconciliation. Whatever the causal relationship between his verse and his physical paralysis, Williams rarely doubted that his imaginative dance was vigorous- even if his actual legs were not.

## Coda: Beyond Modernism

“I feel a mortal isolation  
Wrap each lovely limb in desolation,  
Sight, hearing, all  
Suffer a fall.”  
-Stevie Smith, “Every Lovely Limb a Desolation”

In his book entitled *Youth and Life*, reformer and activist Randolph Bourne reflects upon disability’s capacity to initiate revolutions both within society and within the individual. Bourne is perhaps best known for his prominent role in the American progressive movements of the early twentieth century, but even many historians do not apprehend (or acknowledge) how strongly his own personal experience with disability shaped his political and cultural convictions. The handicapped youth, he writes:

will want to burrow into the motives of men, and find the reasons for the crass inequalities and injustices of the world he sees around him. He has practically to construct a new world of his own, and explain a great many things to himself that the ordinary person never dreams of finding unintelligible at all. He will be filled with a profound sympathy for all who are despised and ignored in this world. (349-50)

Confronted with a daunting world, the handicapped person responds with strategies that, as Paul K Longmore and Paul Steven Miller have noted, provide a template for both disability activism and broader modern progressive thought and action. For in Bourne’s vision, the handicapped individual becomes a “pragmatic” social theorist by necessity. In endeavoring to “find the reasons for the crass inequalities and injustices,” he locates an alternate set of values based on other kinds of measurement, other kinds of justice. He discovers his own capacity for feeling, a capacity which, Virginia Woolf wryly reminds us in “On Being Ill,” is “dispensed chiefly by the laggards and failures, women for the most part (in whom the obsolete exists so strangely side by side with anarchy and newness), who, having dropped out of the race, have time to spend upon fantastic and unprofitable excursions” (10): the sorts of sick excursions and anarchies and novelties that are antithetical to the

grinding press of civilization. If, as scholar Mary Guyatt has said, the “international cultural imperative” (313) of standardizing and rehabilitating the human body in the early twentieth-century was literally produced by the very machinery of modernity itself, i.e. with many of the techniques of mass-production and assembly-line labor and education that drove imperialist and capitalist projects, then in Bourne’s estimation, a disabled perspective necessarily and passionately rebukes that symbolic order. Progress “points to a different goal,” a profitable goal, while progressivism is predicated upon radical creation through a language of empathy.

For me, it is this Bournian belief that the disabled man “has practically to construct a new world of his own,” and that he does so in order to give expression to his own alien experiences of modernity, which simultaneously encompasses the work I’ve sought to achieve in my project and offers a way of projecting beyond modernism into our contemporary realm. The modernist writers in my project all participate in such acts of world-making, as their literature emerges out of their collective efforts to find a language of embodiment that can contain the “great many” sensations and thoughts that are “intelligible” and “normal” to everyone else but are not so to them. They ask provocative questions, as H.D.’s speaker in “Hermetic Definition” does when she wonders, “is physical weakness indecent?” (39). They envision another kind of modernity, one in which disability is not merely an impediment in the workplace, or an emblem of war, or a monstrosity, but rather a foundation for community. Their texts become spaces wherein abnormal voices and bodies can express themselves without fear of censure or censorship or cure. And it is through their explicit acknowledgment of the exciting political and artistic possibilities of such freedom that these writers become important precursors to the disability activists and trauma studies theorists of the later twentieth-century. From Susan Sontag’s meditations on pain and the medical humanities writing of Oliver Sacks to Audre Lorde’s diaries and Jim Ferris’s poetry: all of these artists owe a significant debt to writers like Lawrence, H.D., and Williams for insisting on the intrinsic sanctity and value of

the disabled body, for doing so at a time when bodies were increasingly regarded as mere material, as just another resource, and for self-consciously and frankly articulating their attempts to create literature that would be socially engaged rather than mimetic. By insisting that the “new world” also offers us the chance to embrace broken bodies, disabled modernism makes the work of postmodernism possible.

Yet in our own precarious time, a time not unlike Bourne’s era, it seems naïve to think that possessing a body or mind with a difficult “make,” as D.H. Lawrence would put it, is a virtue. The world demands efficiency and essentialism. Why wear glasses when you can have LASIK surgery? Why suffer from anxiety when you can swallow a Valium? Why go without a limb when you can select from an array of technologically advanced prosthetics? Why choose deafness when you can have a cochlear implant? The extraordinary attention (over 13 million views and counting) generated when the Huffington Post featured a Youtube video of Sarah Churman, a young, tattooed, attractive deaf woman, as her cochlear implant was activated and she heard herself for the first time, speaks to the enduring significance of these questions; it speaks as well as to our solidly American penchant for “miraculous,” linear, satisfying narratives of uplift and overcoming and mobility. Indeed, the dreadful ballast of mortality, of corporeality, that English poet Stevie Smith describes in “Every Lovely Limb a Desolation” weighs a little heavier upon all of us these days, particularly those who possess extraordinary bodies. But art matters more, not less, at such historical junctures, if only because it sustains collective belief in unprofitable but valuable human conditions and endeavors, including the very act of writing itself. Paul Muldoon alludes to this self-reflexivity in the final lecture of his series on “The End of the Poem,” when he remarks that “the only decent end of the poem and our only decent end is to let the poem have its way with us, just as the poet let it have its way with him or her” (374). Tellingly, Muldoon then summons Robert Graves’s Woolfian description of poetic composition as a trance which “happens no more

predictably than a migraine or an epileptic fit” (qtd. in Muldoon 374) to describe the state that a poem should induce in both reader and writer alike. The most effective works of art, in other words, reinforce the shared humanity between writer and reader by positioning them “at the interface between what is recognizable and what is new, negotiating as they do the to-and-fro between familiar and strange” (375). When we read about disability and illness in the works of writers like Lawrence, H.D. and William Carlos Williams, we glean a sense of how these artists availed themselves (or didn’t avail themselves) of the technologies and treatments of their eras, and in that sense, their works are historically meaningful: we learn about the history of speech therapy in America, or we can say something about early twentieth-century English nationalism, the body, and the practice of performing health screenings for potential soldiers. What Muldoon and Graves and Woolf all are alluding to, however, is something arguably more valuable than these specific cultural phenomena. They are alluding to the fundamental desire for a language of coping, for language that privileges “ends” in the sense of unpredictable purpose rather than in the sense of closure or linearity. So literature won’t give us a diagnosis, medical or moral or otherwise, but it can show us how to inhabit uncertainty with dignity. The literature of disability, in its affirmation of the ways in which embodied experience can subvert narrative control, has much to teach us in this regard. I’m pleased to reach my own end here by passing that work to the fellow so-called laggards and failures in my field: may your art be “unprofitable” and your bodies untamable.

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