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Genial Thinking:
Frost, Stevens, Ashbery

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation explores how Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, and John Ashbery have responded to the problem of philosophical skepticism that they inherit from Emerson: that while things do in fact exist, direct knowledge of them is beyond our ken. Traditionally read within the framework of an evolving Romanticism that finds them attempting to resolve this problem through some form of synthesis or transcendence, I argue instead that these poets accept the intractability of the problem so as to develop forms of thinking from within its conditions. Chapter One explains why poetry is particularly suited to this sort of thinking and what it can achieve that philosophy (or at least a certain understanding of it) cannot. Chapter Two focuses on the act of listening in Stevens’s poetry as a way to show how Stevens is not, as is typically thought, interested in “the thing itself,” but in "the less legible meaning of sounds," the slight, keen indecision that resonates in between sense and understanding. Chapter Three focuses on those moments in Frost’s poetry when, instead of attempting to comprehend, seize, grasp, and represent reality through the use of metaphor, he chooses to regard its inappropriability or otherness. And Chapter Four focuses on how Ashbery’s constant shifts of focus are not just the wanderings of his mind, but a technique for disrupting our absorption in a single plane of attention so as to achieve new economies of engagement.
Overall, though, the goal of this project is to move the discussion about this line of poets out of the epistemological register within which they are usually read and into an ethical one.
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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION…1

1. THE POETICS OF SINGULARITY…25

2. THE TIMBRE OF THOUGHT: WALLACE STEVENS AND THE LESS LEGIBLE MEANINGS OF SOUNDS…71

3. THE REST OF IT: ROBERT FROST AND THE LIMITS OF METAPHOR…113

4. FLOW CHART: JOHN ASHBERY’S ECONOMIES OF ATTENTION…161

CONCLUSION…189

BIBLIOGRAPHY…193
INTRODUCTION...

GENIAL THINKING

The world is enigmatical, every thing said & every thing known & done, & must not be taken literally, but genially.¹

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

According to Simon Critchley, modern philosophy begins in disappointment; that is, it begins “not, as ancient tradition relates, in an experience of wonder at the fact that things (nature, the world, the universe) are, but rather with an indeterminate but palpable sense that something desired has not been fulfilled, that a fantastic effort has failed.”² Now, I’m not so sure that this dissertation qualifies as a work of philosophy, but it, too, begins in disappointment—and philosophical disappointment at that. Namely, it begins in disappointment with Kant’s settlement with skepticism, which—to spare you (and, frankly, me) from having to suffer through a full explanation of the *Critique of Pure Reason*³—I’ll simply summarize by citing the following two paragraphs from the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*:

Since the oldest days of philosophy inquirers into pure reason have conceived, besides the things of sense, or appearances (phenomena), which make up the sensible world, certain creations of the understanding, called noumena, which should constitute an intelligible world. And as appearances and illusion were by those men identified (a thing which we may well excuse in an undeveloped epoch), actuality was only conceded to the creations of thought. And we indeed, rightly considering objects of sense as mere appearances, confess thereby that they are based upon a thing in itself, though we know not this


² Simon Critchley, *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004), xvii. All further references will be given parenthetically.

³ More seriously, though, I summarize here because I am less interested in what Kant himself actually said than I am in the way in which he has been inherited and interpreted by a certain critical tradition.
thing in its internal constitution, but only know its appearances, viz., the way in which our senses are affected by this unknown something. The understanding therefore, by assuming appearances, grants the existence of things in themselves also, and so far we may say, that the representation of such things as form the basis of phenomena, consequently of mere creations of the understanding, is not only admissible, but unavoidable.  

Or, to hopefully make it even more accessible, here’s Stanley Cavell’s five-point schematization:

1. Experience is constituted by appearances.  
2. Appearances are of something else, which accordingly cannot itself appear.  
3. All and only functions of experience can be known; these are our categories of the understanding.  
4. It follows that the something else—that of which appearances are appearances, whose existence we must grant—cannot be known. In discovering this limitation of reason, reason proves its power to itself, over itself.  
5. Moreover, since it is unavoidable for our reason to be drawn to think about this unknowable ground of appearance, reason reveals itself to itself in this necessity also.

No matter how you put it, though, the disappointing fact here is that, as Cavell explains, “to settle with skepticism…to assure us that we do know the existence of the world or, rather, that what we understand as knowledge is of the world, the price Kant asks us to pay is to cede any claim to know the thing in itself, to grant that human knowledge is not of things as they are in themselves” (63). Thus, “Thanks for nothing,” Cavell says, because, in effect, Kant has left us in two incommensurable worlds, “in one of them determined, in the other free, one of which is necessary to the satisfaction of human Understanding, the other to the satisfaction of human Reason” (64). Or, rather, to follow this thought out, as Cavell does, because we are not fully at home in either world, we are, ultimately, in neither world, or, “as it is said, between worlds” (64).

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5 Stanley Cavell, “Emerson, Coleridge, Kant (Terms as Conditions)” in *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes*, ed. David Justin Hodge (Stanford University Press, 2003), 62. All further references will be given parenthetically.
In short, then, my disappointment stems from the fact that, for all intents and purposes, we are caught between worlds, knowing, on the one hand, that things do in fact exist, but, on the other, that direct knowledge of them is beyond our ken. But, more than this—which, once you get used to it, seems entirely reasonable and not at all worth being disappointed about—my disappointment stems from the fact that there have been so few viable suggestions as to how philosophical thought should proceed in the wake of Kant’s settlement. Indeed, as Derrida has shown time and time again, it seems that post-Kantian philosophy has had an exceptionally hard time acknowledging that “the great metaphysical dream of the soul moving frictionlessly towards knowledge of itself, things-in-themselves and God is just that, a dream” (Critchley xvii). The overarching question that I want to ask here, therefore, is: how might philosophical thought proceed when philosophy, as traditionally understood—which is to say, philosophy as the pursuit of the true nature of things—has become impossible?

In the following pages, I would like to suggest that, however else philosophical thought might proceed, one way in which it can and has proceeded is by means of a practice which I find running throughout the Emersonian tradition of American literature and which I have chosen to call genial thinking. This is a complex and often contradictory practice, which I will be drawing out and refining in the chapters that follow; but, to begin explaining what I mean, let me restate my epigraph: “The world is enigmatical, every thing said & every thing known & done, & must not be taken literally, but genially.” In this statement, drawn from an 1846 entry in Emerson’s journal, I find both a tidy summation of the problem of philosophical skepticism and a prescription for
how we might proceed in the wake of Kant’s settlement with it. The summation comprises the first half of the sentence—“The world is enigmatical, every thing said & every thing known & done”—and is relatively easy to state. In effect, it says that the world-in-itself is unknowable. The prescription, however, is more difficult: the world “must not be taken literally, but genially.” What does this mean? That it must not be taken literally makes sense enough in that, if the world is ultimately unknowable, then there is indeed no way that it can be understood as such, without exaggeration or inaccuracy. But genially? This seems like a rather odd word to set in opposition to “literally.” “Figuratively” or “metaphorically” would make more intuitive sense, seeing as that they are common antonyms of “literally” and that they follow the general logic of Emerson’s claim: that if the world cannot be known as such, it can therefore only be known through our various representations of it. But genially? What can this possibly mean?

The online concordance\(^6\) to Emerson’s complete works finds the word “genial” thirty-four times and, for the most part, it is used, as we use it today, to refer to someone who is pleasantly cheerful—as when, in “Clubs,” he describes a certain unnamed friend as being “of such genial temper that he disposes all others irresistibly to good humor and discourse”\(^7\); or when, in “Plutarch,” he says that the Roman “was a genial host and guest, and delighted in bringing friends and guests to the supper table” (\(CW\) 10:319). But there are other times when Emerson uses the word differently—as when, in “Thoughts on Modern Literature,” he warns us not to forget “the genial miraculous force we have

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\(^7\) Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Clubs” in The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Centenary Edition, Vol. 7 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903), 233. All further references will be given parenthetically as \(CW\) followed by the volume and page number.
known to proceed from a book” (CW 12:309); or when, in “Shakespeare; or, the Poet,” he says that “[g]reat genial power...consists in not being original at all; in being altogether receptive; in letting the world do all, and suffering the spirit of the hour to pass unobstructed through the mind” (CW 4:191). Moreover, there are times when Emerson cites and develops his own journal entry in the context of a longer essay—as when, in “Swedenborg; or the Mystic,” he says: “Nature avenges herself speedily on the hard pedantry that would chain her waves. She is no literalist. Every thing must be taken genially, and we must be at the top of our condition to understand any thing rightly” (CW 4:121); or when, in “Works and Days,” he says:

One more view remains. But life is good only when it is magical and musical, a perfect timing and consent, and when we do not anatomize it. You must treat the days respectfully, you must be a day yourself, and not interrogate it like a college professor. The world is enigmatical, —everything said, and everything known or done, —and must not be taken literally, but genially. We must be at the top of our condition to understand anything rightly. You must hear the bird’s song without attempting to render it into nouns and verbs. Cannot we be a little abstemious and obedient? Cannot we let the morning be? (CW 7:180)

And then there are also times when he uses the word “genius” in a similar way—as when, in “The Transcendentalist,” he says that “genius is the power to labor better and more availably” (CW 1:348); or when, in “Literary Ethics,” he says that “[t]he vision of genius comes by renouncing the too officious activity of the understanding, and giving leave and ampest privilege to the spontaneous sentiment” (CW 1:165).

Taking all of this into consideration, I would like to propose a four part definition of genial (as opposed to literal) thinking—not as a strict definition of what Emerson means, but simply as a useful name for the complex mode of thought which I take that word (and his various uses of it) to suggest. The first of these—which refers mainly to the claim that “the world is enigmatical”—is that genial thinking is genealogical, a word
which I use in the sense that Foucault gives to it in “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History.” This sense is itself complex and has been interpreted in different ways by different people. But, setting those various interpretations aside, the basic points I want to emphasize are: 1) that genealogy “opposes itself to the search for ‘origins’” because such a search “is an attempt to capture the exact essence of things, their purest possibilities, and their carefully protected identities,” when, in fact, there is “not a timeless and essential secret” behind things, but only “the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms”; 2) that, instead of questing after origins, genealogy attempts to analyze descent (herkunft) and emergence (entstehung), where “descent” is understood not in terms of “the exclusive generic characteristics of an individual, a sentiment or an idea,” but rather “the subtle, singular, and subindividual marks that might possibly intersect in them to form a network that is difficult to unravel” (81), and where “emergence” is understood not as the sequential movement of episodes, but as the discontinuous eruption of certain temporary configurations which gain the appearance of stability through the workings of power; and 3) that, in doing so, genealogy reframes our conception of knowledge so that it is no longer associated with “an exact and serene mastery of nature” (95), but with a “perspective” which, if held long enough, “creates a progressive enslavement to its instinctive violence” (96). In other words, Foucault’s genealogy is more or less in line with so many other anti-essentialist programs, the prime example of which would have to be Derrida’s deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence. I emphasize Foucault’s


9 Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 77-78. All further references will be given parenthetically.
above the others, however, not only because the words “genealogy” and “genial” share an etymological root, but also because the historical relationship between Emerson and Nietzsche provides at least some justification for its use.  

At any rate, the second aspect of genial thinking that I want to emphasize is that it is indeed genial, which is to say that it is receptive. This should be clear enough from such earlier citations as “[g]reat genial power…consists in not being original at all; in being altogether receptive.” But, to explain what I mean in a bit more detail, I want to draw on Heidegger’s explanation of receptivity in What Is Called Thinking? Playing first with the common metaphor that thinking has to do with “grasping” or “getting”—as when we say “Being and Time is beyond my grasp” or “I finally get it”—Heidegger claims that thinking is a “handicraft.” But, then, he quickly points out that “the craft of the hand is richer than we commonly imagine”:

The hand does not only grasp and catch, or push and pull. The hand reaches and extends, receives and welcomes—and not just things: the hand extends itself, and receives its own welcome in the hands of others. The hand holds. The hand carries. The hand designs and signs, presumably because man is a sign. Two hands fold into one, a gesture meant to carry many into the great oneness. The hand is all this, and this is the true handicraft. (16)

In other words, Heidegger wants us to know that while thinking can be conceived of as an active grasping, it can just as easily—and using the very same metaphor—be conceived of, amongst other things, as a passive receiving; and, in fact, as he shows later on through his explorations of the etymological relations between the Old English thencan (to think) and thancian (to thank), it might even be said that thinking has more

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10 For one of the many accounts of this relationship, see George J. Stack, Nietzsche and Emerson: An Elective Affinity (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1993).

to do with giving—a giving of thanks—than it does with getting. But, in either case, the point that Heidegger wants to make—and the point that I want to make through him—is that “[c]ompared with the root _thanc_, thought in the sense of logical-rational representation turns out to be a reduction and an impoverishment of the word that beggars the imagination” (139). Or, to put it differently, Heidegger wants to suggest that if we hope to do more than reduce and impoverish the world through the conceptual violence of synthetic thought, then we will have, in a certain sense, to do less—not in any sort of reverent silence or stoned disaffection, mind you, but in something like a patient state of attention which seeks always to welcome those singularities that resist conceptualization.\(^\text{12}\)

The third aspect of genial thinking that I want to emphasize, then, is that it requires _genius_.\(^\text{13}\) I don’t mean this in the sense that it requires exceptional intelligence (although this certainly helps). Nor do I mean it, in the ancient sense, that it requires the direction of some guiding spirit (even if this is how it feels). Rather, I mean something like what Emerson means when he uses the word in the following passage from “Self-Reliance”: “I shun father and mother and wife and brother, when my genius calls me. I would write on the lintels of the door-post, _Whim_. I hope it is somewhat better than whim at last, but we cannot spend the day in explanation” (_W_ 2:51). As Cavell points

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\(^\text{12}\) Emerson’s way of saying this in “Experience” runs as follows: “I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition” (_CW_ 3:49). Later on in the essay, playing with the word “manipular” (with its Latin root _mani_- having to do with the hand), he restates it like this: “I know that the world I converse with in the city and in the farms, is not the world I think. I observe that difference, and shall observe. One day, I shall know the value and law of this discrepancy. But I have not found that much was gained by manipular attempts to realize the world of thought” (_CW_ 3:85).

out, there are a number of religious layers to this passage: the substitution of genius for Jesus, the oblique allusion to marking one’s door with Passover blood, and the more direct one to posting a mezuzah. But, setting aside any specific discussion of these, the point I want to make is this: that genius has to do with heeding the promise of a call, the results of which, in substituting “Whim” for God, Emerson shows to be without foundation, and thus which must be taken up and lived to become “true.” Or, to put it another way, genius has to do with abandonment, with being willing to leave behind our present thoughts and selves in the hope of something better. In a word, it has to do with onwardness.

The fourth and final aspect of genial thinking that I want to emphasize, then, is that it is generative, by which I mean that it is productive; or, to use the words of Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, that it is “both a ‘poetic listening’ to nature and a natural process within nature, an open process of production and invention, in an open, productive and inventive world.”—a formulation which one might be tempted to think of in terms of the Deleuzian notion of philosophy as the creation of concepts. Since Deleuze ultimately maintains the distinction between philosophy and literature, however,

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14 For one of his many discussions of this, see Stanley Cavell, “An Emerson Mood” in Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes, ed. David Justin Hodge (Stanford University Press, 2003).

15 For more on this notion of “onwardness”, see Branka Arsic, On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010). It’s worth noting, too, I think, that this notion of “onwardness” is also important (albeit in different ways) in the work of other Emersonians: William James, for instance, often speaks of “truth” as “the name for whatever idea starts the verification process,” and thus, as the process of “leading” or “being guided” (90), while Frost is “on record as saying that freedom is nothing but departure—setting forth—leaving things behind, brave origination of the courage to be new” (15). The James quotes are from William James, Pragmatism in Pragmatism and Other Writings, ed. Giles Gunn (New York: Penguin Books, 2000). The Frost quote is from Robert Frost, “On Emerson” in Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays, eds. Milton R. Konvitz and Stephen E. Whicher (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962). All further references to James will be given parenthetically.


I find it preferable to think of this productive function along the lines of what Derrida refers to as “the Nietzschean affirmation, that is the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation.”¹⁸ In either case, though, the point that I want to emphasize about this generative aspect of genial thinking is that it allows us to move beyond the idea that philosophy’s task is to recover and thus to re-present the world; which is to say that it allows us to conceive of our “loss of the world” as other than loss. Indeed, we might even go so far as to say that it allows us to conceive of our situation as one of endless potential due to the fact that the geometric sense of the word “generative” has to do with forming a relational perspective by means of a line—or, to put it plainly, by connecting things—wherein the goal is no longer representational accuracy but something like ethico-political responsivity to the situation in which one finds oneself.

In sum, then—and in schematic form—my conception of genial thinking runs as follows:

1. Genial thinking is genealogical; it is anti-metaphysical; it treats things not as ontological essences but as emergent occasions.
2. Genial thinking is genial; it is receptive; it does not grasp after things in an attempt to master and know them, but responds to them in a gesture of hospitality which seeks to accommodate their singularity.
3. Genial thinking requires genius; it requires that one be willing to eschew all present certainties and connections so as to be drawn onwards by the promise of...

a call; it requires one to substitute founding for finding.

4. Genial thinking is *generative*; it is the production of new lines of relation; the creative response to an undecidable situation.

Or, to put it differently—and at the risk of making it seem like some sort of sequential program—we might say that genial thinking begins by unsettling the certainties of our conceptions; proceeds by receiving things as singularities; and ends by attempting to do justice to their call by creating new lines of relation—again and again, *ad infinitum*.

Now, I’m certainly aware that, at this point, my definition raises more questions than it answers. But, as I said before, my goal here is not to compose a comprehensive definition of genial thinking, but to offer a useful byword for the complex mode of thought that I will be exploring and drawing out in the chapters that follow. Moreover, I’m aware that this mode of thought could just as easily be described differently—perhaps along the lines of Theodor Adorno’s conception of “the essay”19 or Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe’s conception of “the fragment.”20 But, rather than worrying about the similarities and differences between their approaches and mine, I want to spend my time here telling the story of how this mode of thought works itself out in the American tradition as it passes from Emerson to his major twentieth-century literary inheritors: Wallace Stevens, Robert Frost, and John Ashbery.

Let me say immediately, though, that—despite what the phrase “passes from”

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may suggest—my interest here lies neither in establishing direct historical lines of influence between these writers\textsuperscript{21} nor in explaining the nature of that influence,\textsuperscript{22} but in drawing out a shared topos that emerges in their writing: the problem of how thought is to proceed in the wake of Kant’s settlement with skepticism, which is to say, in the absence of epistemological certainty. And let me also say that I have no intention of claiming that Stevens, Frost, and Ashbery arrive at the same solution to this problem; for one of the aspects of genial thinking that I want to insist on here is that it does not offer a solution to this problem so much as it provides a guiding ethos for how we might live with it. In fact, what I ultimately want to claim for these writers is not that they solve the problem, but that they provide us with a certain ethics of thought, which, like Keats’s “negative capability”\textsuperscript{23} or Thoreau’s “Society for the Diffusion of Useful Ignorance,”\textsuperscript{24} might allow us to respond to the world even in the absence of certainty.

\textsuperscript{21} These lines—who read who and when?—have already been well-enough established in a variety of biographical studies and interviews. For three sources among many others, see Tony Sharpe, \textit{Wallace Stevens: A Literary Life} (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), Jay Parini, \textit{Robert Frost: A Life} (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1999), and John Ashbery and Mark Ford, \textit{John Ashbery in Conversation with Mark Ford} (Oxfordshire: Between the Lines, 2003).

\textsuperscript{22} Harold Bloom has undertaken this project in works ranging from \textit{The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) to \textit{The Anatomy of Influence: Literature as a Way of Life} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

\textsuperscript{23} In an 1817 letter to his brothers, Keats defines “negative capability” as follows: “I had not a dispute but a disquisition, with Dilke on various subjects; several things dove-tailed in my mind, and at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean Negative Capability, that is, \textit{when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason}.” See John Keats, \textit{Selected Letters}, ed. Robert Gittings (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 40. For more on this concept and its relation to poetry, see Li Ou, \textit{Keats and Negative Capability} (New York: Continuum, 2009).

\textsuperscript{24} In “Walking,” Thoreau describes the “Society for the Diffusion of Useful Ignorance” as follows: “We have heard of a Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. It is said that knowledge is power; and the like. Methinks there is equal need of a Society for the Diffusion of Useful Ignorance, what we will call Beautiful Knowledge, a knowledge useful in a higher sense: for what is most of our boasted so-called knowledge but a conceit that we know something, which robs us of the advantage of our actual ignorance. What we call knowledge is often our positive ignorance; ignorance our negative knowledge.” See Henry David Thoreau, “Walking” in \textit{Henry David Thoreau: Collected Essays and Poems}, ed. Elizabeth Hall Witherell (New York: Library of America, 2001), 249.
But still, due to the fact that these writers have been linked together more than once before, I feel compelled to say at least a few words about how my own approach differs from such earlier efforts, and especially from the two dominant ones. The first of these sees Emerson and company as a curious variant of Orphism and has been set forth most forcefully by Harold Bloom in an essay called “The Native Strain.” There, Bloom explains Orphism as follows:

Orphism differs from every other Greek religion, including the worship of Dionysus to which it is so strangely both allied and opposed. Orpheus is a kind of shaman, as is Empedocles after him, a master of divination whose quest leads to godhood, if finally also to failure and to a terrible death. The hypothetical lost poems of the Orphics, which Emerson knew in their later, Neoplatonic elaborations, were evidently purgatorial and apocalyptic, offering pathways to release from metamorphic existence. Where Greek thought emphasized always the great reality of human mortality, Orphism was not only a doctrine of immortality but of the actual if latent divinity of the soul. Such doctrine was Thracian and Bacchic; the Orphics combined it with Apollonian notions of ritual purification to produce a purgatorial faith. There are only two gods who matter deeply to the Orphics, and these are Eros or Phanes, and Dionysus or Bacchus.25

According to Bloom, “these are also the only gods who matter to Emerson and to all his descendants in the American poetic tradition,” although he does add one more: “Ananke or dread Necessity” (70). “The divinities of American Romantic poetry,” he therefore says, “are Eros, Bacchus, and Ananke, and the troublesome relations between these giant forms account for much of the peculiar individuality of post-Emersonian American poetry, when we compare it to the British poetry of the same period, continuing on into our own days” (70-71). Indeed, for Bloom, the driving force of the native strain of American poetry—which includes Stevens, Frost, and Ashbery (among others)26—is the

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26 Over the course of his career, Bloom’s list of others has expanded to the point where his model has begun to lose any heuristic value. At one point, for example, he defines “virtually every American artist or
dialectic between the desire for Dionysiac influx and the acquiescence to fatal Ananke, which resolves itself in a continual Erotic longing for those moments of divine transparency when, as Emerson might put it, the axis of vision becomes coincident with the axis of things; or, as Stevens might put it, when the fluent mondo stops revolving except in crystal.27

The problem with this reading is that it assumes that Emerson and his followers want to achieve a coincidence between vision and things28—or, to use an older vocabulary, between Thought and Being—when the preponderance of evidence in their work finds them turning and troping away from such moments via what Stevens refers to in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” as “an and yet, and yet, and yet.”29 Indeed, as I will explain in the chapters that follow, the so-called native strain’s understanding of language is such that, even when a coincidence of this sort does occur, they are quick to recognize that, as Paul de Man puts it, “the very fact that the relationship has to be established within the medium of language indicates that it does not exist in actuality.”30 Moreover, since Bloom acknowledges the impossibility of achieving anything more than a brief (and, one might add, delusional) glimpse of such unity, he commits these writers to the endless Romantic cycle of desire and disappointment that Emerson describes in “Montaigne”:

27 These paraphrases come, respectively, from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Nature” and Wallace Stevens’s “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.”

28 This is not to say that they don’t long for transparency from time to time—I mean, who doesn’t? It’s simply to say that transparency is not, as Bloom maintains, the basis of their poetic projects.


It [Providence] has shown the heaven and earth to every child, and filled him with a desire for the whole; a desire raging, infinite; a hunger, as of space to be filled with planets; a cry of famine, as of devils for souls. Then for the satisfaction, —to each man is administered a single drop, a bead of dew of vital power, \textit{per day}, —a cup as large as space, and one drop of the water of life in it. \textit{(CW 4:184)}

Or, to put it differently, he commits them to the Wordsworthian enterprise of suffering a lack while longing for “something evermore about to be”\textsuperscript{31}—which, with the exception of a number of passages in Emerson’s journals and the occasional lyric, I simply don’t find to be the case.

The larger problem with Bloom’s reading, however, is that it assumes that such transparency is there to be had at all, when even Emerson himself (at least in his post-\textit{Nature} period) remains skeptical of this possibility—and it is in this light that the pragmatist account of these writers seems so compelling. This account is presented most lucidly in Richard Poirier’s \textit{Poetry and Pragmatism},\textsuperscript{32} where he says, in language explicitly opposed to Bloom’s sense of transparency, that the “impulse shared by Emersonian pragmatists” involves the “recognition that language, if it is to represent the flow of individual experience, ceases to be an instrument of clarification or of clarity and, instead, becomes the instrument of a saving uncertainty and vagueness.”\textsuperscript{33} More specifically, though, he says that these writers “share in a liberating and creative suspicion as to the dependability of words and syntax, especially as it relates to matters


\textsuperscript{32} A more recent pragmatist approach to many of these same writers is available in Joan Richardson, \textit{A Natural History of Pragmatism: The Fact of Feeling from Jonathan Edwards to Gertrude Stein} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

\textsuperscript{33} Richard Poirier, \textit{Poetry and Pragmatism} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 3. All further references will be given parenthetically. It is worth pointing out that Poirier is also opposed to Bloom in his belief that “language as found in literary or philosophical or political writings [cannot] sustain the astonishing fantasy that these are the places where redemption is available for the damages and wastes of contemporary history” (11-12).
of belief, including belief in the drift of one’s feelings and impressions” (5). For Poirier, then, the pragmatism of Emerson and his poetic descendants is essentially a form of linguistic skepticism, the distinctive feature of which is an “unrelenting flexibility of language,” “a flexibility wherein meanings are emplaced only to be edged out by alternative ones, and where the human presence already implicit in the sounds of words can, through the very gestures that dissolve that presence, be refigured and affirmed” (11). Moreover, he claims that, in engaging with these writings, we, as readers, are enjoined in “a recurrent discovery about the language we inherit: that by a conscious effort of linguistic skepticism it is possible to reveal, in the words and phrases we use, linguistic resources that point to something beyond skepticism, to possibilities of personal and cultural renewal” (11). In short, then, whereas Bloom finds these writers engaged in an effort to think through words to some greater vision, Poirier finds them engaged in an effort of thinking “in words” (32), where “[w]ithin even a single word, language can create that vagueness that puts us at rest inside contradictions” (30).

Clearly, then, this pragmatist approach has much in common with my own sense of things. I am hesitant to embrace it wholeheartedly, however, for a number of reasons. First, as Cavell points out in an essay called “What’s the Use of Calling Emerson a Pragmatist?” “to understand Emerson as essentially the forerunner of pragmatism is perhaps to consider pragmatism as representing more effectively or rationally what Emerson had undertaken to bring to these shores”34—which, on Cavell’s view, means that it is just “the latest in the sequence of repressions of Emerson’s thought by the culture he helped to found, of what is distinctive in that thought” (222). For him,

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34 Stanley Cavell, “What’s the Use of Calling Emerson a Pragmatist?” in *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes*, ed. David Justin Hodge (Stanford University Press, 2003), 222. All further references will be given parenthetically.
therefore, to label Emerson a pragmatist would be to reduce the singular difficulty (and achievement) of his—and I would add Stevens’s, Frost’s, and Ashbery’s—writing to something which it exceeds. Indeed, as Cavell says about similar efforts to bring Wittgenstein into the pragmatist circle, it is necessary to “keep in mind how different their arguments sound,” and to “admit that in philosophy it is the sound which makes all the difference” (216). In short, then, Cavell finds a distinctive stylistic difference between the writings of Emerson and those of the pragmatists, and he takes that difference to be “philosophically fundamental” (219; my emphasis).³⁵

A greater problem with the pragmatist approach to these writers, though, is its emphasis on “use,” “action,” and “practice”—all of which Poirier gathers under the concept of work. Cavell, too, raises this objection when he points to Emerson’s conclusion to “Experience”—“I have not found that much was gained by manipular attempts to realize the world of thought…Patience and patience, we shall win at the last” (CW 3:85)—saying both that “[i]t is hard not to take this plea of Emerson’s for suffering and for waiting as pretty flatly the negation of the primacy of practice” (221), and that patience itself may “be exercised aggressively, as an agent of change” (222). But I think that we can gain an even greater purchase on the problem here by noting William James’s many statements on the use-value of truth—such as when he says that the essential questions to ask about an idea or belief are: “what concrete difference will its being true make in any one’s actual life? How will the truth be realized? What

³⁵ This has been one of Cavell’s major points since at least the time of “The Philosopher in American Life,” where claims that given a certain reading—which is to say, given a reading that allows for rather than represses their peculiar style—Emerson and Thoreau “propose, and embody, a mode of thinking, a mode of conceptual accuracy, as thorough as anything imagined within established philosophy, but invisible to that philosophy because based on an idea of rigor foreign to its establishment” (45). See Stanley Cavell, “The Philosopher in American Life” in Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes, ed. David Justin Hodge (Stanford University Press, 2003), 45.
experiences will be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false? What, in short, is the truth’s cash-value in experiential terms?” (88); or when he says that “the possession of true thoughts means everywhere the possession of invaluable instruments of action” (89). What James is insisting on here (and in so many other places) is that truth is what is useful for us to believe—an idea which I certainly agree with in terms of its genealogical (anti-essentialist) and generative (productive) implications, but which I find difficult to apply to Stevens, Frost, and Ashbery due to the fact that their poems can hardly be described as “invaluable instruments of action.” In fact, I would even go so far as to say that their work’s only real “usefulness” resides in what Michel Serres might call its abuse value, a term which, as Cary Wolfe points out, we should understand “not in the common pejorative sense of ‘mistreatment’ but rather in light of the Latin prefix ab- meaning, the Oxford English Dictionary tells us, ‘off or away from’: ‘abuse’ value at a tangent to use and exchange value, at a distance from it: a different vector, a different type of value.” But, at any rate, the point I’m trying to get at is that the work of Stevens, Frost, and Ashbery does not participate in the language

36 Cary Wolfe, “Bring the Noise: The Parasite and the Multiple Genealogies of Posthumanism” in Michel Serres, The Parasite, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xx. Charles Bernstein makes a similar point in “Artifice of Absorption,” A Poetics (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) when he says: “Meaning is not a use value as opposed to / some other kind of value, but more like valuation / itself; & even to refuse value is a value / & a sort / of exchange. Meaning is no where bound to the orbit of purpose, intention, or utility” (13). And so does Steve McCaffery in “Writing as a General Economy,” North of Intention: Critical Writings, 1973-1986 (New York: Roof Books, 2000) where he draws on the work of Georges Bataille in an attempt to “free” language from various “restricted” economies of meaning that are, of necessity, based on “value” and “use.” It should be noted, too, that this conception of literature is older than the names I cite suggests; Sir Philip Sidney, for example, held that fictional propositions were neither true nor false because, since “the poet nothing affirms,” he “therefore never lies.” See Sir Philip Sidney, “The Defence of Poesy” in Classic Writings on Poetry, ed. William Harmon (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 139. Or again, if you want to put the matter negatively, there is Gottlob Frege’s claim that “assertions in fiction are not to be taken seriously, they are only mock assertions. Even the thoughts are not to be taken seriously, as in the sciences; they are only mock thoughts.” See Gottlob Frege, Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege, eds. Peter Geach and Max Black (Totowa, NJ: Blackwell Publishers, 1980), 130. And then, of course, there are the New Critics, who I will deal with in more detail in Chapter One.
game of “truth,” and thus cannot be situated—at least not comfortably—within the confines of pragmatism. Indeed, I find that their work can more fruitfully be thought of as an irritant to “truth,” or what James calls a “boiling over” (98)—which is to say that their work does not guide us home, but takes us deeper into the woods; or, to paraphrase Stevens’s “The Creations of Sound,” that it does not clarify dirty silence, but makes such silence still dirtier.

How, exactly, their work does this, and what it means for our understanding of the relationship between literature and thought, will be the topics of Chapter One, where I pose the question: why literature? Or, to spell it out in greater detail: why is it that, given the philosophical nature of the problem that I am posing for these writers, do they choose to respond in literary forms? Is it merely their particular way of writing, or is there something about the practice of literature as such that lends itself to what I am calling genial thinking? In short, I’m asking about the difference between literature and

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38 The allusion here is to the following passage in James’s *Pragmatism*: “If I am lost in the woods and starved, and find what looks like a cow-path, it is of the utmost importance that I should think of a human habitation at the end of it, for if I do so and follow it, I save myself. The true thought is useful here because the house which its object is useful” (89).

39 The original runs as follows: “Tell X that speech is not dirty silence / Clarified. It is silence made still dirtier” (CPP 275).

40 I should note here that, while I am mainly concerned with poetry, I often use the more general term “literature.” This is because, ever since reading Edmund Wilson’s classic essay “Is Verse a Dying Technique?”—and especially in the modernist, postmodernist, and contemporary periods—I find the division between poetry and fiction to be incredibly porous. What, after all, is the generic difference between a “novel” like Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* and a “poem” like John Ashbery’s “The New Spirit”? See Edmund Wilson, “Is Verse a Dying Technique” in *Edmund Wilson: Literary Essays and Reviews of the 1930s and 40s* (New York: Library of America, 2007).
philosophy: what can the former achieve that the latter cannot? This is not a new question, to be sure; and, in fact, if one were so inclined, it would be easy enough to compose an historical outline of all the answers it has received. But, since my interest here is not in this question itself, but in the possibilities that inhere in a particular response to it, I forgo such an outline in order to focus on that response in the context of recent critical conversations.

I begin, therefore, not with an examination of Plato’s expulsion of the poets from the republic, but—after a consideration of some other answers—with a discussion of what Timothy Clark has called “the school of singularity,” a school which, for Clark, consists of such figures as Heidegger, Derrida, Blanchot, and Gadamer. My own particular focus, however, is on Derek Attridge’s recent book, *The Singularity of Literature*, which, to my mind, offers both the clearest articulation of the concept of singularity and the best argument for its relevance within the field of literary studies. In short, I find that, in defining literature as “an act, an event, of reading, never entirely separable from the act-event (or acts-events) of writing that brought it into being as a potentially readable text, never entirely insulated from the contingencies of the history into which it is projected and within which it is read” and not solely as a representation of something else (even if it does have a relation to that something else), Attridge is able

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to explain, more precisely than most, wherein literature’s “value” or “specialness” lies—namely, in its invention of otherness. Moreover, in explaining how the singularity of literature has the potential to introduce something otherwise unnoticed or even unimaginable into one’s common modes of understanding, I find that he is able to provide us with a new, non-instrumental way of thinking about literature’s possible effectivity—namely, how it forces us to acknowledge and accommodate that otherness. In sum, then, I find that Attridge’s account of the singularity of literature can help us to see how literature is able to surpass the disciplinary strictures of philosophy (and such related practices as theory and critique as well) to become genial thinking.

With this question settled—at least temporarily—I then move on to readings of my three principle subjects: Wallace Stevens, Robert Frost, and John Ashbery. Chapter Two focuses on Wallace Stevens. It begins with an exploration of Stevens’s conflicted relationship with philosophy to find that that conflict had less to do with Stevens’s animosity towards philosophy per se than it did with his frustrations with the Anglo-American, propositional philosophy dominant at the time. Then, while acknowledging that others have noted this, I argue that their accounts have not been able to adequately explain Stevens’s thought because they have remained tied to a romantic paradigm that reads Stevens according to a strict subject/object, inside/outside dualism. In order to correct this, therefore, I focus on the act of listening in Stevens’s poetry; for, as I show with the help of Jean-Luc Nancy, listening is an act that disrupts the borders of all oppositions so as to achieve not a knowledge of the world, but a resonance with it. Thus,

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45 As I will discuss in Chapter One, these two terms are often used to refer to the singularity of literature. The first is to be found in Susan J. Wolfson, “Reading for Form” in MLQ 61:1 (2000), 7; and the second in George Levine, “Reclaiming the Aesthetic” in Aesthetics and Ideology, ed. George Levine (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 4.
in readings of “The Snow Man,” “Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself,” and “The Course of a Particular,” I show how Stevens is not, as is typically thought, interested in “the thing itself,” but with the sense of sound, or, as he refers to it, with “the less legible meanings of sounds,”46 the slight, keen indecision that resonates in between listening and understanding.

Chapter Three focuses on Robert Frost. It begins with Frost’s well-documented interest in metaphor and his belief that it is “the whole of thinking”47 in order to ask: what happens in those moments in Frost’s poetry when metaphor breaks down? Or again: what, for a poet who believed so strongly in the ubiquity of metaphoric thinking, is left when such thinking fails? And what is left, I argue, is seeing—a term which I use not in its visionary sense (ie. Bloom’s “visionary strain” of American poetry48), but rather to get at something like what Paul Valéry means when he says, apocryphally or not, that “seeing is forgetting the name of the thing one sees.” In other words, I argue that when metaphor breaks down for Frost—which is to say, when the integrative “marriage function” of metaphor fails—he turns to the act of attentive looking (or what I will also have occasion to call regarding), wherein, instead of attempting to carry over, and thus assimilate, the object or event of his focus into the realm of discernible human meaning, he simply lets it stand in its alterity or its ultimate inappropriability. Indeed, what I hope to show in that chapter is that, while metaphor may be the most of Frost’s thinking, it is not all of it; that there is also what we might call the rest of it: those intervals when,


instead of attempting to comprehend, seize, grasp, and re-present reality in his own image, Frost responds to its inappropriability or otherness. But, perhaps more practically, I hope to show there that, alongside the epistemological Frost that Frank Lentricchia, Richard Poirier, and others have helped propel into the ranks of serious modernist poets, there is also an ethical Frost—one who can not only provide us with “momentary stay[s] against confusion,”49 but also teach us how to regard those intervals in between.

Chapter Four focuses on John Ashbery. It begins with a discussion of the (in)famous Ashbery trance that readers tend to go into as they attempt to follow his constant and unannounced shifts from topic to topic. Then, through an examination of Flow Chart, Ashbery’s longest and most disjunctive poem, I attempt to show how this trance is more than, as some critics have claimed, a mere symptom of late modernity. More specifically, though, I argue that Ashbery’s constant shifts of focus are a technique for disrupting our absorption in a single plane of attention so as to achieve a hyperattentiveness that has its own economy of engagement. Indeed, my goal there is to show that, once one gets rid of the idea that the poem is “about something,” one can start to see that it is “a way of directing the gaze of consciousness onto literally inconceivably complex and entangled linkages between various modes of experience.”50 That is, I claim that Flow Chart does not just absorb us into a trance (as so many readers have claimed), but also makes possible an expansion of the absorbability of experiential data by the attentional mind, an expansion that might not bring us closer to reality, but can provide us with a greater actuality.


Overall, though, my goal in this project is to move the discussion about this line of poets beyond the tired realms of knowledge and epistemology in which they have been read for the last 40 years. In fact, the whole dissertation might be read as an extended meditation on these poets’ resistance to (if not refusal of) knowledge and epistemology. More positively, though, it might be read as an attempt describe another way of being in the world than that of knowing, one that is comfortable with the uncertainties of our conceptions, is less interested in grasping the world than in responding to it, and, in a word, is *genial.*
CHAPTER ONE...

THE POETICS OF SINGULARITY

A specter is haunting the academy, the specter of literature.¹

—Marjorie Perloff

“What?”²

—Richard M. Nixon

Marjorie Perloff began her 2006 presidential address to members of the Modern Language Association by reporting on “the intense global literary activity” surrounding the centennial of Samuel Beckett’s birth (653). In Paris, she said, the government had co-sponsored the production of Beckett’s complete dramatic oeuvre; in Tokyo, there had been a conference dedicated to the notion that “Beckett’s art…undermines dualistic differences between English and French, geographical and political differences, and conventional frameworks of philosophy and aesthetics”; and, in Los Angeles, the Dublin Gate Theater company had put on a number of performances, including a production of Godot for inner-city school children (653). Yet, despite this seemingly wide-ranging interest in literature, Perloff noted that there were hardly any jobs available for those who might want—and be qualified—to teach it. In fact, according to her review of the 2006 MLA Job Information List, if you happened to be a newly-minted PhD in English who had written a dissertation on some “literary” topic—like Beckett’s drama, for instance—

¹ Marjorie Perloff, “Presidential Address 2006: It Must Change” in PMLA 122:3 (May 2007), 658. All further references will be given parenthetically.

then the odds of you getting a job that year, tenure track or not, were quite dismal. But why? Why, Perloff wanted to know, was there “such a disconnect between what writers and scholars at home and abroad seem[ed] to be doing and the availability of teaching positions in MLA-related departments” (653)? Why was it that in the world outside the academy literature was being celebrated, while, within it, literature—and, specifically, the “merely” literary—had become “suspect” (655)?

Perloff’s answer was predictable enough. While she admitted that there could, of course, be no easy explanation as to why the literary had become suspect, she implied that one of the major factors contributing to its exile from the academy was the move towards interdisciplinarity. At Stanford, for example, she found that of the forty-nine English dissertations completed between 2000 and 2006, “only a handful [had] any specifically literary component” (654). The others often used literary texts as examples, but when they did, she claimed, “the fictions, dramas, or poems in question [were] taken to be means to an end—they [were] windows through which we [could] see the world beyond the text, symptoms of cultural desires, drives, anxieties, and prejudices” (654). She conceded that this blurring of disciplinary boundaries might well be “a healthy sign,” but she worried that, in most cases, no matter what the inter- was, “there [was] one discipline that [was] conspicuously absent, and that discipline [was] what the Greeks called poetike” (655)—the very discipline that departments of English were supposed to specialize in. Outside of the academy people were clamoring for literature, she said, while inside, in precisely the place where it was supposed to be professed, the study of literature as literature was being so thoroughly avoided that what passed as interdisciplinary work, she claimed, should, in fact, be called “other-disciplinary” (655).
The whole situation was really quite troubling, Perloff concluded, and it needed to change in a hurry if the profession was to maintain even a modicum of relevancy.³

Fortunately, then, it was just such a change that Perloff provided evidence of in the second half of her address. Pointing to some recent books by scholars who one might assume to be averse to the “merely” literary and also to a number of popular electronic platforms, she predicted that literature was about to make a comeback. The Marxist critic Terry Eagleton, for example, had put out a book that year called How to Read a Poem, which worried that “[l]ike thatching or clog dancing,” traditional literary criticism seemed “to be something of a dying art”⁴; and, the year before that, the poet/critics Charles Bernstein and Al Filreis had co-founded the massive web-archive of poetry known as PennSound.⁵ Indeed, so many—and from so many different corners—were calling for a return to literature, Perloff said, that it looked like a veritable revolution was at hand. “A specter [was] haunting the academy,” she warned, “the specter of literature”: one could either sign up and “serve a real function in our oral, print, and digital culture,” or one could continue “lusting after those other disciplines” and become irrelevant (662).

It was all a bit too dramatic, really. But, then again, Perloff did have a point. For, since at least the mid-1990s, many literary scholars had been voicing their desire to return to more traditional—ie. less (new) historical or (high) theoretical—topics of literary scholarship. George Levine, for example, had said in the introduction to his edited collection Aesthetics and Ideology that he wanted to contribute to the growing effort “to

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⁴ Terry Eagleton, How to Read a Poem (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 1.

⁵ PennSound (www.writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/).
rescue [literature] from its potential disappearance into culture and politics” so as to recover something of its “specialness.”

Susan J. Wolfson, to take another, had said in the introduction to a special issue of Modern Language Quarterly that the essays therein “advance[d] a sophisticated yet unembarrassed sense of literary value—and pleasure.”

And Jonathan Culler, to take just one more, had said in an essay in his collection The Literary in Theory that his purpose was to rectify the recent neglect literature had suffered by “reground[ing] the literary in literature.” In short, if one had paid attention to the scholarship coming out—as Perloff no doubt had—then one would certainly not be wrong in predicting that a “revolution” was in the making.

Revolutions, however, can be of two kinds: they can involve a radical and pervasive break with the established order, or they can involve a cyclical return to the point of origin. Six years on from Perloff’s address now, it appears as though the revolution she had envisioned has been of the latter kind; for while there has been a substantial increase in the study of literature as literature, it has, for the most part, involved a return to old methodologies and assumptions. Indeed, while studies about literature have proliferated, there have been hardly any attempts made to define—let

6 George Levine, “Reclaiming the Aesthetic” in Aesthetics and Ideology, ed. George Levine (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 3, 4. All further references will be given parenthetically.

7 Susan J. Wolfson, “Reading for Form” in MLQ 61:1 (2000), 7. All further references will be given parenthetically.

8 Jonathan Culler, “Introduction” in The Literary in Theory (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 41. All further references will be given parenthetically.

9 Marjorie Levinson has explained this problem quite well in her review of New Formalism, the heading under which much of this scholarship falls, and about which I will have more to say in Chapter Three. As she puts it: “[B]ecause new formalism’s argument is with prestige and praxis, not grounding principles, one finds in the literature […] no efforts to retheorize art, culture, knowledge, value, or even—and this is a surprise—form,” leaving us, she continues, with “a shared commitment minus articulated agreement about the object to which one commits.” See, Marjorie Levinson, “What Is New Formalism” in PMLA 122:2 (March 2007), 558-569.
alone retheorize—what, exactly, it is. One hears, for example, that literature is the site where the relationship between “the personal, the social, and the political” can be explored in unique ways (Levine 20); or that it is a particular way of “attending to language in all of its material density” (Eagleton 2)\(^\text{10}\); or that it is “language framed in particular ways” (Culler 25)—which, while all true enough, could just as easily be said about historical accounts, political treatises, or any other type of writing. In other words, the return to literature has been a mere return, a return in which claims about literature’s specific “value,” “specialness,” or “literariness” remain just as foggy as always. And while that’s not necessarily a bad thing in itself, one has to wonder if such a simple turning back of the clock will actually be able to address the quite real concern that Perloff raises; that is, if it will be able to put literature back at the center of literary studies.\(^\text{11}\)

Of course, it may well be argued here that this is not a real concern, and that, in spite of Perloff’s sense of alarm, literature is, in fact, at the center of literary studies. Or again, it may be argued that literature need not be at the center of literary studies, and that the tendency towards “other-disciplinarity” is precisely what makes literary studies (and perhaps even literature itself) so vital. But I will leave those arguments to others; for what I want to do here is ask two related questions. The first responds directly to what I see as the problem with Perloff’s claim—namely, that if literary studies is going to refocus itself on literature, then it should have at least some sense of (even if not

\(^{10}\) As we will see later on, Eagleton has revised this position in his more recent book *The Event of Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

\(^{11}\) Perloff develops her own theory of literature’s specificity most fully in *Wittgenstein’s Ladder*, which, while significantly different from the account I offer below, is nevertheless worth considering. See Marjorie Perloff, *Wittgenstein’s Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
agreement on) what it means by the term “literature”—and can be formulated, quite simply, as follows: what is literature? The second is more suited to my own purposes and can be formulated like this: given the answer to this first question, what then is the relationship between literature and philosophy in terms of that larger thing called thought?—a question whose answer will lead quite directly to one of this dissertation’s governing assumptions: that literature (and specifically the poetry of Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, and John Ashbery) is able to surpass the disciplinary strictures of philosophy so as to become what I call genial thinking.

The question, then, is what is literature?—and, to begin with, we can consider what is generally recognized as the most reasonable response to this question: namely, that there is no such thing as literature per se, but only what an interpretive community decides to produce as literature. This response receives its paradigmatic formulation in Stanley Fish’s Is There a Text in This Class? which begins with the now-famous anecdote about his teaching experience during the summer of 1971. During that time,

12 It should be noted that this a different question than “Why is literature important?”—although there is considerable slippage between them. The reason I ask the former rather than the latter is because responses to the question of literature’s importance (ie. Why does literature matter?) usually privilege one type of literature above others. This can be seen at least as far back as the debates between Bertolt Brecht and Georg Lukács that can be found in Aesthetics and Politics, ed. Frederic Jameson (London: Verso, 2007). But, more recently, it can seen in the very different answers given to this question in books like Martha Nussbaum’s Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995)—which privileges the realist novel and the expense of other forms of literature—and Charles Bernstein’s A Poetics (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992)—which privileges avant-garde poetry at the expense of the realist novel. In short, responses to the question of literature’s importance tend to assume an uncontested definition of literature based on the author’s own sensibilities. Thus, for Nussbaum, literature is that which offers a particularly rich version of what Clifford Geertz famously called “thick description,” and so is important because it can—and, in her view, should—supplement rational argumentation so as to allow one to see people as more than what Whitman called “dreams or dots”; or, to put it differently, that it give us “the ability to imagine what it is like to live the life of another person who might, given changes in circumstance, be oneself or one of one’s loved ones” (5)—a task that the realist novel clearly excels at, while, for Bernstein, literature is that which foregrounds its artifice so as to prevent “an initial / ‘illusionistic’ reading” (41-42) and wake us from our habituated ways of seeing the world, or, as he puts it, “to pull / us out of the shit, the ideology in which we slip” (76)—a task that so-called “anti-realist” work clearly excels at.
Fish was teaching two courses: one on the relationship between linguistics and literary criticism and the other on English religious poetry of the seventeenth century. One day, at the end of the first class, Fish wrote the following on the board:

Jacobs-Rosenbaum
Levin
Thorne
Hayes
Ohman (?)\(^{13}\)

This was not a poem for the second group’s consideration, but a list of linguists that Fish wanted the first group of students to read for their next meeting. When the next class came in, however, Fish told them that it was a religious poem of the sort that they had been reading that semester, and then asked them to interpret it.

The students proceeded to interpret the “poem” in a manner that Fish describes as “more or less predictable” (324):

The first student to speak pointed out that the poem was probably a hieroglyph, although he was not sure whether it was in the shape of a cross or an altar. This question was set aside as the other students, following his lead, began to concentrate on individual words, interrupting each other with suggestions that came so quickly that they seemed spontaneous. The first line of the poem (the very order of events assumed the already constituted status of the object) received the most attention: Jacobs was explicated as a reference to Jacob’s ladder, traditionally allegorized as a figure for the Christian ascent to heaven. In this poem, however, or so my students told me, the means of ascent is not a ladder but a tree, a rose tree or rosenbaum. This was seen to be an obvious reference to the Virgin Mary who was often characterized as a rose without thorns, itself an emblem of the immaculate conception. At this point the poem appeared to the students to be operating in the familiar manner of an iconographic riddle… (324)

Setting aside the ingenuity of the students’ interpretation of that “riddle,” what interests Fish here is their ability to interpret it at all. Hence his questions—not “Is there a theological precedent for the connection between allegories of Jacob’s ladder and the

\(^{13}\) Stanley Fish, “How to Recognize a Poem When You See One” in *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 322. All further references will be given parenthetically.
Virgin Mary?” or “How does the poem change if we understand it to have been composed in the shape of an altar rather than a cross?” but rather: “What is the source of that ability? How is it that they were able to do what they did? What is it that they did?”—questions which are important not only in terms of the present example, but also because “they bear directly on a question often asked in literary theory, What are the distinguishing features of literary language? Or, to put the matter more colloquially, How do you recognize a poem when you see one?” (325).

According to Fish, the commonsense answer to this final question “is that the act of recognition is triggered by the observable presence of distinguishing features,” which is to say, “you know a poem when you see one because its language displays the characteristics that you know to be proper to poems” (325-326). But this clearly wasn’t the case in the example under discussion; for his students “did not proceed from the noting of distinguishing features to the recognition that they were confronted by a poem; rather, it was the act or recognition that came first—they knew in advance that they were dealing with a poem—and the distinguishing features followed” (326). Or, as he puts it more broadly, “acts of recognition, rather than being triggered by formal characteristics, are their source,” meaning that “[i]t is not that the presence of poetic qualities compels a certain kind of attention but that the paying of a certain kind of attention results in the emergence of poetic qualities” (326). And, indeed, in the case of the “iconographic riddle,” it was only after the students were told that they were seeing poetry that “they began to look with poetry-seeing eyes, that is, with eyes that saw everything in relation to the properties they knew poems to possess” (326). In other words, the students’ reading was not a matter “of discerning what [was] there,” but “of knowing how to produce what
can thereafter be said to be there” (327). Thus, as Fish extrapolates from his anecdote, “[i]nterpretation is not the art of construing but the art of constructing” (327). And so, since “objects are made and not found,” we must conclude, he says, that poems are merely “constructed artifacts, the products and not the producers of interpretation” (331).

The immediate challenge to this, of course, is that it commits Fish to relativism. But, as he goes on to say, this not, in fact, the case; for “the means by which they [poems] are made are social and conventional,” which is to say, “the ‘you’ who does the interpretive work that puts poems and assignments and lists into the world is a communal you and not an isolated individual” (331). This is because “the mental operations we can perform are limited by the institutions in which we are already embedded”; they “precede us, and it is only by inhabiting them, or being inhabited by them, that we have access to the public and conventional senses they make” (331-332). Thus, as Fish continues, “while it is true to say that we create poetry (and assignments and lists), we create it through interpretive strategies that are finally not our own but have their source in a publicly available system of intelligibility” (332). For Fish, then, “the opposition between objectivity and subjectivity is a false one because neither exists in the pure form that would give the opposition its point” (332). Indeed, as he says in reference to his opening anecdote, “[m]y students could do what they did, and do it in unison, because as members of a literary community they knew what a poem was (their knowledge was public), and that knowledge led them to look in such a way as to populate the landscape with what they knew to be poems” (332). “[T]he fear of solipsism, of the imposition by the unconstrained self of its own prejudices,” is therefore unfounded, he says, “because

the self does not exist apart from the communal or conventional categories of thought that enable its operations (of thinking, seeing, reading)” (335); for “[o]nce one realizes that the conceptions that fill consciousness, including any conception of its own status, are culturally derived, the very notion of an unconstrained self, of a consciousness wholly and dangerously free, becomes incomprehensible” (335). In other words, “if the self is conceived of not as an independent entity but as a social construct whose operations are delimited by the systems of intelligibility that inform it, then the meanings it confers on texts are not its own but have their source in the interpretive community (or communities) of which it is a function” (335)—which is to say that “these meanings will be neither subjective nor objective”: “they will not be objective because they will always have been the product of a point of view rather than having been simply ‘read off’; and they will not be subjective because that point of view will always be social or institutional” (335).

All told, then, it would seem that Fish’s response—that there is no such thing as literature per se, but only what an interpretive community decides to produce as literature—is entirely reasonable and defensible. But, then again, as Terry Eagleton points out in The Event of Literature, it does not necessarily “follow from the fact that literature has no essence that the category has no legitimacy at all.” In fact, on Eagleton’s view, Fish’s claim that the category of “literature” ultimately has no content, is the claim of “an inverted essentialist,” one who “believes with Thomas Aquinas that things without essences have no real existence”—the only difference being that whereas “Aquinas holds that things do in fact have essences,” “Fish believes they do not” (19-20).

In other words, Eagleton finds that Fish presents us with “a Hobson’s choice between the

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15 Terry Eagleton, The Event of Literature (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 19. All further references will be given parenthetically.
essentialist and the arbitrary” (20), when there are actually several possible alternatives, including, most persuasively, the theory of family resemblance presented in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*. There, Wittgenstein asks us “to consider what all games have in common,” only to conclude that “there is no single element they share” (20), but rather “‘a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing’” (quoted in Eagleton 20) which are comparable to the resemblances between members of a family: “These men, women and children may seem alike, but not because they all have hairy ears, a bulbous nose, a slobbering mouth or a streak of petulance. Some will have one or two of these features but not the others; some will combine several of them, along perhaps with yet another physical or temperamental trait, and so on”—meaning, for Wittgenstein, that “two members of the same family may share no features at all in common, but may still be linked to each other through intervening items in the series” (20) and, for Eagleton, who cites Christopher New, that “all literary discourses would resemble some other literary discourse in one way, but they would not all resemble each other in a single way” (quoted in Eagleton 21).17

Eagleton’s own sense is that when “people call a piece of writing literary, they have one of five things in mind, or some combination of them. They mean by ‘literary’ a work which is fictional, or which yields significant insight into human experience as opposed to reporting empirical truths, or which uses language in a peculiarly heightened, figurative or self-conscious way, or which is not practical in the sense that shopping lists

16 While Eagleton’s characterization of Fish’s position as “arbitrary” is not quite accurate, his point, as we will see, still holds.

are, or which is highly valued as a piece of writing” (25). These categories are not theoretical but empirical—“[t]hey derive from everyday judgments, not from an investigation into the logic of the concept itself”—and while works that combine all of them (Othello and Light in August are two of the examples he gives) are taken to be paradigmatically literary, Eagleton insists that “no work classified as literary needs to meet all of these criteria,” and that “the absence of any one of these features need not be enough to disqualify it from the category” (25-26). For example, we might call a work “literary” “because it is fictional and verbally inventive even though it is morally shallow, or because it yields significant moral insights and is ‘finely’ written but non-fictional, or because it is non-fictional and morally trivial but superbly written and serves no immediate practical purpose, and so on” (26). But the point, at any rate, is that “not just anything goes”; indeed, as Eagleton puts it, a “ham sandwich is not literature even for the most generously pluralistic of postmodernists” (26).

Still, it may well be argued here that Eagleton’s categories are themselves subject to interpretive labor (and disagreement) since all of them “are culturally and historically variable” (28). For Eagleton, however, this is all the more reason to recommend them. Indeed, just because “categories like these are leaky and labile” (29), he says, does not mean that they have no force at all, but rather that they have “a built-in capacity for expansion and transformation” (27). In fact, he claims that “[t]he belief that definitions must of their nature be exact is one of several sense in which the wilder sort of deconstructionist is the prodigal son of the metaphysical father” in the sense that both believe that “without watertight definitions we are plunged into chaos” (29)—the only difference being that whereas the metaphysical father fears such indeterminacy, the wild-
deconstructionist son revels in it. Moreover, it may be argued that his categories are not peculiar to literature. A joke, for example, can use language in a self-conscious way (“I went to the zoo the other day. There was only one dog in it. It was a shitzu.”) or yield moral insight (most articles in *The Onion*). But, as Eagleton points out, jokes and literature are very different practices. “The whole point of a joke,” he says, “is to be funny, which is not true of a lot of what we call literature”; and, furthermore, he notes that “[e]ven comic literary works”—like much of Shakespeare—“are rarely just funny” (31). For Eagleton, then, the difference between jokes and literature, no matter what formal properties they share, is “functional, which is to say situational or institutional” (31); and, while he admits that there is a certain “rough-and-ready” quality to this distinction, he has faith in such “common-or-garden discourse,” insisting that “[p]eople do indeed have a sense of what they mean by literature, and of how it differs from other social forms” (33).

It would seem, therefore, that Eagleton is ultimately in agreement with Fish; that “what we call literature is simply language around which we draw a frame, indicating a decision to treat it with a peculiarly focused attentiveness” (39). But, as he points out, to say just this is to “skate with suspicious speed over the question of why we should want to do this in the first place, if there is nothing in the work itself to warrant it” (39). For Fish, it is certainly not because of the inherent properties of the text; indeed, according to him, there are none. Thus, as Eagleton puts it, Fish’s epistemology “disqualifies him from accepting that in a specific cultural context, some texts display properties that are judged to reward a sensitive reading more than others, and that this is one reason why the literary institution ‘decides’ that they are to be handled with answerable delicacy and
responsiveness” (39). In other words, Fish “cannot ground the decision to treat a text as literary in facts about the work, since in his view there are no such unimpeachable facts”; for facts, he tells us, “are simply well-entrenched interpretations” (40). Why they have become so well-entrenched, however, remains a mystery. “It cannot,” Eagleton notes, “be because they are part of the way the world is, since for Fish ‘the way the world is’ is itself a product of interpretation” (40). Nor, he says, can it be because of any textual evidence since, for Fish, such evidence would itself be “a product of the hypothesis in question” (40); which is to say that the whole notion of “evidence” is null and void since, for Fish, it is in-turtle-pretations all the way down.

To see things this way, however, is “not to take Wittgenstein’s point that we use the word ‘interpretation’ only in certain practical contexts,” such as when “there is some possibility of doubt or obscurity, or of alternative possibilities” (41). Indeed, as Eagleton puts it, “[t]o imagine that [one] always [has] to ‘interpret’ the words ‘Stanley Fish’ every time [one] see[s] them is like supposing that [one has] to ‘infer’ or ‘deduce’ that someone is grief-stricken from his torrent of tears” (40-41); most of the time, we just know and interpretation is not an issue—and that Fish does not see this, Eagleton claims, “is evident from the fact that he sees reading as a process of interpretation, but denies that involves any possibility of doubt” (41). For Fish, “[t]his is because the individual reader is merely a function of the so-called interpretive community to which she belongs, and for this community, meaning is always determinate”; “[i]t is, so to speak, the community which does the interpreting for the reader, to the point where she will spontaneously see a meaning just as it determines her to see it”—meaning, for Eagleton, that “Fish sees the need for interpretation where there is none, and fails to see the need for it where there is”
In other words, Fish problematically sees reading as an unproblematic activity: “[t]he whole process is well-nigh automatic, as the interpretive community takes the strain and the reader is able to lie back”; “[t]here is no untidy overlapping of such communities, no ambiguity about their conventions or how to apply them, no indeterminacy about their boundaries, no conflicts and inconsistencies within them, and no possibility of collisions between the sense the interpretive community makes of a text and the meaning that the reader tries to pluck from it” (43)\(^\text{18}\) — which, as anyone who has ever taught (or even read for that matter) knows, is simply not the case.

For Eagleton, however, there are a number of problems beyond even this, the first of which is that Fish is ultimately proffering a strangely conservative brand of epistemological radicalism:

It implies among other things that nobody can disagree with him. If he can understand your criticisms, then you and he are natives of the same interpretive community and there can be no fundamental dissension between you. If he cannot understand you, this is probably because you inhabit an interpretive community incommensurable with his own, and your criticisms can be safely ignored (43-44).

Moreover, Eagleton notes that Fish’s claim that “blank verse, heroic couplets or the character of Miranda are not properties internal to a text but features bestowed on it by [an interpretive community]” risks making his point trivial; for, even if one makes the Nietzschean argument that “there are no such things as inherent qualities in any case,” the argument “cancels all the way through and leaves everything exactly as it was”; “[i]t has meaning but no force” (45). In addition, Eagleton finds fault with Fish’s claim that we should not “pay close attention to texts marked as literary in an ‘aesthetic’ way, savoring their verbal strategies and relishing their intricate designs,” but in a moral way, if only

\(^{18}\) Eagleton describes this situation as “the case at its most self-parodic” (43); but anyone who has heard Fish talk about the meaning of Paradise Lost might not get the element of parody.
because it ignores what Louis Hjelmslev calls “the form of the content, as well as the content of form” (46). That is, Fish’s account fails to see “that a work’s moral outlook, if it has anything so cohesive, may be secreted as much in its form as its content—that the language and structure of a literary text may be the bearers and progenitors of so-called moral content” (46)—as it is, for instance, in the intricate hesitations and qualifications of Henry James’s later prose (ie. The Ambassadors). Still differently, Eagleton takes issue with Fish’s claim that “[l]iterature is a question of what we do, a set of enabling strategies, a certain way of conducting or orienting ourselves in the presence of a piece of writing” when, in fact, “we can always argue the toss over what exactly it is we should be doing” (48-49). That is, he feels that we should never assume, as Fish does, “that everything runs smoothly all of the time” or “that the conventions that govern literary reception always hold and are always well defined,” and “that a skilled professional will just know how to proceed” (51); for, as most teachers know from experience, some of the most poignant insights comes from those students who have no idea what the conventions of the interpretive community are. And finally, Eagleton objects to Fish’s claim that literary works are “those which prove responsive to the normative reading strategies of the established literary institution” (55) on the grounds that the established literary institution may very well be wrong—as they were in the case of writers like John Clare and Herman Melville—as well as on the grounds that any number of works might be said to exceed the conventions of literary interpretation—as was the case when Finnegan’s

*Wake* appeared, or, more recently, when Rochelle Owens’s *Grosh Monkeys Horses* came out. In short, then, if Fish’s theory of interpretive communities is not altogether wrong, it is at least insufficient.

But this is only to answer the question of literature negatively; that is, to say what it is *not*—and, for Eagleton, as we have just seen, it is certainly not (or at least not *only*) what an interpretive community has decided to *call* literature. Indeed, for him, it is something more. But what? After spending the majority of his book poking holes in his own five-part definition—that it is a piece of writing which is either fictional, valuable, richly figurative, non-pragmatic, or morally significant (or some combination of these)—Eagleton finally settles on the answer that literature is a *strategy*. Drawing on the work of Frederic Jameson (who, in turn, draws on the work of Kenneth Burke), Eagleton defines a strategy as an imaginary response to a determinate situation—although we should note immediately that such a response is “not bound to provide an answer in the sense that a medical diagnosis is meant to do” (174), but is rather a “loose jointed, internally differentiated affair, powered by a set of general purposes but with semi-autonomous parts, between which there can be frictions and conflicts” (225); which is to say that Eagleton’s notion of “strategy” is more complex than it might at first appear. This is because “[t]he work itself is to be seen not as a reflection of a history external to it, but as a strategic labour—as a way of setting to work on a reality which, in order to be accessible to it, must somehow be contained within it, and which consequently baffles any simple-minded dichotomy of inside and outside” (170). Jameson, for instance, “writes of how the work, in order to act on the world, must have this world somehow inhere within it, ‘as the content it has to take up into itself in order to submit it to the
transformations of form’” so that the whole paradox of what is often referred to as the work’s “subtext” “may be summed up in this, that the literary work or cultural object, as though for the first time, brings into being that very situation to which it is also, at one and the same time, a reaction” (quoted in Eagleton 170). That is, for Jameson, “the literary or aesthetic gesture...always stands in some active relationship with the real,” even though, “in order to act on the real, the text cannot simply allow reality to persevere in its being outside of itself, inertly, at a distance,” but must “draw the real into its own texture” (quoted in Eagleton 171). Thus, as he continues, “[t]he symbolic act therefore begins by producing its own context in the same moment of emergence in which it steps back over against it, measuring it with an eye to its own active project” (quoted in Eagleton 171)—meaning, for Eagleton, that there are two moments in question: “that of historical and ideological reality itself, now suitably ‘textualised,’ worked up or ‘produced’ in a form on which the text can go to work; and this transformative project itself, which in Jameson’s words represents the ‘active, well-nigh instrumental stance of the text towards the new reality, the new situation, thus produced” (171).

On this view, then, literature—to quote Jameson once more—can be seen as “the accomplishment of an act and the latter’s substitute, a way of acting on the world and of compensating for the impossibility of such action all at once” (quoted in Eagleton 172). Or, as Eagleton puts it in a passage worth citing at length due to its resonance with my discussion of Kant in the Introduction:

> Literature would seem to depend for its existence on a certain loss or distancing of the real, and this absence is vitally constitutive of its presence. The same could be said of the human subject known to psychoanalysis. It is as though the work seeks to compensate for this loss of the real, one which is a condition of all symbolic practice, by repossessing it even more intimately in language; which is to say, in the very medium which placed it at a remove in the first place. All
literature, like all language, is doomed to this perpetual ambiguity. It is forced to recreate the world in a medium which involves the loss of the world, at least in the form of sensuous immediacy. The symbol is the death of the thing. As such, writing is both a sign of the Fall and an attempt to redeem it. (172)

And yet, as Eagleton goes on to say, “if the text is in this sense secondary and derivative, a mere metaphor or displacement of action proper, it is in another sense an action perfectly realized, fully consummated, one which cannot fall short of reality because the reality to which it is faithful is one it fabricates itself” (173).

At the same time, though, Eagleton notes that we should not take this idea of text-as-answer too literally since “[l]iterary works, not least modern ones, do not generally come up with textbook solutions to the problems they pose” (173). In fact, he claims that we might even go so far as to say, with Roland Barthes, that “[n]o literature in the world has ever answered the question it asked, and it is this very suspension which has always constituted it as literature: it is that very fragile language which men set between the violence of the question and the silence of the answer” (quoted in Eagleton 174). Thus, rather than a literal solution to the question it poses, Eagleton suggests that it is better to think of the literary work as a response to that question, and perhaps better still to think of it as a response to a whole series of questions which are intricately (and often indissociably) related to one another. Moreover, since each response will in turn give rise to new questions, there is a sense in which any response can only ever be partial. The Trial, for instance, might be seen as a response to a whole cluster of questions related to guilt, anxiety, alienation, paranoia, bureaucratization, and the law under the conditions of modernity, but it can hardly be said to be the final word on such issues—and not only because the exact meaning of that response is unclear (and unfinished), but also because

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Kafka’s treatment of these issues—his particular way of “working them up” in the distinctive form of his novel—transforms our understanding of them in ways that raise other questions. Hence the reason why the novel continues to produce a seemingly endless stream of critical interpretation. Indeed, there is a sense in which the very uncertainty of _The Trial’s_ response—its contradictions and obscurities—is precisely what qualifies it as a work of literature as opposed to, say, a work of psychology or philosophy.

But only _a_ sense; for, in another sense, the same could be said about any piece of writing. Isn’t a work of history, for instance, also a strategy? That is, isn’t it also a response to a whole series of questions which are intricately (and often indissociably) related to one another? And isn’t such a work also partial? That is, isn’t it also not so much a reflection of the facts and their relations, but rather a matter of selection and a particular way of working those facts up into a form that produces those relations, and that therefore contains its own blind spots and contradictions? If not, then why are histories constantly being revised? The same, too, of course, could be said of works of philosophy, anthropology, physics, and the rest. They are all strategies; which is to say, they are all responses to a complex of questions, which, since they must of necessity be partial—both in the sense that they cannot encompass everything and in the Jamesonian sense that they produce their own contexts—means that they will always give rise to new questions. In the end, then, we could say the same thing about Eagleton’s notion of literature-as-strategy as he says about Fish’s notion of “interpretation”: “[i]t has meaning but no force” (45). For, in the end, what sort of writing could _not_ be described as a strategy?
Still, in spite of this shortfall, I think that Eagleton is right in claiming that literature is more than just the product of an interpretive community. Moreover, I think that he actually hits upon the idea of what this “more” is, even if he doesn’t take the time to adequately explain it—which is quite strange really, considering that this idea is the title of his book: the event of literature. But, rather than exploring why Eagleton doesn’t pursue this idea of literature-as-event, I want to pursue the idea itself by turning to what Timothy Clark has called the “school of singularity,” a school of which Derek Attridge’s *The Singularity of Literature* can be taken as exemplary. Like Perloff in her address to the MLA, Attridge is concerned there with the increasing “other-disciplinarity” of literary studies. More specifically, though, he is concerned with what he refers to as “instrumentalism,” a critical approach which he summarizes as “the treating of a text (or other cultural artifact) as a means to a predetermined end: coming to the object with the hope or the assumption that it can be instrumental in furthering an existing project, and responding to it in such a way as to test, or even produce, that usefulness.” Such an approach has, he admits, “been highly productive, giving us valuable accounts of literary

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21 Timothy Clark, *The Poetics of Singularity: The Counter-Culturalist Turn in Heidegger, Derrida, Blanchot and the Later Gadamer* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 1. Clark himself, it should be noted, does not find Attridge’s work to be exemplary. Rather, he finds it to be “a schematisation of Derrida’s thinking in this field” (2). Clark does admit, in a footnote, that Attridge’s account is “lucid and compelling” (161), but he claims that its “accessibility” is “achieved by the decision to present these things in terms of a general phenomenology of reading, detaching the arguments from the broader philosophical and other stakes (the nature of language, institutions, of the social bond, the ‘metaphysical’)” (162). Moreover, Clark claims that Attridge’s reliance on the term “idioculture” risks reducing the conception of singularity to “a merely empirical/social field of reference, of which it is the (albeit incalculable) product or correlate” (162), and so linking it to the very instrumentalism he seeks to avoid. As such, Clark’s concerns should not be dismissed. However, since he doesn’t pursue the specific difference between his and Attridge’s work to any great extent but simply marks it in a footnote, it seems that his purpose in raising this point has less to do with any real difference than it does with acknowledging other work in the field—as I do here.

22 Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 7. All further references will be given parenthetically.
works as indices to the historical, sociological, and ideological texture of earlier periods and other cultures, and to the psychic and sometimes somatic constitution of authors, injecting literature into political struggles…and exemplifying in literary works important features of linguistic structure, rhetorical and formal organization, and generic conventions” (7). Moreover, he admits that it “would be naïve to think that reading could be innocent of exterior motivations and goals, if only because since Marx, Darwin, and Freud we know how little we can be aware of the hidden processes and drives that condition our plans and performances” (9). But, at the same time, he worries that such an instrumental approach—which sees literature as only a representation or symptom of something else—will close off any attention to “the specificity of the literary within the textual domain, and to the uniqueness of each literary object” (10), which, for him, is where literature’s most radical potential lies.

This “specificity” or “uniqueness” of the literary is what Attridge calls its “singularity,” a term which, in itself, of course, is just as nebulous as Levine’s “value,” Wolfson’s “specialness,” or Eagleton’s “more,” but which is distinguished from these by Attridge’s emphasis on, and particularly rigorous theorization of, its status as a performative event. Such an emphasis is crucial because, in defining literature as “an act, an event, of reading, never entirely separable from the act-event (or acts-events) of writing that brought it into being as a potentially readable text, never entirely insulated from the contingencies of the history into which it is projected and within which it is read” (59) and not solely as a representation of something else (even if it does have a

23 Another distinguishing factor is Attridge’s particularly rich understanding of the ways in which this issue has been addressed in the past, as is evident in an earlier book of his which looks at the (failed) attempts made since the Renaissance to distinguish between “literary” and “non-literary” language. See Derek Attridge, Peculiar Language: Literature as Difference from the Renaissance to James Joyce (London: Routledge, 1988).
relation to that something else), Attridge is able to explain, more precisely than most, wherein literature’s “value” or “specialness” lies—namely, in its invention of otherness. Moreover, in explaining how the singularity of literature has the potential to introduce something otherwise unnoticed or even unimaginable into one’s common modes of understanding, he provides us with a new, non-instrumental way of thinking about literature’s possible effectivity—namely, how it forces us to acknowledge and accommodate otherness. But, before discussing these larger points any further, it will be helpful to step back for a moment to consider Attridge’s argument in a bit more detail.

Attridge begins with the following question: “how does it happen that, via the work of an individual or a group of individuals, otherness enters, and changes, a cultural sphere?” (19)—a question, he notes, which is “not at bottom a matter of psychology, consciousness, or subjective experience, but rather of structural relations, or, better, shifts between different structural relations and the possibilities and constraints they bring into being” (18). Thus, in order to address this question without relying on psychological explanations, he suggests that we think of verbal creation as “a handling of language whereby something we might call ‘otherness,’ or ‘alterity,’ or ‘the other,’ is made, or allowed to impact upon the existing configurations of an individual’s mental world—which is to say, upon a particular cultural field as it is embodied in a single subjectivity” (19). This embodied cultural field is what Attridge calls an “idioculture”:

the way an individual’s grasp on the world is mediated by a changing array of interlocking, overlapping, and often contradictory cultural systems absorbed in the course of his or her previous experience, a complex matrix of habits, cognitive models, representations, beliefs, expectations, prejudices, and preferences that operate intellectually emotionally, and physically to produce a sense of at least relative continuity, coherence, and significance out of the manifold events of human living. (21)²⁴

²⁴ For a critique of this notion, see Clark’s The Poetics of Singularity, or, more briefly, fn. 23.
In short, it is the name he uses “to be able to talk about the subject as a node within a set of noncontinuous and heterogeneous networks” (22). The other that Attridge has in mind, therefore, is not some absolute Other or mystical ineffability, but rather a relational other: that which has been occluded, at a particular time and in a particular place, in order to provide a given subject with a relative sense of coherence. Thus, when Attridge says that creation is a matter of allowing otherness to impact upon one’s idioculture, he does not mean that it has to do with wresting something completely new out of the ether, _ex nihilo_, as it were. Rather, he means that it is has to do with acknowledging that one’s idioculture is “a divided and contradictory one, its semblance of coherence sustained by the repression or exclusion of some elements and possibilities, subject to constant challenge from the outside as well as to ongoing tensions from within” (25), and then relinquishing enough control so that what has been occluded may emerge. Significantly, then, Attridge’s account suggests—as so many artists have related—that creation involves a certain element of passivity, “of attempting to heighten responsiveness to hints of relationships, to incipient arguments, to images swimming on the edges of consciousness, an element of ‘letting them come’ as much as seeking them out” (23). That is, it suggests that creation is as much an event as it is an act; which is to say, it as much “something that happens without warning to a passive, though, alert, consciousness” as it is “something that is done intentionally by an effort of the will” (26).

As such, Attridge’s description of creation is a description of a private event, a description of what “happens when an individual brings into being something hitherto beyond the reach of his or her knowledge, assumptions, capacities, and habits” (35). To describe what happens when “what is brought into being is also other to the norms and
routines of the wider culture” (35), he therefore introduces the term “invention,” by which he means a creation with effects that extend well beyond the creator. An invention, that is, is a creation which “possesses originality of the fullest kind, Kant’s exemplary originality”: “it is a new deployment of materials that can be both imitated and inventively developed, parodied, and challenged” (42). Thus, while creativity need only work with the materials available to one mind, inventiveness “requires a close engagement with the circumambient cultural matrix” (36), and, more specifically, with the gaps, strains, and blind spots of that matrix, which, when acknowledged, may allow otherness to emerge—an otherness, it should be noted again, which is not to be conceived of as some ultimate reality, but as “a truth, a value, a feeling, a way of doing things, or some complex combination of these, that has been historically occluded and whose emergence or re-emergence is important for a particular time and place” (39). Moreover, it should be noted that any invention will necessarily occlude something else; for, while the otherness that is brought into being by means of a given invention may bring about permanent alterations in cultural norms as a given culture attempts to accommodate what was formerly excluded, those new cultural formations will themselves depend on their own exclusions—meaning, on the one hand, that the invention of the other can only ever be partial, but, on the other, that it is a productive partiality since, as Attridge points out, “it is out of such partial accommodation that further invention—always an engagement with the potential alterity implicit in the system—arises” (42).

At any rate, since invention may occur in a number of different fields (the sciences, of course, are incredibly inventive)—and, more to the point, in a number of different verbal fields (historical accounts, for example, can also be inventive)—the
question at this juncture (and the one that Eagleton never adequately answers) is: how does literary invention differ from other sorts of invention? This is an especially important question to ask because of the fact that linguistic innovation may be registered in so many different ways. For instance, “the effect of linguistic innovation may be merely blockage or blankness, a shutting-down of the interpretive mechanism, an experience of baffled perplexity that takes the reader or hearer nowhere,” or “it may be a simple recasting of existing rules to allow for a limited number of new possibilities” (58)—neither of which, Attridge insists, are necessarily literary. However, if the effect of linguistic innovation is “a temporary remaking of norms in a manner that does not involve straightforward extension or extrapolation, and that produces not an interpretation but something like an experience of meaning in process, of ‘meaning’ understood as a participle of the verb ‘to mean’ rather than as a noun—as the experience of an event, in short,” then, he says, “it seems apt to call it literary invention” (58). For Attridge, then, “[i]t is only when the event of this reformulation is experienced by the reader (who is, in the first instance, the writer reading or articulating the words as they emerge) as an event, an event which opens new possibilities of meaning and feeling (understood as verbs), or, more accurately, the event of such opening, that we can speak of the literary” (59). And thus, he ultimately defines a literary work as “an act, an event, of reading, never entirely separable from the act-event (or acts-events) of writing that brought it into being as a potentially readable text, never entirely insulated from the contingencies of the history into which it is projected and within which it is read” (59).

Significantly, then, the “singularity of literature” of which Attridge speaks does not reside in any permanent, isolated, and identifiable component of a text or in some
particular message to be taken away from it, but in the way that a given performance forces an attentive reader to come to terms with something hitherto unthinkable, which is to say, with the work’s particular staging of otherness. Thus, in a certain sense, the singularity of literature is, as J. Hillis Miller points out by drawing on the meaning of the word in physics, something of a “black hole”: a negative space where explanation breaks down.\(^{25}\) In fact, as Attridge himself puts it,

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\text{[t]he singularity of a cultural object consists in its difference from all other such objects, not simply as a particular manifestation of general rules but as a peculiar nexus within the culture that is perceived as resisting or exceeding all pre-existing general determinations. Singularity, that is to say, is generated not by a core of irreducible materiality or vein of sheer contingency to which the cultural frameworks we use cannot penetrate but by a configuration of general properties that, in constituting the entity (as it exists in a particular time and place), go beyond the possibilities pre-programmed by a culture’s norms, the norms with which its members are familiar and through which most cultural products are understood. (63)}
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In another sense, however, the singularity of literature is less like a negativity than, as Attridge puts its elsewhere, “a germ, a foreign body that has been introduced into the cultural matrix but that “cannot be accounted for by its existing codes and practices” (55-56). Indeed, this germ metaphor is particularly apt when one considers that part of literature’s effectivity is the way that it forces the reader—often unconsciously and sometimes with permanent consequences—to respond to the introduction of the other into the field of the same. But, in either case, the essential point here is that the singularity of literature lies not “in any essence of the work, any inalterable and ineffable core or kernel,” but in “the demand that [a] specific collocation of words, allusions, and

\(^{25}\) See J. Hillis Miller and Manuel Asensi, *Black Holes / J. Hillis Miller; or Boustrophedonic Reading* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999). In this regard, one might also want to look at Miller’s *On Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2002). Yet another way to describe this—and one which seems to be gaining more and more traction—is the notion being developed within the fields of information theory and systems theory of literature as noise. See, for instance, William R. Paulson, *The Noise of Culture: Literary Texts in a World of Information* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).
cultural references makes on [one] in the event of [one’s] reading (67); that is, the way that it forces one to acknowledge something heretofore occluded and then, hopefully, go beyond one’s standard habits and practices in order to accommodate it.

The word “hopefully” is key here because the possibility of this depends upon a certain type of reading: one which consists not only of “the mechanical conversion of typographic marks or phonetic sequences into conceptual structures, following the conventions of lexicography, syntax, genre, implicature, relevance, and so on,” but also of “an attempt to respond to the otherness, inventiveness, and singularity of the work” (79; my emphasis)—and not in a way that “overrides the work’s conventionally determined meanings in the name of imaginative freedom,” but in one that, “in striving to do full justice to the work, is obliged to go beyond existing conventions” (80). Or, as Attridge elaborates:

To read creatively in an attempt to respond fully and responsibly to the alterity and singularity of the text is to work against the mind’s tendency to assimilate the other to the same, attending to that which can barely be heard, registering what is unique about the shaping of language, thought, and feeling in this particular work. It involves a suspension of habits, a willingness to rethink old positions in order to apprehend the work’s inaugural power...[For, in] its encounter with the other, an encounter in which existing modes of thought and evaluation falter, creative reading allows the work to take the mind (understood in the broadest sense) to the borders of its accustomed terrain. (80)

Significantly, then—as the phrase “allows the work to take the mind” implies—such a reading requires “a peculiar kind of passivity that does not preclude a high degree of alertness—what Wordsworth meant by ‘wise passiveness,’ perhaps” (81). Moreover, since such a reading can only occur as an event—that is, as something that befalls one—

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26 This phrase comes from the poem “Expostulation and Reply,” where Wordsworth writes: “Nor less I deem that there are Powers / Which of themselves our minds impress; / That we can feed this mind of ours / In a wise passiveness.” See William Wordsworth, The Major Works (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 129.
“there is no possibility of legislating in advance, as many critical theories have attempted to do, what is and is not relevant to a full response” (81). In fact, “[t]o respond to the singularity of the work...[is to] affirm its singularity in [one’s] own singular response, open not just to the signifying potential of the words on the page but also to the specific time and place within which the reading occurs, the ungeneralizable relation between this work and this reader” (81)—a formulation which may well call to mind such New Critical dicta as I.A. Richard’s campaign against “stock responses,”27 Cleanth Brooks’s essay against the “heresy of paraphrase,”28 or Archibald MacLeish’s claim that “a poem should not mean / but be.”29 But, whereas the New Criticism focused on detecting what Attridge describes as “the unique and permanent significance of the work” (90), the uniqueness to which a creative reading must respond is “not an unchanging essence, nor the sum of the work’s difference from all other works as it appears in a particular time and place, but the inventive otherness of the work as it emerges through [one’s] creative act of comprehension (and [one’s] acknowledgment of its limits), that is to say, its singularity” (91). Indeed, while a just response will—as Fish would have it—take note “of all the programmable procedures that the institution of literature requires in a full account of its formal arrangements of meaning and referentiality,” it will also—as Fish would not accept—allow for surprise; that is, it will also “be an unpredictable, singular affirmation of the singular event of the work’s otherness as it impinges on [one], here and now, in this event of reading” (91). In other words, a just response is not so much a

“matter of an act calling forth a wholly secondary and subsidiary reaction…but of a reenactment that, paradoxically, makes the ‘original’ act happen, and happen differently with each response” (91).

One might say, then, that the event of literature is only possible in and through a given performance; for, while there is no question that a certain collocation of words exists as an artifact prior to a reading, what is essential to its status as literature (rather than, say, its status as historical information) is the experience of its unfolding—so that, in a sense, the relationship between text and literature is like that between score and music.30 For instance, when one encounter this—

![Musical notation image]

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30 Eagleton makes almost the same point in his discussion of Wolfgang Iser. “The text,” he says, “is a set of instructions for the production of meaning, rather like an orchestral score” (187). Or, as Iser himself puts it—in a way that makes the relation less like that between orchestral performer and score than between jazzman and theme (i.e. Coltrane’s “My Favorite Things”)—“As we read, we oscillate to a greater or lesser degree between the building and breaking of illusions. In a process of trial and error, we organize and reorganize the various data offered us by the text…We look forward, we look back, we decide, we change our decisions, we form expectations, we are shocked by their nonfulfillment, we question, we muse, we accept, we reject…Elements of the repertoire are continually backgrounded or foregrounded with a resultant strategic overmaginification, trivialization or even annihilation of the allusion.” See, Wolfgang Iser, The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 288.
—one does not necessarily encounter “music”; one encounters a score that must be performed (either physically, by voice or by instrument, or mentally, by one who can “hear” notation) to become music.  

Similarly, when one encounters this—

I must tell you
this young tree
whose round and firm trunk
between wet

pavement and the gutter
(where water
is trickling) rises
bodily

into the air with
one undulant
thrust half its height—
and then

dividing and waning
sending out
young branches on
all sides—

hung with cocoons
it thins
till nothing is left of it
but two

eccentric knotted
twigs
bending forward
hornlike at the top

—one does not necessarily encounter literature, but an arrangement of words that must be performed (either by a speaker or in one’s own head) to become literature. In either case, though, the point is that, while the work can be said to exist as an artifact prior to

\[31\] Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Nouvelles Suites de Pièces de Clavecin*, 1726.  

one’s engagement with it, it can only come to exist as an event—and, thus, as literature—as one experiences its unfolding over the course of a performance.\footnote{This becomes especially clear in the case of some recent avant-garde poets like Jackson Mac Low, or even the John Ashbery of “Litany.” See Jackson Mac Low, Doings: Assorted Performance Pieces, 1955-2002 (New York: Granary Books, 2002) and John Ashbery, “Litany” in As We Know (New York: Penguin Classics, 1979).}

In the case of literature, this means that the work only comes to exist as an event as one encounters “the words themselves, their sequence, their suggestiveness, their patterning, their interrelations, their sounds and rhythms” (104), which, for Attridge, implies that “a creative achievement in the literary field is, whatever else it may be, a \textit{formal} one” (107). Significantly, though, Attridge does not use the word “formal” here to refer “to an abstract structure or arrangement (‘the sonnet form’) or the specific properties of a single work (‘the unique form of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 116’)” (107). Moreover—and here he is in agreement with Eagleton and Jameson—he does not use the word in a way that sets it in dualistic opposition to “content,” as the aesthetic tradition is wont to do; for, as he insists, “[t]he invention of the other whereby alterity is brought into the idiocultural, and beyond that the cultural, field cannot be thought of in terms of the separation of form and content” since “[t]he new form that emerges, the new arrangement of cultural materials, is, by the same token, a new content—an open set of fresh possibilities of meaning, feeling, perceiving, responding, [and] behaving” (108). Rather, Attridge uses the word “formal” to refer to a work’s singular “\textit{staging} of meaning and feeling: a staging that is realized in...a performative reading” (109). Thus, when he claims that “a creative achievement in the literary field is...a \textit{formal} one,” what he means is that the achievement is the result of the singular staging of meaning and feeling (both understood as verbs) that occurs during a given performance of the work—which,
because this staging can never occur in exactly the same way, implies that “the text can never close down on a represented world, can never become solely the reflection of or a pointer to a set of existents outside language” (118-119). Indeed, he claims that “[o]nce we identify the uniqueness of the literary work with its singular performative mobility it becomes difficult to approach it in a purely instrumental way, or at least it becomes evident how an instrumentality not founded upon a response to this singularity fails in its responsibility to the text and to the institution of literature”—especially since “[a]n instrumental approach seeks not only to comprehend the text by relating it to known and fixed parameters and values, but to generalize its uniqueness and transform its performativity into a static and therefore usable paradigm” (119).

Another way to say this, therefore, is to say that one’s ability to accommodate the singularity of literature depends upon a certain ethics of reading: one that demands not only a responsibility to the work, but also a responsibility for the work. According to Attridge, this “involves assuming the other’s needs (if only the need to exist), affirming it, sustaining it, being prepared to give up [one’s] own wants and satisfactions for the sake of the other” (124). In other words, such responsibility aims not only “to appropriate and interpret the work, to bring it into the familiar circle,” but also “to register its resistance and irreducibility, and to register it in such a way as to dramatize what it is about familiar modes of understanding that render them unable to accommodate this stranger” (125). Indeed, “[t]o read a literary work responsibly,” he says, “is to read it without placing over it a grid of possible uses, as historical evidence, moral lesson, path to truth, political inspiration, or personal encouragement, and without passing judgment on the work or its author” (129), but to bring it into “being anew by allowing it, in a
performance of its singularity for me, for my place and time, to refigure the ways in which I, and my culture, think and feel” (125). Thus, for Attridge, “[r]esponsibility for the other is a form of hospitality and generosity” (126): it demands that one take in and accommodate the other as other—a demand that, if fulfilled, will cause one to think and act differently.34

Clearly, then, Attridge’s approach here is different from the “other-disciplinary” one that Perloff complained about in her address—and for at least three reasons. First, whereas the other-disciplinary approach sees literature as a window through which to see the world beyond the text, Attridge’s approach—and, again, he shares much here with Jameson and Eagleton—sees it as a singular formation, the difference being that the former assumes a transparency while the latter focuses on mediation: the fact that the so-called “real world” beyond the text is constituted by the text. For example, whereas an other-disciplinary approach might see a novel like The House of Mirth as a window onto the world of New York’s Gilded Age, Attridge’s approach would see it as a particular enactment of this world. It would not, by any means, ignore the historical context of Wharton’s work—neither the context of its 1890’s setting nor of its 1905 production—but, it would also not reduce the work to a mere representation of these circumstances. Rather, it would focus on the novel’s singular staging of this material, its particular and peculiar descriptive formation. Second, whereas the other-disciplinary approach sees literature as an artifact—a linguistic structure whose meaning (even if complex and contradictory) can be prized out through the application of well-established interpretive

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34. This is essentially the same point that the more popular writer Alain De Botton makes about Proust—and with a whole lot less “theory”—when we say: “a genuine homage to Proust would be to look at our world through his eyes, not to look at his world through our eyes.” See Alain De Botton, How Proust Can Change Your Life (New York: Vintage, 1998), 196.
strategies and then related to some existing episteme—Attridge’s approach sees it as an act of meaning (where “meaning” is understood as a verb) which is capable of producing surprise and wonder in the event of reading. That is, it is not just to see it as an inert message which, as Eagleton describes Fish’s method, can be submitted to “the campaign of an all conquering general” that “mows down everything in its path and meets with no resistance” (188)—one that “involves a certain mastery, and thus a certain will to power” (178)—but also to see it as something strange and unfamiliar, and to receive that alterity in a way that does not reduce it to some other episteme but takes it on its own terms as something incapable of (or at least resistant to) assimilation and reduction. And third, whereas the other-disciplinary approach sees literature’s effectivity in terms of a “thickening” of description (whether of individual experience, of history, or of social relations), Attridge’s approach sees its effectivity as “a reordering of habitual modes of thought and emotion, an experience which arises from an encounter with an entity, an idea, a form, a feeling that cannot be accounted for, cannot even be registered by, those habitual modes” (84), and so requires one to submit one’s habitual modes of understanding to it. That is, it does not see literature as something that we must actively work on (and work over)—although this is certainly part of it—but as something that we must allow to work on us. In short, then, the difference between the other-disciplinary approach and Attridge’s is that, whereas the former sees literature as an object—whether preexisting (as the New Critics did) or produced (as Fish does)—the latter sees it as a singular event.

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And yet, a question still lingers: does the status of “event” only apply to works of literature, or can it be applied to works in other fields as well? If we follow Attridge in defining an event as the introduction of the other into the field of the same, it is certainly difficult to see how the former could be so. Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, for example, provides countless examples of scientific works that could rightly be described as events, while, in the field of the (non-literary) humanities, one immediately thinks of works by writers like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Indeed, we might well describe Copernicus’s *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* as an event, since it introduced the other (the heliocentric model of the solar system) into the field of the same (the Ptolemaic model of astronomy) in a way that caused a reordering of habitual modes of thought, just as we might describe Kant’s own so-called “Copernican Revolution” as an event in the field of philosophy, since it, too, introduced the other (the idea that objects must conform to our knowledge rather than vice versa) into the field of the same (epistemology) in a way that caused a reordering of habitual modes of thought. Thus, it seems that, in spite of the explanatory usefulness of Attridge’s account, we are, once again, in a place where the definition of literature cancels all the way through and so has meaning but no force.

At the same time, though, if we think of “eventness” as a status that a work attains rather than as something that inheres in it, it is still possible to make this definition tenable. To do so, however, we must clarify a few things, the first of which is the notion of “the same.” As we have seen before, an event, for Attridge, is that which introduces the other into the field of the same. But what is “the same”? According to Attridge, the same is the “complex matrix of habits, cognitive models, representations, beliefs,
expectations, prejudices, and preferences that operate intellectually, emotionally, and physically to produce a sense of at least relative continuity, coherence, and significance out of the manifold events of human living” (21). But we might just as well describe it, in Foucauldian terms, as an episteme, or as he later refined it, a discursive formation, which, using Judith Butler’s pithy phrase, we can define as “the limits of acceptable speech.”35 The “same,” in other words, is that which regulates truth claims at any given moment; and furthermore, is that which does so by means of “the repression or exclusion of some elements and possibilities” (Attridge 25), or, in short, by the exclusion of the other. The second term in need of clarification, then, is “the event,” which, again, as we have seen before, Attridge defines as that which “opens new possibilities of meaning and feeling (understood as verbs)” (59), but which we might also understand, in Derridean terms, as “what comes and, in coming, comes to surprise me, to surprise and to suspend comprehension” so that “the event is first of all that which I do not first of all comprehend.”36 Or even better, as he continues, “the event is first of all that I do not comprehend. It consists in that, that I do not comprehend: that which I do not comprehend and first of all that I do not comprehend, the fact that I do not comprehend: my incomprehension” (90). In other words, the event “is the limit, at once internal and external...of appropriation (comprehension, recognition, identification, description, determination, interpretation on the basis of a horizon of anticipation, knowledge, naming, and so on)” (90); which is to say, it is the limit at which appropriation falters. In


short, then, an event is the irruption of some previously excluded possibility within an established discursive formation.

Most of the time, of course, such irruptions are handled quite quickly—as is the case in academia. A critic will point out a blind spot in previous scholarship and, if legitimate, it will swiftly become part of critical doxa—meaning that it will be appropriated by the governing discourse, and so cannot rightly be called an event. Hence the reason why an article in *Critical Inquiry* is rarely, if ever, an event, even though it might be said to introduce something new into the field. And hence, too, why a contemporary reader will find it hard to take *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* as an event in the true sense of the word, even though it might have made sense to call it one in 1543. There are other times, however, when a work remains inappropriable or retains a sense of “eventness”—as is the case with most of what we call “literature.” Keats’s “Hyperion,” for instance, has remained resistant to the appropriation of any discursive formation despite the fact that it was written in 1818, which is why it can still surprise even the most seasoned scholar of Romantic poetry. And the same can be said for a work like Nietzsche’s *The Will to Power*, which, while rarely described as “literature,” might well be defined as such due to the fact that it has remained inappropriable to the discursive formation of philosophy despite the various uses to which it has been put. In short, if we retain the word “event” for those works that resist appropriation and incorporation by any given discursive formation, then Attridge’s conception of “literature” does not cancel all the way through; that is, it becomes a particular qualification (perhaps an honorific title) which we can attach to those works that remain unassimilable to any discursive formation.
Even so, one might well argue that this definition expands our sense of what counts as “literature” too far.\textsuperscript{37} But I would respond by saying that the benefits of this definition far outweigh the risks of expansion—and for at least three reasons. The first is that to define literature as “a singular event that remains resistant to appropriation by some other discourse” is to give it a certain specificity that terms like “special” (Levine) and “valuable” (Wolfson) lack, since the former is ultimately a personal designation and the latter one that—in addition to begging the question “Valuable for whom?”—seems just as applicable to the latest issue of The New England Journal of Medicine as it does to Bleak House. The second is that it is able to account for not only those works, which, as Fish would have it, “prove responsive to the normative reading strategies of the established literary institution” (ie. Jane Eyre), but also those that are unresponsive due the fact that they exceed or challenge those strategies (ie. Steve McCaffery’s Panopticon). And the third—and most importantly for the concerns that we saw Perloff raise at the beginning of this chapter—is that it suggests a way in which literary studies might proceed with a sort of interdisciplinary work that is not, finally, other-disciplinary; that is, a sort of work that, as Perloff put it, does not simply see literary texts as “windows through which we can see the world beyond the text, symptoms of cultural desires, drives, anxieties, and prejudices.” In fact, in defining literature as the invention of the other within the field of the same—or, again, as an event that cannot be appropriated by an established discursive formation—it suggests that some form of interdisciplinarity might even be necessary; for, in order to say how some work (ie. Charles Olson’s

\textsuperscript{37} How, for instance, can Emerson’s “Experience”, Eliot’s Four Quartets, and Henry Darger’s In the Realms of the Unreal all be called literature? For don’t they all address quite different concerns? And don’t they all take radically different forms? Yes and yes; but, then, they also share one feature in common: they are all works that have remained resistant to the appropriation of other discourses, whether philosophy (in the case of Emerson), religion (in the case of Eliot), or psychoanalysis (in the case of Darger).
Maximus Poems) exceeds a given discursive formation (i.e., history), one will have to have some knowledge of what is acceptable and unacceptable to that formation. Overall, then, we could say that, while Attridge’s definition does expand the possibilities of what might count as literature, it does so by giving that category a coherence—and a dynamic one at that— which other definitions lack. That is, it is able not only to say but to explain why literature truly is, as Derrida famously put it, that “strange institution” which “allows one to say everything, in every way.”

With this question settled, then—at least temporarily—we can now turn to a consideration of the answer’s relevance for my own project, and, in particular, to the question of the relationship between literature and philosophy (as well as theory and critique) in terms of that broader thing called thought—and, to do so, it will be helpful to begin by looking at the work of Rodolphe Gasché, who explains how the latter three practices fail to live up to what he calls “the honor thinking.” Philosophy fails, Gasché says, because it is “a thing of the academy and part of the so-called humanities,” which means that, nowadays at least, it “consists mostly of historical or textual commentaries on the texts of the tradition; of critically probing in conformity with certain disciplinary and institutional constraints, criteria and rules, arguments taken out of context; or of epigonic

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38 By this, I mean that it is able to account for historical change, which is to say, for why a work may be understood as an event—and thus, as literature—at one time only to become a historical artifact later on (i.e., many of the lesser morality plays), or, conversely, why a work may not, at first, be taken as literature only to be treated as such later on (i.e., Defoe’s A Journal of the Plague Year); for, as discursive formations inevitably change, so will what is and isn’t taken to be disruptive to those formations. Moreover, it is able to account for cultural differences, which is to say, for why a work may be taken as an event in one culture, but not in another.

39 Jacques Derrida and Derek Attridge, “‘This Strange Institution Called Literature’: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,” in Acts of Literature, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), 36. For a nice overview of Derrida’s thinking on literature, see Attridge’s introduction to this volume.
variations on previous philosophical accomplishments, however brilliant.” 40 The consequence of its “development as metaphysics into the independent sciences in which it finds its legitimate completion,” philosophy is determined from the outset, in other words, by a calculated rationality and a set of institutionally established norms” (6). It is still a worthy and useful thing to do, Gasché admits, but it cannot ultimately live up to the demands of thinking, he says, because that which “determines the essence of thinking remains concealed to philosophy as philosophy” (6)—which, to give it a Heideggerian ring, means that thinking remains philosophy’s always unthought potential which lies in wait, so to speak, “to awaken the not yet actualized possibility of philosophy” (7). 41

Theory, then, fails for a similar reason; for, in its modern sense, Gasché explains, theory “is a deductive system in view of the explication of given facts, and, hence, is dependent on a naturalistic view of the world, which [it] advances while being grounded in it” (9). It is grounded, that is, “in the fundamental experience of Being that characterizes the metaphysical ground-situation of western science and cognition”: “the experience of that which presences as object in objects and which consists in securing and entrapping what presences in such objectness” (9). Thus, as theory is based on a “representational relation to Being as presence-at-hand,” it, too, cannot live up to the demands of thinking, Gasché says, because it participates in “annihilating the specificity of that which it deals with” and “abandoning concreteness for lofty abstractions” (9). Indeed, just like philosophy, theory also stops and rests at precisely the place where...


And so, too, with critique—although, with it, things are a bit more complicated; for, as Gasché explains, while critique begins as a promising “new and radical negativity of thought” (12) through which, “for the first time, metaphysics puts itself into question” (15), as it develops in Kant, it becomes “a self-critique of reason by way of which reason subjects itself to its own standard and achieves self-knowledge, as well as a knowledge of its inherent boundaries” (13). Thus, far from achieving the “thorough destruction of the pretensions and dialectical illusions of reason” which it proposed at its outset, critique is nowadays nothing more than the first step to be taken in “securing the minimal, but firm, foundation for the much more ambitious project of establishing a future metaphysics” (13). In other words, while critique might have begun in negativity, that negativity has nowadays come to serve merely as “a function of a self-evident positivity held to be fundamental and unshakable” (13). And, moreover, “since the notion of critique derives from the Greek verb krinein (to separate, to distinguish, to choose, to decide), [it] entails the assumption of the possibility of clear-but, pure distinction and discrimination” (12)—which means that even when it puts reason itself into question, critique still supports and maintains the reasoning faculty that is performing that critique. In fact, as Gasché points out, Kant’s notion of critique, from which our contemporary notions are derived, “was above all critique of prejudice and established authority, and hence was intimately tied to a conception of the human being as capable of self-thinking, hence autonomous, and free

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42 It is important to note here that the “theory” of which Gasché speaks is not the same as what Anglo-American departments of English have mistakenly come to call “theory.” As Gasché puts it, “to uphold thinking in the face of ‘theory’ is also to resist the impoverishment of continental thought that the label ‘theory’ produces and to advocate a responsibility toward the tradition of continental philosophy as a whole, without which a critical break in a thinking mode with this tradition makes no sense” (10).
from religious and political authorities” (13)—meaning that “the critical idea is founded not only on the assurance or doxa that binary severing is ultimately possible without also being rendered impossible from within, but also on the uncritical faith in the salutary nature of what critique tries to sever off in strokes of uncontaminated purity and the desirability of thus achieved purity and ideality” (16). Thus, like philosophy and theory before it, critique cannot therefore live up to the demands of thinking, Gasché says, because it rests on the “unquestioned, if not uncritical, presuppositions of self-evident truth and purity” (12) which a more rigorous thinking would want to unsettle.43

Gasché’s common complaint against these three traditional practices, then, is that they fail to go far enough; that, as he puts it in an Adornian formulation, they “halt precisely where thinking would have to continue in order to arrive at the place where finally something could be changed” (8). And yet, at the same time, Gasché is careful to insist that these practices not be abandoned; for thinking, he suggests, is not something that can be achieved in some pure realm distinct from philosophy, theory, and critique, but is rather, as Derrida might say, parasitic upon those practices.44 Indeed, as Gasché summarizes it,

[...]thinking is not a unified and separate undertaking. Rather, thinking is multiple from the start and takes shape only by way of such differentiation and multiplication of its forms. But although it takes place in the shape of these

43 At one point, Gasché refers to the sort of thinking that would go beyond critique as “hypercritique,” which he describes as follows: “Hypercritique directed at critique seeks to exceed critique without, however, compromising it in the least. In thinking critique otherwise, radical and interminable hypercritique expropriates critique from all reassuring certitudes, above all from the certitude of disposing of unequivocal, definite, and determined oppositions, and opens it up to what, therefore, is by definition indeterminate, incaulculable, and unforeseeable—to what exceed binary determination, and which, therefore, escapes the categorization sought by the latter” (17).

various undertakings that are critique, theory, and philosophy, it is also what ceaselessly questions these formations and expands on their inherent limits. Thinking occurs in no other way than by way of the uncompromising vigilance regarding the unquestioned presuppositions of the different forms in which it segregates. (17)

Thinking, in other words, is internal to the forms in which it occurs; it is the confrontation of a form of thought “with the structural limits that its very enabling conditions impose on its totalizing and stabilizing enterprise” (11)—and so it consists, above all, “in preventing the conceptual and categorial grid that informs philosophical thought from closing thought upon itself and of eliminating the possibility…of something that would not let itself be identified by what Kant referred to as the ‘form of thinking’” (18). To live up to the honor of thinking, therefore, one would, first and foremost, have to hold open the form of thinking itself; for it is in this way alone, Gasché suggests, that a space might be secured “within it for the possibility of events so singular and so new that they [would] not let themselves be determined in distinction from and in opposition to what already obtains” (18). One would have, in other words, to acknowledge that thinking “is always necessarily ‘held within’ [prise] and ‘overtaken’ [surprise] by a language and a logic constituting […] system that cannot be dominated by thinking,” and then, from that acknowledgment, set out to respond with an uncalculated responsibility, a responsibility, that is, which would call upon one to decide the undecidable in the face of uncertainty.45

Now, Gasché doesn’t say it, but, to me, this sounds an awful lot like what we have heard Attridge call “the singular event of literature”; for, to describe “thinking” as the confrontation of a form of thought “with the structural limits that its very enabling

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conditions impose on its totalizing and stabilizing enterprise” or, again, as an event “so singular and so new” that it “would not let itself be identified by what Kant referred to as the ‘form of thinking’” is, in effect, to say that it is the irruption of an event of meaning (understood as a verb) which cannot be appropriated by a given discursive formation—which, in this case, means that it cannot be appropriated by the “disciplinary and institutional constraints, criteria and rules” of philosophy. Literature, then, while certainly not the only site where such thinking can take place, is, as we will see in the following chapters, one of the main sites where it does take place in the American tradition.46

Before going on, however—and as a way of transition to Chapter Two’s discussion of Wallace Stevens’s “philosophy” of sound—let me try to make the relationship between literature and philosophy a bit more clear by drawing on two admittedly idiosyncratic examples from the world of audio engineering: compression and gating. A compressor is an electronic device (often in the form of a stomp-box pedal)—or, as is increasingly common, a software program—that is used to control the volume of an audio signal (like the one running from an electric guitar to an amplifier) in an attempt to “even out” the sound. When engaged, it will attenuate signals coming from

46 The reasons for why this is so—that is, for why America has not spawned a “philosophical” tradition comparable to that of Continental philosophy—are quite complex and beyond the scope of this dissertation. In passing, though, we can note that it has something to do with the nation’s long history of anti-intellectualism, that tendency which Richard Hofstadter famously described as the widespread “resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind and of those who are considered to represent it; and a disposition constantly to minimize the value of that life” (7), as well as with the fact that, even when philosophy is invoked by American intellectuals, it is not done, as Cornel West has argued, to put forth “solutions to perennial problems in the Western philosophical conversation initiated by Plato,” but rather to provide a “continuous cultural commentary or set of interpretations that attempt to explain America to itself at a particular historical moment” (5). See Richard Hofstadter, Anti-intellectualism in American Life (New York: Vintage Books, 1963) and Cornel West, The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).
the guitar that register above a certain threshold and increase those that register below. In other words, it will limit the dynamic range of the signal so as to smooth over the inevitable inconsistencies of a player’s attack. A noise gate, then, works in much the same way—although its function is to limit the “hiss” or “noise” that accompanies the “music.” Thus, when a noise gate is engaged, it will attenuate signals coming from the guitar that register below a certain threshold. That is, it will eradicate any unintended “noise” by only allowing a signal to pass through the “gate” (from guitar to amplifier, for example) when it is above the set threshold. In either case, though, the point is that both compressors and noise gates eliminate any “outlying” sounds so as to “purify” the “intended” signal—which is, of course, to oversimplify the matter greatly. But, since this is not a dissertation about signal processing, let me move on. What I want to say is that philosophy (or at least what is called philosophy in the Anglo-American tradition) is like thought processed through a compressor or a noise gate: it funnels the inconsistencies of what John Updike called “the difficulty of reality”47 through set parameters (ie. disciplinary restraints, calculable logic, etc.) so as to produce something palatable, legible, and, while often “useful,” entirely bland, whereas literature is like thought set free: inconsistent, noisy, and…well, real.

47 For more on this, see Cora Diamond, “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy” in Philosophy and Animal Life (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).
CHAPTER TWO...

THE TIMBRE OF THOUGHT: WALLACE STEVENS AND THE LESS LEGIBLE MEANINGS OF SOUND

Reality is not what it is.¹

—Wallace Stevens

Anyone reading through the notebooks and letters of Wallace Stevens might well assume that the poet harbored a strong antipathy towards philosophy. In his undated “Adagia,” for example, he wrote that “[t]he poet must not adapt his experience to that of the philosopher” (CPP 909) and, more antagonistically, that “it is of more value to infuriate philosophers than to go along with them” (CPP 906). In a 1942 letter to Henry Church, for another, he claimed that, while interested in his friend’s “preoccupation” with Nietzsche, he was not too eager to get his hands on the German philosopher’s work, since, in his view, “[t]he incessant job is to get into focus, not out of focus,” and Nietzsche, he thought, was “as perfect a means of getting out of focus as a little bit too much drink.”² And, in a 1949 letter to Bernard Heringman, for one more, he stated that he had “never studied systematic philosophy and should be bored to death at the mere thought of doing so” (L 636). At the same time, though—and in those same notebooks and letters—one can find a number of statements indicating that Stevens did, in fact, read philosophy and, moreover, that he was deeply interested and even moved by it. In a

¹ Wallace Stevens, “Adagia” in Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose, eds. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1997), 914. All further references to Stevens, except where indicated, are from this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text as CPP, followed by the page number.

² Wallace Stevens, Letters of Wallace Stevens, ed. Holly Stevens (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 432. All further references will be given parenthetically in the text as L, followed by the page number.
1941 letter to Harvey Breit, for instance, Stevens claimed that he liked “to read a little philosophy after breakfast, before starting downtown” (L 390). In a 1952 letter to Paule Vidal, for another, he stated that he was “extremely eager” to get ahold of Heidegger’s book on Hölderlin (L 758). And, in a 1955 letter to Peter H. Lee, for one more, he professed his “love” for the French philosopher Maurice Blanchot (L 879).³

Even more complicated than this, though, is the relationship that emerges in the essays collected in The Necessary Angel and elsewhere. In “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet,” for example, Stevens begins by setting philosophy (what he calls the “official view of being”) and poetry (what he calls “the unofficial view”) in opposition to one another, only to admit, in the next breath, that such a contrast actually establishes a necessary connection between them:

In philosophy we attempt to approach truth through the reason. Obviously this is a statement of convenience. If we say that in poetry we attempt to approach truth through the imagination, this, too, is a statement of convenience. We must conceive of poetry as at least the equal of philosophy. If truth is the object of both and if any considerable number of people feel very skeptical of all philosophers, then, to be brief about it, a still more considerable number of people must feel very skeptical of all poets. Since we expect rational ideas to satisfy the reason and imaginative ideas to satisfy the imagination, it follows that if we are skeptical of rational ideas it is because they do not satisfy the reason and if we are skeptical of imaginative ideas it is because they do not satisfy the imagination. If an imaginative idea does not satisfy the reason, we regard the fact as in the nature of things. If an imaginative idea does not satisfy the imagination, our expectation of it is not fulfilled. On the other hand, and finally, if an imaginative idea satisfies the imagination, we are indifferent to the fact that it does not satisfy the reason, although we concede that it would be complete, as an idea, if, in addition to satisfying the imagination, it also satisfied the reason. (CPP 667-668)

³ Richard Wilbur’s account of meeting Stevens after a 1952 reading at Harvard confirms this interest: “Stevens became very comfortable, sitting in a corner chair as he talked at great length about the Harvard of his days, about Royce and Santayana. We were all so interested that we just asked him questions that made him talk a little more. I cannot remember anything save that it was all about his teachers in philosophy. Those were the people he talked about, and we went out feeling that’s what happened. Not the publication of a few poems in the Advocate, but his philosophy courses.” Quoted in Peter Brazeau, Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered: An Oral Biography (New York: Random House, 1983), 169.
In “Imagination as Value,” for another, he claims that “[i]magination, as metaphysics, leads us in one direction and, as art, in another” (CPP 726), only to say, in the next sentence, that they are essentially the same; that “[w]hen we consider the imagination as metaphysics, we realize that it is in the nature of the imagination itself that we should be quick to accept it as the only clue to reality” (CPP 727; my emphasis). And, in “A Collect of Philosophy,” for one more, he claims that just as “all philosophy is poetic in conception and doctrine…all poetry is philosophic in conception and doctrine” (CPP 856), only to say later on that “[t]he uses to which the philosopher and the poet put the world are different and the ends that they have in mind are different” (CPP 863), since “[t]he philosopher intends his integration to be fateful [whereas] the poet intends his to be effective” (CPP 862).

And then, of course, there are the poems themselves, which have an undeniably philosophical bent even while maintaining an ironic attitude towards such a pursuit. In “The Comedian as the Letter C,” for example, Stevens inhabits, only to send up, what he calls, in a 1940 letter to Hi Simons, “the way of all mind”: “from romanticism to realism, to fatalism and then to indifferentism” (L 350). In “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” for another, he focuses on—and mocks—what he describes, in a note to the 1937 Knopf edition, as “the incessant conjunctions between things as they are and things imagined” (CPP 998), which is to say, on the intersections and conflicts of realism and idealism, “a relation or balance” which, as he told Ronald Lane Latimer in a letter from 1937, was “a constant source of trouble” for him (L 316). And, in “The Bed of Old John Zeller,” for one more, he sets off to examine the “structure of ideas, these ghostly sequences / Of the mind” and our desire for “another structure / Of ideas,” only to
compare this desire to his maternal grandfather’s “ting-tang tossing” in a desire for sleep (CPP 287). Indeed, it is as if Stevens embraces philosophy only to dismiss it as so much mumbo jumbo, a soporific pursuit that allows one to evade the difficulties of reality.

How are we to make sense of these contradictions, this simultaneous interest in and dismissal of philosophy? To begin with, we can note that, as Bart Eeckhout says, “‘[p]hilosophy’ can mean a lot of different things depending on the cultural and historical context in which the word is used” and that it is perhaps “this semantic instability…that accounts for much of the ambiguity surrounding Stevens’ relation to it.” In fact, as he goes on to say, Stevens’s apparently contradictory relationship to philosophy—“defensive and flippant on one occasion, inspired and deeply committed the next” (104)—has less to do with Stevens’s own confusion than it does with the confusions of philosophy itself; for, to be a philosopher, he says, is not necessarily “to enter a beautifully closed-off terrain of intellectual operations, let alone an institutional discipline certified with a degree,” but simply “to display a fundamentally questioning spirit” (104-105). Following Eeckhout, then, we might say that “Stevens’ occasional animosity against philosophy must be regarded in its context…as tapping into specific connotations of the word,” which is to say that when he “lashed out at ‘systematic philosophy’ and wanted to ‘infuriate’ philosophers, he was not just guarding his poetic inspiration against the jealous mistress of reason, nor simply pitting his own attachment to beautiful things against an attachment to truth; he was also [associating] philosophy

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4 Bart Eeckhout, “Stevens and Philosophy” in The Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens, ed. John N. Serio (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 104. All further references will be given parenthetically in the text. It is worth noting, too, I think, that even etymology is of no help, since, as Eeckhout puts it, “the Greek composite noun philo-sophia simply points to a love of wisdom” and wisdom, too, “depends on circumstances and contexts” (104).
with a particular institutionalized discipline with which he felt fundamentally out of step” (105-106).

Stevens felt out of step with this discipline because, in his day—as in ours—most Anglo-American departments of philosophy were dominated by various strands of analytic philosophy, a brand whose “insistence on formal logic, would-be scientific objectivity, and highly theoretical, disembodied, almost scholastic case studies,” Eeckhout says, “happens to constitute the one tradition that is most antithetical to Stevens’ own interests and poetic manner of thinking” (106). In fact, as Stevens himself put it in a 1944 letter to Theodore Weiss, his problem was not with philosophy per se, but with the fact that “most modern philosophers [were] purely academic” (L 476), meaning that they practiced a propositional (if p, then q) form of rational argumentation. As we saw Stanley Cavell point out in the Introduction, however, argumentation is but one way in which philosophical thinking can proceed, the other being what he calls “reading” or “interpretation,” a practice usually associated with the Continental tradition, but which, as we’ll see later on—and, as the names Stevens cites (Heidegger, Blanchot, Nietzsche) suggest—we might just as easily, if not fully, associate with Stevens himself.\(^5\)

But then, in a sense, this is already old news; for, since at least the 1980s, a whole segment of Stevens scholarship has focused on establishing precisely this fact. In *Wallace Stevens and the Idealist Tradition*, for instance, Margaret Peterson argues that Stevens “elected to defend the intellectual tradition of romantic poetry and to explore its basic assumptions,” and, more specifically, that his “prose and poetry alike show that the choice led to an increasingly narrow focus upon the core of the problem, the

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epistemology of the Kantian aesthetic as it was formulated primarily in Coleridge’s theory of the imagination.”6 In *Early Stevens: The Nietzschean Intertext*, for another, B.J. Leggett argues not only that “a strong case can be made for Nietzsche as a source for some of Stevens’ most important works,” but also that “Nietzsche furnishes the texts by which many of [Stevens’s] texts may be completed.”7 And, in *The Later Poetry of Wallace Stevens: Phenomenological Parallels with Husserl and Heidegger*, for one more, Thomas J. Hines argues that “the development of the middle and later poetry of Stevens can be profitably explained through comparisons with the phenomenological methods and concepts of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger,” and then sets about analyzing each “segment of Stevens’s poetry in terms of the methods and concepts of phenomenology as these were developed and explained by the two German philosophers.”8 Indeed, as these studies and the warm receptions they have received bear out, it hardly even needs to be said that, despite his lack of rational argumentation and his occasional animosity towards philosophy, Stevens is, in fact, engaged in philosophical thinking.

And yet, for as much good as these studies have done, there is always a danger in the sort of scholarship that associates Stevens too closely with any given philosopher or tradition; for, as all three of the critics mentioned above rightly acknowledge, reading Stevens in terms of X is just as likely to obscure his thought as it is to illuminate it. Indeed, as Eeckhout points out, “trying to explain Stevens and philosophy…is different

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from inquiring into philosophy and Stevens,” since “[i]n the first instance, we posit an interest in the poet as our central topic of investigation and then go on to ask ourselves what this poet may have derived from his reading in, and interaction with, philosophy,” whereas “[i]n the second instance, we are interested primarily in philosophical questions and want to know what insights we may derive in turn from Stevens” (115). Thus, if we are to truly determine the nature of Stevens’s thought, then we must be careful not to place too high a premium on any one term or system external to the poetry itself, even if it can help us to clarify certain tendencies in it; which is to say, we must be careful to pay attention to the singular irreducibility of what Helen Vendler called Stevens’s “qualified assertions,”9 Marjorie Perloff called his “ironic modes,”10 and Frank Doggett called his “poetry of thought.”11

Hence the initial promise and ultimate disappointment of Simon Critchley’s recent book Things Merely Are: Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens. Critchley begins with the claim that we should not be “mining Stevens’s verse for philosophical puzzles and aperçus in pleasing poetic garb,” but attempting to illuminate how his poetry “contains deep, consequent and instructive philosophical insight” of its own.12 More specifically, though, he claims that “Stevens’s poetry allows us to recast what is arguably the fundamental concern of philosophy, namely the relation between thought and things

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11 Frank Doggett, Stevens’s Poetry of Thought (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1966). All further references will be given parenthetically in the text.

12 Simon Critchley, Things Merely Are: Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens (New York: Routledge, 2005), 4. All further references will be given parenthetically in the text.
or mind and world, the concern that becomes, in the early modern period, the basic problem of epistemology,” and, furthermore, that “Stevens recasts this concern in a way that lets us cast it away”; that is, that his “verse shows us a way of overcoming epistemology” (4). In fact, for Critchley, Steven’s entire corpus can be read as the efforts of a poet working through “a dejected transcendental idealism” that “laments the abyssal distance between nature and the self, or between things-in-themselves and things-as-they-are-for-us” (25) so as to achieve “an experience of calm, the calm that comes from learning to look at things, being there with things in a way that does not seek to dominate them or appropriate them to the understanding” (5). Indeed, when Critchley claims that Stevens shows us a way of overcoming epistemology, what he means is that he shows us how to “see things in their mereness, in their plainness and remoteness from us” and, moreover, how “to accept it calmly, without the frustrated assertions and juvenile overreachings of the will” (88).

And yet, in spite of this achievement, Critchley concludes with the assertion that “Stevens’s poetry fails” (87). It fails, he says, because Stevens is never able to “reduce reality to the imagination nor extend the imagination into reality,” and so cannot compose his “supreme fiction” (87). In fact, on Critchley’s view, the most “that Stevens gives us is a detailed series of notes towards the supreme fiction, and a series of stipulations on its nature divided into the three sections of the poem: ‘It must be abstract,’ ‘It must change,’ ‘It must give pleasure’”—which, while “[h]ugely impressive” in their own right, add up to nothing more than “the sketch of a score, which doesn’t even make it into rehearsal” (87). For Critchley, therefore, the calm that Stevens achieves has less to do with peace and stillness than it does with what he calls “the
métier of nothingness”: “the endless activity of description in the full awareness of failure,” where failure “is defined by the courage to persist with failure” (88), or, to paraphrase Beckett, to try again, fail again, and fail better.13

But, then, this is to dictate failure in advance; for, to say, as Critchley does, that Stevens fails because he wasn’t able to formulate our supreme fiction is to ascribe to him a goal that he wouldn’t necessarily ascribe to himself, since even his “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” were just that: notes (not “theses”) toward (not “on”) a (not “the”) supreme fiction. Indeed, to say that Stevens fails because he does not successfully compose a new myth for our secular age is a bit like saying that Emerson failed because he was unable to clutch the evanescent and lubricious objects that swirled around him: it is to miss the point. Moreover, to say that the fall out from this failure is the achievement of an experience of calm is not to make the case that Stevens has “overcome epistemology” as much as it is to say that he has resigned himself to the intractability of the problem while still holding out hope for what Wordsworth called “something evermore about to be.”14 In fact, it is to place Stevens within the confines of the same “dejected transcendental idealism” that Critchley claims he has surpassed, making one think that the “calm” that Critchley attributes to Stevens is more along the lines of melancholia. In short, then, while Critchley starts on firm footing by claiming that Stevens’s poetry “contains deep, consequent and instructive philosophical insight” of its own, he ends by locating him right back in the same old philosophical schema.

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It seems to me, then, that what we need is an approach that: 1) does not read Stevens solely in terms of some external philosophical system (ie. idealism, romanticism, phenomenology, etc.); and 2) does not equate his project with an attempt to accurately represent reality (in which case—and here Critchley is right—it can only fail). What I’d like to do in the following pages, therefore, is present one such approach. Specifically, though, I am going to suggest that we need to pay to attention to the act of listening in Stevens’s poetry; for, while it is not often commented upon, I believe that the act of listening is crucial to Stevens’s thought. I mean, it’s no mere coincidence that both the first (“Earthly Anecdote”) and last (“Of Mere Being”) poems in his Collected Poems (which he wanted to call The Whole of Harmonium) focus on the audible; nor that everything in between is so full of music, sound, and noise that, as the poet John Hollander put it, “merely to catalogue its elements can be bewildering”:

Pianos, oboes, orchestras, mandolins, guitars, claviers, tambourines, and songs; the music of Mozart and Brahms, and all the bird songs and other noises of nature; the sounds of language deconstructed into vocables; the visionary phonetics of transcendent tongues; music claimed for language as well as language claimed for music; music abstract and concrete; music simply or complexly figurative—from the clattering of bucks to a scrawny cry from outside, Stevens’ poetry is suffused with systematic sound.  

Indeed, as Hollander goes on to say, from “the lyre, harp, and lute of neoclassic diction” to “the Aeolian harp and singing seashell of earlier romanticism” to “the virtuoso pianism or homely parlor upright of its later phase” and “personal instruments, such as the guitar (‘This slave of Music’ given by Shelley-Ariel to Jane-Miranda)”—not to

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15 There have, of course, been two issues of The Wallace Stevens Journal devoted to “Stevens and Sound.” But none of the essays therein focus on the act of listening in Stevens’s poetry. See The Wallace Stevens Journal 15.2 (Fall 1991) and 33.1 (Spring 2009).

mention the ever-present birdsong—there is “hardly a scrap of traditional auditory mythology upon which Stevens has not improvised” (245-246).

But, more than these sounds themselves—and more even than the sound of Stevens’s poetry, what I am interested in here is, as I said before, the act of listening itself; how Stevens portrays this act, and how it works in his poetry to disrupt the subject/object or inside/outside oppositions upon which so much of the criticism is based. Before getting to the poetry itself, however, I want to spend some time clarifying what I mean by “listening” by drawing on the work of Jean-Luc Nancy—a move, I’m aware, that might seem to some like a blatant contradiction of what I said earlier regarding the problems of reading Stevens in terms of X, but to which I would respond by saying that my use of Nancy is not done so as to provide us with a philosophical paradigm within which to locate the movement of Stevens’s thought, but to better explain a concept (or, rather, an act) that is already at work in Stevens’s poetry.

17 Alan Filreis has explained why critics have been slow to appreciate the importance of sound in Stevens’s poetry in his essay “Sound at an Impasse” in The Wallace Stevens Journal 33.1 (Spring 2009): 16-23. According to Filreis, there are at least six reasons. The first—and this applies to his earliest critics in particular—is that they “feared that focus on sound might too closely associate their own projects with a dead-end mannerism”; which is to say that they found Stevens’s “zany post-Victorian mode”—his “[t]um-ti-tum[s]” (CPP 16) and “ki-ki-ri-ki[s]” (CPP 50)—to be “less tragic and far less relevant” than they themselves, writing amidst the political upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s, wanted to seem. The second—and this is in spite of how important sound was for the whole Pound-Williams-Objectivist nexus—is that they worried that a focus on sound would associate Stevens too directly with the “non-innovate” (15) strain of American poetry (ie. Vachel Lindsay, Carl Sandburg, etc.). The third is that they relied too heavily—and without proper context17—on Stevens’s many letters to his “friend” Hi Simons, who often asked about the sound of the poet’s work, but who, in response, received only cursory explanations containing the bare minimum of what Stevens “thought Simons needed to get along” (19), suggesting to many that Stevens was not, in fact, interested in sound. The fourth is that, by general consensus, Stevens was “such an incapable and apparently indifferent reader of his own poetry at public readings” that he “created a general impression that he did not value the heard poem” (19). The fifth is that those critics who have shown an interest in the poetics of sound (ie. Charles Bernstein, Adalade Morris, Thomas Swiss, etc.), have barely mentioned Stevens’s name, implying to those entering the field that Stevens is “not cool enough to be counted among the modernist aural ‘lingualisualists’” (21). And the sixth is that critics have shown “a certain deafness in the project of disclosing Stevens’ politics,” meaning that those who, like Filreis, “have tried to make manifest the political life of an apparently unpolitical poet found the requirements of the project were so daunting—and involved, as critical writing, so much primary exposition—that [they] had to make short work of sound in readings of poems where the music of words is obviously central” (21).
Moreover, I should note that, while I find the following, theoretically-dense exposition of Nancy’s views to be both instructive and necessary for our understanding of the importance of listening in Stevens (as well as for its critical implications), I’m aware that not all readers will feel this way. Thus, if the reader is pressed for time (or is simply uninterested), he can skip ahead to the next section (which begins on p.95), where everything essential (if not all the exciting nuances) will be repeated as we look at Stevens’s poetry itself.

Nancy begins his short book, *Listening*, by asking if listening is “something of which philosophy is capable” or if, on the other hand, philosophy has “superimposed upon listening, beforehand and of necessity, or else substituted for listening, something else that might be more on the order of understanding?”¹⁸ That is, he wants to know if the philosopher must, as is typically thought, be conceived of as “someone who always hears (and who hears everything) but who cannot listen, or who, more precisely, neutralizes listening within himself, so that he can philosophize,” or if he can, with great concentration, give himself “over to the slight, keen indecision that grates, rings out or shouts between ‘listening’ and ‘understanding’: between two kinds of hearing, between two paces [allures] of the same...between tension and a balance, or else, if you prefer, between a sense (that one listens to) and a truth (that one understands), although the one cannot, in the long run, do without the other)” (1-2). In short, he wants to know if philosophy can remain at the level of sense, or if it must, of necessity, translate sense

into meaning.

This is an especially difficult question to address, according to Nancy, because it takes philosophy out of its comfortable visual register where “[t]here is, at least potentially, more isomorphism between the visual and the conceptual, even if only by virtue of the fact that the *morphe*, the ‘form’ implied in the idea of ‘isomorphism,’ is immediately thought or grasped on the visual plane,” and, instead, places it within the less certain auditory register where “[t]he sonorous…outweighs form,” which is to say, where “[i]t does not dissolve [form], but rather enlarges it” or where “it gives it an amplitude, a density, and a vibration or an undulation whose outline never does anything but approach” (2). Indeed, as he goes on to say, whereas “[t]he visual persists until its disappearance,” “the sonorous appears and fades away into its permanence” (2). And so, before getting to his original question about the possibility of a philosophical listening, he first asks another series of questions:

Why and how is it that something of perceived meaning has privileged a model, a support, or a referent in visual presence rather than in acoustic penetration? Why, for example, does *acoustsmatics*, or the teaching model by which the teacher remains hidden from the disciple who listens to him, belong to a prephilosophical Pythagorean esoterism, just as, much later, *auricular* confession corresponds to a secret intimacy of sin and forgiveness? Why, in the case of the ear, is there withdrawal and turning inward, a making resonant, but, in the case of the eye, there is manifestation and display, a making evident? Why, however, does each of these facets also touch the other, and by touching, put into play the whole system of the senses? And how, in turn, does it touch perceived meaning? How does it come to engender it or modulate it, determine it or disperse it? (2-3)

In other words, before getting to the question of philosophical listening itself, he claims that it will be necessary to “*prick up the philosophical ear*: to tug the philosopher’s ear in order to draw it toward what has always solicited or represented philosophical knowledge less than what presents itself to view—form, idea, painting, representation,
aspect, phenomenon, composition—but arises instead in accent, tone, timbre, resonance, and sound” (3). His question, therefore, is this: “[w]hat [would] it mean for a being to be immersed entirely in listening, formed by listening or in listening, listening with all his being” (4)?

Nancy begins to answer this question with a bit of etymology, noting that “[a]fter it had designated a person who listens (who spies), the word écoute came to designate a place where one could listen in secret,” meaning that “Être aux écoutes, ‘to listen in, to eavesdrop,’ consisted first in being in a concealed place where you could surprise a conversation or a confession” (4). Thus, one aspect of his question is: “[w]hat secret is at stake when one truly listens, that is, when one tries to capture or surprise the sonority rather than the message?”; while the other, indissociable aspect is: “[w]hat does it mean to exist according to listening, for it and through it, what part of experience and truth is put into play” (4-5)? On the whole, though, he says that “this double interrogation refer[s] first of all simply to the meaning of the verb écouter, ‘to listen,’” and then, consequently, “to that kernel of meaning where the use of a sensory organ (hearing, the ear, auris, a word that gives the first part of the verb auscultare, ‘to lend an ear,’ ‘to listen attentively,’ from which écouter, ‘to listen,’ comes) and a tension, an intention, and an attention, which the second part of the term marks, are combined,” since “[t]o listen is tender l’oreille—literally, to stretch the ear—an expression that evokes a singular mobility, among the sensory apparatuses, of the pinna of the ear” (5).

Of course, as Nancy notes, “[e]very sensory register…bears with it both its simple nature and its tense, attentive, or anxious state: seeing and looking, smelling and sniffing or scenting, tasting and savoring, touching and feeling or palpating, hearing and
listening” (5). But the last, auditive pair, he says, “has a special relationship with sense in the intellectural or intelligible acceptance of the word (with ‘perceived meaning’ [sens sensé], if you like, as opposed to ‘perceiving sense’ [sens sensible])” (5-6). In fact, as he goes on to say, “[e]ntendre, ‘to hear,’ also means comprendre, ‘to understand,’ as if ‘hearing’ were above all ‘hearing say’ (rather than ‘hearing sound’), or rather, as if in all ‘hearing’ there had to be a ‘hearing say,’ regardless of whether the sound perceived was a word or not” (6). At the same time, though, Nancy suggests that this “might be reversible” since “in all saying”—and here he means in all discourse or in the whole chain of meaning—“there is hearing, and in hearing itself, at the very bottom of it, a listening”—meaning that “perhaps it is necessary that sense not be content to make sense (or to be logos), but that it want also to resound” (6). For now, however, he is content to draw the distinction between “hearing” and “listening” as follows: “[i]f ‘to hear’ is to understand the sense (either in the so-called figurative sense, or in the so-called proper sense: to hear a siren, a bird, or a drum is already each time to understand at least the rough outline of a situation, a context if not a text), to listen is to be straining toward a possible meaning, and consequently one that is not immediately accessible” (6). Or, as he also puts it, “[t]o be listening is always to be on the edge of meaning, or in an edgy meaning of extremity, and as if the sound were precisely nothing else than this edge, this fringe, this margin” (7).

Given this marginality, however, what, if anything, “can be the shared space of meaning and sound” (7)? According to Nancy, just as “[m]eaning consists in a reference [renvoi]” and, in fact, “is made of a totality of referrals: from a sign to a thing, from a state of things to a quality, from a subject to another subject or to itself, all
simultaneously,” sound, too, is “made of referrals: it spreads in space, where it resounds while still resounding ‘in me,’ as we say” (7):

In the external or internal space, it resounds, that is, it re-emits itself while still actually “sounding,” which is already “re-sounding” since that’s nothing else but referring back to itself. To sound is to vibrate in itself or by itself: it is not only, for the sonorous body, to emit a sound, but it is also to stretch out, to carry itself and be resolved into vibrations that return it to itself and place it outside itself. (8)

Indeed, as we have known since Aristotle, Nancy says, “sensing [sentir] (aisthesis) is always a perception [ressentir], that is, a feeling-oneself-feel [se-sentir-sentir]: or, if you prefer, sensing is a subject, or it does not sense” (8). Moreover, he says that “it is perhaps in the sonorous register that this reflected structure is most obviously manifest, and in any case offers itself as open structure, spaced and spacing...[and] at the same time as an intersection, mixture, covering up in the referral [renvoi] of the perceptible with the perceived as well as with the other senses” (8). Thus, on Nancy’s view, we can say “that meaning and sound share the space of a referral, in which at the same time they refer to each other, and that, in a very general way, this space can be defined as the space of a self, a subject” wherein the “self” is understood as “nothing other than a form or function of referral” since a self, after all, “is made of a relationship to itself, or of a presence to self, which is nothing other than the mutual referral between a perceptible individuation and an intelligible identity” (8). In other words, Nancy’s “self” is “not just the individual in the current sense of the word, but in him the singular occurrences of a state, a tension, or precisely, a ‘sense’” (8).19

For Nancy, then, “[t]o be listening will always...be to be straining toward or in an approach to the self” where, again, the approach to self is “neither to a proper self (I),

nor to the self of an other, but to the form or structure of self as such, that is to say, to the form, structure, and movement of an infinite referral [renvoi], since it refers to something (itself) that is nothing outside of the referral” (9). Or, as he also puts it: to be listening will always be to be “on the lookout for a subject, something (itself) that identifies itself by resonating from self to self, in itself and for itself, hence outside of itself, at once the same as and other than itself, one in the echo of the other” (9). As he goes on to specify, however, “it is a question of being on the watch [être aux aguets] for a way that is precisely not that of a watch [guet] in the sense of a visual surveillance”; for the sonorous, he explains, “makes clear its singularity in relation to the optical register, where the relationship to the intelligible as a theoretical relationship (theoretical is linked, in Greek, to seeing) is more manifestly, if we can use this word, in play” (10). Indeed, while, in the case of gazing, “the subject is referred back to itself as object,” in the case of listening, “it is, in a way, to itself that the subject refers or refers back” (10). Thus, in this sense, “[t]o be listening is…to enter into tension and to be on the lookout for a relation to self: not, it should be emphasized, a relationship to ‘me’ (the supposedly given subject), or to the ‘self’ of the other (the speaker, the musician, also supposedly given, with his subjectivity), but to the relationship in self, so to speak, as it forms a ‘self’ or a ‘to itself’ in general, and if something like that ever does reach the end of its formation” (12). Or, as he also puts it: “listening is passing over to the register of presence to self, it being understood that the ‘self’ is precisely nothing available (substantial or subsistent) to which one can be ‘present,’ but precisely the resonance of a return [renvoi]” (12). But, in either case, the essential point, for Nancy, is that “listening—the opening stretched toward the register of the sonorous, then to its musical
amplification and composition—can and must appear to us not as a metaphor for access to self, but as the reality of this access, a reality consequently indissociably ‘mine’ and ‘other,’ ‘singular’ and ‘plural,’ as much as it is ‘material’ and ‘spiritual’ and ‘signifying’ and ‘a-signifying’” (12).  

Indissociably mine and other, singular and plural: this is why, for Nancy, the “presence” he speaks of is “an ‘in the presence of’ that, itself, is not an ‘in view of’ or a ‘vis-à-vis’, which is to say, “an ‘in the presence of’ that does not let itself be objectified or projected outward” (13). Indeed, on Nancy’s view, “presence” is “first of all presence in the sense of a present that is not a being (at least not in the intransitive, stable, consistent sense of the word), but rather a coming and a passing, an extending and a penetrating”—which, significantly, means that it is not “the instant of philosophico-scientific time…the point of no dimension, the strict negativity in which that mathematical time has always consisted” (13). That is, sonorous time is “not that of simple succession (corollary of the negative instant),” but “a present in waves on a swell…a time that opens up, that is hollowed out, that is enlarged or ramified, that envelops or separates, that becomes or is turned into a loop, that stretches out or contracts, and so on” (13). In fact, as Nancy goes on to say, the sonorous present “opens a space that is its own,” one that is “immediately omnidimensional and transversate through all spaces” (13)—meaning, in other words, that “[s]ound has no hidden face; it is all in front, in back, and outside inside, inside-out in relation to the most general logic of presence as appearing, as phenomenality or as manifestation, and thus as the visible face of a presence subsisting in self “ (13).

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20 For more on Nancy’s conception of “the self,” which would bear interesting fruit in relation to certain political readings of Stevens, see Jean-Luc Nancy, Being Singular Plural, trans. Robert Richardson and Anne O’Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).
This is significant, for Nancy, because it suggests that “[t]o listen is to enter that spatiality by which, at the same time, I am penetrated”; for, as physics has shown, sound “opens up in me as well as around me, and from me as well as toward me: it opens me inside me as well as outside, and it is through such a double, quadruple, or sextuple opening that a ‘self’ can take place” (14). Thus, as he goes on to say (in a way that will be important for our reading of a poem like “Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself”), “[t]o be listening is to be at the same time outside and inside, to be open from without and from within, hence from one to the other and from one in the other”; so that listening “forms the perceptible singularity that bears in the most ostensive way the perceptible or sensitive (aesthetic) condition as such: the sharing of an inside/outside, division and participation, de-connection and contagion” (14). In other words, while “the sonorous is omnipresent,” “its presence is never a simple being-there or how things stand, but always at once an advance, penetration, insistence, obsession, or possession, as well as presence ‘on the rebound,’ in a return [renvoi] from one element to the other” (15):

It returns (refers) to itself, it encounters itself or, better, occurs against itself, both in opposition to and next to itself. It is co-presence or, again, “presence in presence,” if one can say that. But insofar as it does not consist in a being-present-there, in a stable, fixed being, yet is not elsewhere or absent, it is rather in the rebound of “there” or in its setting in motion, which makes it, the sonorous place (“sonorized,” one is tempted to say, plugged into sound), a place-of-its-own-self, a place as relation to self, as the taking-place of a self, a vibrant place as the diapason of a subject or, better, as a diapason-subject. (16)

And “diapason,” we should note, refers not just to a tuning fork, but also to a burst of sound and the entire scope of musical tones.

But, more importantly for Nancy, this suggests that “music (or even sound in general) is not exactly a phenomenon; that is to say, it does not stem from a logic of
manifestation” (20). Indeed, according to him, “[i]t stems from a different logic, which would have to be called evocation, but in this precise sense: while manifestation brings presence to light, evocation summons (convokes, invokes) presence to itself” (20). That is, “[i]t anticipates its arrival and remembers its departure, itself remaining suspended and straining between the two” (20) so that, in listening, “it is a question of going back to, or opening oneself up to, the resonance of being, or to being as resonance” (21); a question, in other words, “of going back from the phenomenological subject, an intentional line of sight, to a resonant subject, an intensive spacing of a rebound that does not end in any return to self without immediately relaunching, as an echo, a call to that same self” (21). Thus, while the phenomenological subject “is always already given, posed in itself to its point of view, the subject of listening is always still yet to come, spaced, traversed, and called by itself, sounded by itself” (21). In short, the subject of listening is not a phenomenological subject at all—which means, for Nancy, that “he is not a philosophical subject, and, finally, [that] he is perhaps no subject at all, except as the place of resonance, of its infinite tension and rebound, the amplitude of sonorous deployment and the slightness of its simultaneous redeployment” (22).

So far, then, Nancy has established that “listening opens (itself) up to resonance and that resonance opens (itself) up to the self”; which is to say that “it opens to self (to the resonant body, to its vibration) and that it opens to the self (to the being just as its being is put into play for itself)” (25). But, recalling what he said earlier about the shared space of meaning and sound—that they are both made of referrals—he now claims that this “being put into play” can also be thought of as “sense, or meaning [la sens, ou du sens]” (25); so that the listener is not just straining toward the self, as he said
earlier, but also “straining to end in sense (rather than straining toward, intentionally), or else he is offered, exposed to sense” (26). For Nancy, therefore, to listen is to have:

a relationship to meaning [sens], a tension toward it: but toward it completely ahead of signification, meaning in its nascent state, in the state of return [renvoi] for which the end of this return is not given (the concept, the idea, the information), and hence to the state of return without end, like an echo that continues on its own and that is nothing but this continuance going in a decrescendo, or even in moriendo. (27)

Or, as he also puts it, it is “to be inclined toward the opening of meaning, hence to a slash, a cut in un-sensed [in-sensée] indifference at the same time as toward a reserve that is anterior and posterior to any signifying punctuation” (27). In either case, though, his point is that there “resounds, beyond a saying, a ‘meaning’ [vouloir-dire, ‘meaning to say’] to which one must first give not the value of a will but the inchoate value of an articulatory or profferatory release that is still without intention and without vision of signification” (28).

Once again, then, we are led toward “a radicalization of the ‘phenomenological voice’” in which:

what is affected concerns the originarity [originarité], in the subject or, even better, as the subject of subject, of a difference: of a difference that is not content with dividing or differing the prime supposed unity...but that is nothing else, itself...but the return to self in which the self is supported, but is supported only in dehiscence or in differential of self (is supported, then, by faltering, lets itself be supported from outside. (28).

In a sense, then, we are dealing with the “voice” as Lacan defined it: “the alterity of what is said”; or as Nancy extrapolates, “a non-saying in saying or of saying itself, where saying can resound, and thus properly say.” (29). But, whereas Lacan wants to keep the voice distinct from sonorities within which it resounds, Nancy claims that “pure resonance” “is still a sonority—or, if you prefer, an arch-sonority”—meaning that “it is
not only, according to its ‘purity’ (taken in a Kantian sense), a nonperceptible transcendental of signifying sonority but also, according to its ‘resonance’ (which makes its nature),” what Bernard Baas refers to as a “sonorous materiality, vibration that animates the auditory apparatus as much as the phonatory apparatus, or rather: that seize all somatic locations where the phenomenal voice resonates” (cited in Nancy 29). Thus, as Nancy goes on to say, “transcendental resonance is also incorporated—even strictly speaking, it is nothing but that incorporation (which it would be better to call: the opening up of a body)” (29)—meaning, for him, that “[t]he possibility of sense is identified with the possibility of resonance, or of sonority itself” (29) and, more precisely, that “the perceived possibility of sense…is overlaid with the resonant possibility of sound,” or, as we saw earlier, “with the possibility of an echo or a return of sound to self in self” (30).

For Nancy, then, the subject is “that part, in the body, that is listening or vibrates with listening to—or with the echo of—the beyond-meaning” (31); for, if “listening is distinguished from hearing both as its opening (its attack) and as its intensified extremity, that is, reopening beyond comprehension (of sense) and beyond agreement or harmony (harmony [entente] or resolution in the musical sense),” then “that necessarily signifies that listening is listening to something other than sense in its signifying sense” (32). But what, exactly, does this “listening to the beyond-meaning” consist of “when we resolutely turn away from the signifying perspective as a final perspective” (31)? It consists, Nancy suggests, of the syntactic without semantics; for while semantics per se are “absent (or seem to be identifiable only at the level of sentiment—love, complaint…), the syntactic for its part, or else ‘phrasing,’ is not entirely so” (34).
Indeed, as he explains it, “[t]he syntactic without semantics (or almost, as if conjunctions were not semantic…) would suggest a way of sampling the directional and sequential stratum of language, separate from all signification” (34). That is, “it would be, in language, something that belongs to it just as essentially as semantics, which is its diction” (34); or, as he also puts it, it would be “écritre [‘to write],” which, in its contemporary conception (ie. Derrida’s archi-écriture) “is nothing other than making sense resound beyond signification, or beyond itself”: “[i]t is vocalizing a sense that, for classical thought, intended to remain deaf and mute, an understanding [entente] untimbred [détimbrée] of self in the silence of a consonant without resonance” (34-35).

With listening, therefore—and this will be key for Stevens—it is a question of a paying attention to the non-coded or not-yet-coded so that when we listen to a text speak we can listen to its timbre—a term which, in its most basic sense, refers to “the tonal quality of a sound,” but which is notoriously hard to define. Indeed, as William A. Sethares points out, most definitions of timbre tend to tell us “what it is not (i.e., loudness and pitch), rather than what it is.” For starters, though, we can consider the following description provided by Tor Halmrast, et al.:

It is generally agreed that “timbre” denotes the distinctive perceived sonic qualities of different musical instruments, human voices, or other sound sources, such as the quality which makes the tone of a violin sound different from that of a piano, a trumpet, or a female voice. The expression “tone color” (or the German word *Klangfarbe*) is sometimes used to denote such distinct sound qualities, but we prefer to use the word “timbre” to indicate that we are talking about more than just a stationary hue…One of the essential attributes of timbre is actually those elements that vary over time within any tone, meaning that although we may perceive a violin tone as being stable throughout its duration, it is the many


fluctuations and the overall evolution of features over the course of its duration that contribute to its characteristic quality and to its rich and interesting sound.\textsuperscript{23}

Thus, one thing that Nancy means by “timbre” is “the many fluctuations and the overall evolution of features over the course of its duration that contribute to its characteristic quality and to its rich and interesting sound.”

At the same time, though, he is insistent not “to establish timbre in a primary or dominant position in relation to the other element or components…of music” (39). Indeed, as he goes on to say, “in speaking of timbre, one is aiming precisely at what does not stem from a decomposition”; for, “even if it remains possible and true to distinguish it from pitch, duration, intensity, there is, however, no pitch, and so on, without timbre (just as there is no line or surface without color)” (39-40). Timbre, Nancy therefore says, is “the first correlative of listening,” or, as he also puts it, it “is the resonance of sound: or sound itself” (40). In fact, for Nancy, timbre “forms the first consistency of sonorous sense,” where “sense” is to be understood as “the ricochet, the repercussion, the reverberation: the echo in a given body, even as this given body, or even as the gift to self of this given body” (40). And this, for him, “is why Wittgenstein, after discussing the borderline, or imaginary, experience of hearing a sound separated from its timbre, comes to take timbre as a privileged image of what he calls ‘private experience,’” or what Nancy calls “experience that is not communicable” (41).\textsuperscript{24}


\textsuperscript{24} Nancy extrapolates on this in a footnote, by citing Jules Lagneau: “Since it is not by a distinct act of mind that we compose the idea of timbre, it is perhaps not true to call it perception; perceiving timbre, we measure nothing…Intensity and timbre are immediate sensations, in which we can not complexity only by using external analysis. There is something ultimate there for consciousness” (cited in Nancy 83).
incommunicable: provided it is understood that the incommunicable is nothing other, in a perfectly logical way, than communication itself, that thing by which a subject makes an echo—of self, of the other, it’s all one—it’s all one in the plural” (41).

With this in mind, then, let me now explain the three reasons why I think Nancy’s work can help us to understand the act of listening in Stevens’s poetry. The first has to do with his definition of listening itself, which begins with a distinction between it and “hearing”: “[i]f ‘to hear’ is to understand the sense (either in the so-called figurative sense, or in the so-called proper sense: to hear a siren, a bird, or a drum is already each time to understand at least the rough outline of a situation, a context if not a text), to listen is to be straining toward a possible meaning, and consequently one that is not immediately accessible”; it is “to be on the edge of meaning, or in an edgy meaning of extremity, and as if the sound were precisely nothing else than this edge, this fringe, this margin” (6-7). For Nancy, in other words, listening has to do with resisting the urge to locate a source beyond sound or a presence beyond sense, which raises the question of whether listening is “something of which philosophy is capable” or if, on the other hand, philosophy has “superimposed upon listening, beforehand and of necessity, or else substituted for listening, something else that might be more on the order of understanding” (1)? It raises the question, that is, of whether the philosopher must, as is typically thought, be conceived of as “someone who always hears (and who hears everything) but who cannot listen, or who, more precisely, neutralizes listening within himself, so that he can philosophize,” or if he can, with great concentration, give himself “over to the slight, keen indecision that grates, rings out or shouts between ‘listening’
and ‘understanding’: between two kinds of hearing, between two paces [allures] of the same...between tension and a balance, or else, if you prefer, between a sense (that one listens to) and a truth (that one understands), although the one cannot, in the long run, do without the other)” (1-2)—which, for me, helps explain why Stevens had such a conflicted relationship with philosophy: he was able to give himself over to the slight, keen indecision that resonates in between listening and understanding.

The second reason has to do with his explanation of how sound disrupts the borders of the traditional subject/object, inside/outside paradigm. This begins with his description of how “[s]ound has no hidden face”; how “it is all in front, in back, and outside inside, inside-out in relation to the most general logic of presence as appearing, as phenomenality or as manifestation, and thus as the visible face of a presence subsisting in self” (13). This is significant, for Nancy, because it suggests that “[t]o listen is to enter that spatiality by which, at the same time, I am penetrated”; for, as physics has shown, sound “opens up in me as well as around me, and from me as well as toward me: it opens me inside me as well as outside.” Thus, as Nancy goes on to say, “[t]o be listening is to be at the same time outside and inside, to be open from without and from within, hence from one to the other and from one in the other” (14). This, then, helps me explain why Stevens’s poetry does more than fail (which, within Critchley’s romantic framework is the only option possible): he was less interested in seizing (ie. representing) reality than in listening to it resound within him.

And the third reason that Nancy can help us to understand the act of listening in Stevens’s poetry has to do with his notion of timbre: the overall tonal quality of sound; or, as we saw Tor Halmrast define it, “the many fluctuations and the overall evolution of
features over the course of [a tone’s] duration that contribute to its characteristic quality and to its rich and interesting sound” (183). For Nancy, this means that it is “the first correlative of listening”; or as he also puts it, “the resonance of sound: or sound itself” (40). Timbre, in other words, is “the first consistency of sonorous sense,” where “sense” is to be understood as “the ricochet, the repercussion, the reverberation: the echo in a given body, even as this given body, or even as the gift to self of this given body” (40).

And this, for him, is why “Wittgenstein, after discussing the borderline, or imaginary, experience of hearing a sound separated from its timbre, comes to take timbre as a privileged image of what he calls ‘private experience,’” or what Nancy calls “communication of the incommunicable: provided it is understood that the incommunicable is nothing other, in a perfectly logical way, than communication itself” (41). For me, though, this helps explain not only what interests Stevens in the act of listening, but also what interests us in listening to him: “the less legible meanings of sounds” (CPP 417).

But let’s see how this all works itself out in the poetry, and first of all in “The Snow Man”25:

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

And have been cold a long time

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25 “The Snow Man” was one of the twelve Harmonium poems originally published in Poetry under the title “Sur Ma Guzla Gracile,” a mixed-language phrase meaning “On My Small Gusle,” where “gusle” refers to the one-string bowed instrument commonly used in Bulgarian folk music. In that issue, it was placed in between “Gubbinal” and “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon,” but, by the time Harmonium came out in 1923, Stevens had rearranged things so that it fell in between “Domination of Black” and “The Ordinary Women”—a fact I mention only to note how striking the contrast is (“Snow Man” / “Hoon,” White / Black) in either case. See Eleanor Cook, A Readers Guide to Wallace Stevens (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 35.
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,

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

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is. (CPP 8)

As it’s traditionally read, this poem has to do with the desire for reality itself; or, to borrow the title of a much later Stevens poem (as well as a common philosophical theme), the desire for “the thing itself.” Drawing on Ruskin, Emerson, Whitman, Nietzsche, and Shelley (to name just a few!), Harold Bloom, for instance, claims that “The Snow Man” resists the pathos of turning “the thing itself into an imagined thing”; that it denies a Shelleyan “plentitude of music in the wind”; and that it falls back into the “Sublime emptiness” of Emerson’s “transparent eyeball”—but that, for all this, “[t]he listener, reduced to nothing, remains human because he beholds something shagged and rough, barely figurative, yet still a figuration rather than a bareness.”26 And that’s why I said above that, as it’s traditionally read, it’s about the desire for reality itself: because, according to Bloom at least, the “nothing” that is achieved here, while certainly “minimal” or “abstracted,” is still a fiction (63). Indeed, for Bloom, Stevens’s own reading of the poem—that, as he put it in a 1944 letter to Hi Simons, it was “an example of the necessity of identifying oneself with reality in order to understand it and enjoy it” (L 464)—only “takes care of less than half the poem, the part in which ‘reality’ is

26 Harold Bloom, Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), 56, 60, 61, 63. All further references will be given parenthetically in the text.
‘regarded,’ and not the larger part in which ‘reality’ is ‘beheld’ and so begins to become a passion” (63).27 On Bloom’s reading, therefore, “The Snow Man” is ultimately about the desire for reality itself and the impossibility of achieving it.

But there are three problems with this. The first is that, in spite of the poem’s interest in \textit{listening}, Bloom, as always, is focused on the \textit{visionary}. That is, he holds up “the junipers shagged with ice” and “the spruces rough in the distant glitter” (both visual images) as moments of “astonishment or discovery” “bordering on a \textit{pathos}” — which implies, for him, that Stevens cannot truly embrace the nothingness because it could only come “at the price of ceasing to be a ‘human’ being” (63) — when, in fact, as I will show in just a moment, these visual “beholdings” are not quite the moments of imaginative discovery that he would like them to be. Which is not to say that the poem \textit{does} arrive at reality itself. In fact, the furthest I’d be willing to go in that direction is J. Hillis Miller’s reading, which equates “nothing” with “being,” in the sense that

\begin{quote}
[b]eing is a pervasive power, visible nowhere in itself and yet present and visible in all things. It is what things share through the fact that they are. Being is not a thing like other things and therefore can only appear to man as nothing, but it is what all things must participate in if they are to exist at all.28
\end{quote}

—and this only if “being” is understood in the sense that Nancy gives to it (i.e. being as the resonance of an infinite series of referrals); or, similarly, and in a way that cannot be

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27 As Alan Filreis and other have pointed out, Stevens’s letters to Hi Simons are notoriously unreliable. As Filreis puts it: “[o]nce Stevens began to hear (first from others, then, confessionally, from Simons himself) that his self-effacing correspondent was hoping to write a huge critical biography—’an affair…larger than Horton’s work on Crane, something like Foster Damon’s on Amy Lowell’ (letter from Harry Duncan), a prospect horrifying to Stevens, who hated the idea of biographical readings—the poet’s answers to the critic’s request for detailed response seemed ironically to bear out, rather than to contradict, his principle against authorial explanations as he described this tenet to Simons directly: ‘I made up my mind not to explain things, because most people have so little appreciation of poetry that once a poem has been explained it has been destroyed’ (18)—the point being that Stevens was not always forthcoming—and often defensive or deliberately obscure—in his responses to Simons. See fn. 17.

fully explained here, the sense that Michelle Serres gives to it in *Genesis*: being as noise. But more on this in a minute.

The second problem with Bloom’s reading is his neglect of a certain three-letter word: “the”—by which I mean the “the” that comes in the final line: “Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.” This word would not be so significant if it were not preceded by two uses of “nothing” that leave out the definite article. But it is; and so, especially in a metrically-inconsistent poem where it doesn’t just fill the space of a beat, the “the” here is deserving of our attention, even if Bloom and others pass over it. But, first, let me discuss what leads up it.

The poem begins with the impersonal “One” whose rounded shape already identifies him as the titular Snow Man; and this “One,” we are told, “must have a mind of winter / To regard the frost and the boughs / Of the pine-trees crusted with snow.” The key word here is “regard,” which, as Bloom points out (and as I will discuss differently in the next chapter), “is to look at something attentively or closely, but with a touch of looking back at, a retrospect, stemming ultimately from the root wer meaning to watch out for something” (57). That is, for Bloom, “regard” is “a warier and more passive verb” (57) than it’s counterpart “behold.” But, at any rate, what the poem tells us so far is that one must have a mind of winter if one is going to look attentively at the pine-trees crusted with snow. One must also, however, “have been cold a long time”; not now to “regard,” but rather to “behold the junipers shagged with ice, / The spruces rough in the distance glitter // Of the January sun.” Behold: for Bloom, this word means “to gaze at or look upon, but with a touch of expressed amazement. The beholder

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possesses the object; his scrutiny is active, going back to the root *kel*, meaning to drive or to set in swift motion” (57). For Bloom, that is, “behold” is a more powerful verb than “regard,” since “‘regard’ tends to introduce a trope of *ethos* or of Fate, or of a reduction to the First Idea, while ‘behold’ tends to commence a trope of *pathos* or of Power, a revision or reimagining of the First Idea” (58). Hence his previously stated belief that the poem’s “beholding” marks the beginnings of an imaginative passion.

But this is not yet to address *why* one must do these things. One must do them, according to the poem, so as not to commit Ruskin’s pathetic fallacy30; or, as Stevens puts it, so as “not to think / Of any misery in the sound of the wind, / In the sound of a few leaves,” which, he adds, “is the sound of the land / Full of the same wind / That is blowing in the same bare place // For the listener.” But note, here, Stevens’s insistence on sound and listening, and how different this is from the visual images discussed earlier. Whereas both “regard” and “behold” suggest a certain subject-object dualism, “the sound of the land” seems to permeate this division. And this is why, I think, “the listener, who listens in the snow” is “nothing himself”: he is no longer the “One” of the poem’s first line. That is, he is no longer a self-contained and fully-possessed subject who can “behold” and “regard,” but one whose “being,” if you like, is both rent and rendered by the sound that he listens to. Indeed, in the end, while he “beholds” “Nothing that is not there” (ie. *not* the imaginative projections that, according to Bloom, keep him human), he *is* able to behold “the nothing that is”; that is, *the* no thing, the “thing” (in the everyday sense) that is *not* a thing: sound.

30 See John Ruskin, “Of the Pathetic Fallacy” in *Modern Painters, Vol. III* (London: George Allen, 2006), 161-177. For Ruskin, the issue is “the difference between the ordinary, proper, and true appearances of things to us; and the extraordinary, or false appearances, when we are under the influence of emotion, or contemplative fancy; false appearances, I say, as being entirely unconnected with any real power or character in the object, and only imputed to it by us.”
Before discussing this any further, however, let me get to the third problem with Bloom’s reading because, as we will see below, it is intricately related with the issue of sound. The third problem with Bloom’s reading—as with so many other readings of Stevens—is that it is based on a phenomenological understanding of the subject, which is to say, the intentional subject, the subject stretching out towards its object, or, as Bloom puts it, “beholding” its object—which, in principle, I have no problem with. When it comes to sound and listening, however, such an understanding is difficult to maintain; for it assumes a subject-object dualism that sound, quite literally, does not obey. That is, as we saw Nancy explain earlier, “[t]o listen is to enter that spatiality by which, at the same time, I am penetrated,” since sound “opens up in me as well as around me, and from me as well as toward me: it opens me inside me as well as outside” (14). Thus, as Nancy goes on to say, “[t]o be listening is to be at the same time outside and inside, to be open from without and from within, hence from one to the other and from one in the other” (14). In other words, when it comes to listening, we are not dealing with a phenomenological subject who “is always already given, posed in itself to its point of view,” but with a resonant one who “is always still yet to come, spaced, traversed, and called by itself, sounded by itself” (21)—meaning that, while the speaker may “behold” things (in Bloom’s sense of the word), it is just as true that he is beheld by them, or even beholden to them.

But let’s listen to the poem again with all of this in mind:

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

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

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,

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

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is. (CPP 8)

Note, now, how “sound” is quite literally at the center of the poem. Stevens introduces the word in the middle of line 8 of this 15 line poem and the rest of the poem focuses on it exclusively. That is, whereas the first 7 lines are, as Bloom says, interested in the visual, everything changes after line 8. Indeed, it is here that the borders between subject and object begin to breakdown so that the “One” of the poem’s opening line becomes “nothing” himself. Traditionally, of course, this is seen as the tragic price that one must pay for “identifying oneself with reality in order to understand it and enjoy it.” That is, in order to do so, one must become a snow man, which, as Doggett puts it, is, in effect, “no man” (130). Given all that has been said, however, we might also understand it as a transition to another mode of being, one that forgoes the subject/object dualism of imagination and reality so as to embrace one that does not attempt to possess reality (Bloom) or identify with it (Stevens). In fact, all the listener beholds is “the nothing that is”—which, as I’ve already mentioned, is sound itself (ie. sound that is listened to rather than heard). And this, I think, is why the listener is “nothing himself”: because, as we saw Nancy put it, “[t]o be listening will always…be to be straining toward or in an approach to the self” where the approach to self is “neither to a proper self (I), nor to the
self of an other, but to the form or structure of self as such, that is to say, to the form, structure, and movement of an infinite referral [renvoi], since it refers to something (itself) that is nothing outside of the referral” (9). “The Snow Man,” then, is not (or at least not only) interested in the thing itself or in contact with bare reality, but with the resonance of thing and “self” that comes into play in the act of listening.

Stevens would explore this mode of being throughout his career, but there is an especially intense focus on it in his later poetry. Here, for instance, is “Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself,” the last poem published in his Collected Poems:

At the earliest ending of winter,
In March, a scrawny cry from outside
Seemed like a sound in his mind.

He knew that he heard it,
A bird’s cry, at daylight or before,
In the early March wind.

The sun was rising at six,
No longer a battered panache above snow…
It would have been outside.

It was not from the vast ventriloquism
Of sleep’s faded papier-mâché…
It would have been outside.

That scrawny cry—it was
A chorister whose c preceded the choir.
It was part of the colossal sun,

Surrounded by its choral rings,
Still far away. It was like
A new knowledge of reality. (CPP 451)

Taking a cue from the title, Simon Critchley (and most other critics as well) find this poem to be about “the thing itself, the bare remote inhuman thing that lies beyond all
human understanding and meaning-making” (62). And, in a sense, it is; just not in the way it’s typically been formulated. Here, for instance, is Joseph Riddel:

For what is discovered in “Not Ideas about the Thing”...is that the self, as part of nature, shares a bodily being with the sun. But as it moves toward consciousness, the mind composes its own world, and sentimentalizes, hence loses, the thing itself. Man can know of otherness but not know it—except as he is sustained and hence contained by it.31

That’s pretty good; in fact, I’m willing to endorse it. But I also want to point out two other things. The first is that you can never trust a Stevens title; or rather: you should always be wary of Stevens title. I mean, try guessing what “The Emperor of Ice Cream,” “A Rabbit as King of the Ghosts,” and “No Possum, No Sop, No Taters” are about. If you’re not familiar with Stevens, then you’re probably wrong. So, my point is that we shouldn’t necessarily take him at his word that a poem titled “Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself” will be about that. My second point, then, is that “the thing itself” in this case is “a bird’s cry”; that is, it’s not a thing, but a sound.

With this in mind, then, let’s look at the poem again. The poem opens in March, an important season for Stevens because, as Critchley rightly notes, “the seasons of late autumn and early spring...are a denial of both the worlds of winter and summer, both the contraction of hard reality and its full transfiguration in imagination” (67). Thus, right from the start, we know that Stevens will be exploring the marginal. Fittingly, then, the poem begins when a man hears “a scrawny cry from outside” that seems “like a sound in his mind.” Yet, while the man is confused as to the sounds source, we can be sure that the sound is, in fact, from outside because it is stated without any of Stevens’s conditionals. That is, it only seems like “a sound in his mind” to him. Moreover, he

knows that he hears it. It is a bird’s cry that rings out at day light or before. And yet, still, the man must assure himself of this: “The sun was rising at six, / No longer a battered panache above snow… / It would have been outside.” The ellipsis trailing off of snow, here, suggests a pause where the man must catch himself so as not to continue his flight of fancy into the “battered panache” of the sun, a clear indication that the imagination is beginning to rise. In the next stanza, he must do the same: “It was not from the vast ventriloquism / Of sleep’s faded papier-mâché… / The sun was outside.” Here he starts to think that the sound could have come from the dream world, but, once again, he catches himself to reestablish the facts. No, the sun was coming from outside so it could not have been from his mind.

At this point, Stevens turns away from the man’s confusion to focus on the sound itself, that scrawny cry. He describes it in three ways. First, he says it is “A chorister whose c preceded the choir.” This is an endlessly fascinating line. “Chorister” indicates both a singer in the choir and a choir leader; and “choir” is confusing, too, seeing as though it suggests, in its common sense, a group of singers, but, in antiquity, a band of dancers or singers in worship, calling to mind the “supple” and “turbulent” “ring of men” who “chant in orgy on a summer morn / Their boisterous devotion to the sun” (CPP 55-56) in “Sunday Morning.” But, in either case, this chorister’s “c preceded the choir”: the c, here, immediately brings us back to Crispin from “The Comedian as the Letter C,” but it also includes a pun on preceded as in “pre-c-eded” and suggests that the scrawny cry provides a tuning note for the choir (although most orchestra’s tune to the oboe’s A). In addition, there is a pun here on c as “see” and also as “sea,” both of which further complicate things because the visual “see” comes in the middle of a line otherwise
obsessed with the audial, and the aquatic “sea”—supported by “surrounded” in line 16 (which carries the sense of being inundated and submerged in a flood)—comes in the middle of a section about the sun. And there is also the possibility that c is simply alphabetic, in the sense that the sound of the letter c precedes the word “choir,” as if to emphasize the illegible aspect of the scrawny c-ry. But, on the whole, we can simply read it as noise that that has not yet been integrated into harmony.

Stevens also describes this scrawny cry as “part of the colossal sun, // Surrounded by its choral rings, / Still far away.” The “colossal sun,” here, is not an image of the imagination, but of the aforementioned sun from outside, another insistence that the sound did not come from the man’s mind. “Choral rings,” however, are confusing, since syntactically, they would seem to be part of a quality of the colossal sun, but, semantically, are more in tune with the sound itself. That is, they relate more directly to the “chorister” and “choir” of line 14. Thus, we can take it that, here, Stevens is describing the cry as part of something more that is expanding yet still far away. And then, of course, comes his most famous and direct description of the cry: “It was like / A new knowledge of reality.”32 “Like” is the first word we should notice here; for Stevens is telling us that it is not a new knowledge of reality, but only “like” one, just as he told us in lines 2 and 3 that the cry came from outside, yet “seemed” like a sound in the man’s mind. In this final line, that is, we are returning to the interior confusion of the first stanza, where the man takes something external to be internal.

What Stevens is ultimately exploring in this poem, then, is the way that we immediately and unconsciously make sense of noise, the way we hear it, which as we

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32 Just as a personal side note, I have to admit that, after hearing Charles Bernstein talk about this poem, I can no longer read it without adding a Lebowski-esque “man” to the ending.
saw Nancy put it, is “to understand the sense (either in the so-called figurative sense, or in the so-called proper sense: to hear a siren, a bird, or a drum is already each time to understand at least the rough outline of a situation, a context if not a text)” (6). More than this, though, Stevens is showing us how to resist this easy assimilation of meaning, or how we can listen to it; for, as Nancy put it, to listen “is to be straining toward a possible meaning, and consequently one that is not immediately accessible”; it is “to be on the edge of meaning, or in an edgy meaning of extremity, and as if the sound were precisely nothing else than this edge, this fringe, this margin” (6-7). And this, I think, is why Stevens describes the cry as “like” a new knowledge of reality. It is “like” one because it is not “knowledge” at all; that is, it is not something that we can know, possess, or understand. Rather, it is the “knowledge” that comes when we open ourselves in listening to the tension and infinite referral that resounds between meaning and sense.

This resistance to hearing, understanding, and knowledge becomes even clearer in Stevens’s late poem “The Course of a Particular”:

Today the leaves cry, hanging on branches swept by wind,  
Yet the nothingness of winter becomes a little less.  
It is still full of icy shades and shapen snow.

The leaves cry…One holds off and merely hears the cry.  
It is a busy cry, concerning someone else.  
And though one says that one is part of everything,  
There is conflict, there is a resistance involved;  
And being part is an exertion that declines:  
One feels the life of that which gives life as it is.

The leaves cry. It is not a cry of divine attention,  
Nor the smoke-drift or puffed-out heroes, nor human cry.
It is the cry of leaves that do not transcend themselves,
In the absence of fantasia, without meaning more
Than they are in the final finding of the ear, in the thing
Itself, until, at last, the cry concerns no one at all. (CPP 460).

As many have noticed, this poem seems to be a response to or a refining of the ideas of “The Snow Man,” since both the “wind” of line 1 and “the nothingness of winter” in line 3 are clear references to the earlier poem. Moreover, the poem’s 15 lines divided across 5 stanzas follows the same structure as “The Snow Man.” At the same time, though, the focus on a “cry” and the mention of “the thing / Itself” in lines 14-15 call to mind “Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself.” Once again, however, the thing, here, is not a thing, but a sound.

The sound in this poem is the cry of leaves hanging on branches swept by the wind, a cry, the poem tells us, that makes the nothingness of winter a little less. This could be because, as in “Not Ideas,” it is spring time, and so the cry of leaves would indicate that life is beginning to arise out of the “ice shades and shapen snow.” But it could also be because it is something additional to and other than the speaker’s declining exertions. In either case, though, there is, as in the earlier poem, a temptation and resistance to attributing meaning to the cry as Stevens once again employs an ellipsis: “The leaves cry…One holds off an merely hears the cry.” Here, it is as if the speaker were about to imbue the cry with meaning, but then stops himself so that he can hold off and “merely hear” it, or, as I would read this phrase, listen to it. This cry, however, has none of the pageantry of the cry in “Not Ideas,” with its attendant choral rings. Instead, it “is a busy cry, concerning someone else.” “Busy” seems like a strange word to use to describe the sound of leaves being swept by wind, but the point is that it does not concern the listener,
but someone else (although, in a certain sense, this a contradiction since the cry is precisely what concerns the listener in this poem).

At any rate, the poem then turns to consider what relation there could be between the cry that does not concern him and the fact of his hearing it. It would seem to indicate that he is, in fact, “part of everything,” since the sound that is outside is also inside of him. But, as Stevens says in the following line, “There is a conflict, there is a resistance involved.” Moreover, he says, in what must be a reference to his age, that “being part is an exertion that declines.” “Exertion” obviously means effort, but it also has to do with the power of the faculties, and, in this case, with Stevens’s vaunted imagination. Here, however, the imagination has declined to such a minimal degree that he can only “feel the life of that which gives life as it is,” where “feel” marks a sharp contrast with knowledge, as if Stevens has given up the desire to make sense and is now content to merely feel himself sense. Indeed, as he says in no uncertain terms in the next stanza, the cry is not one of “divine attention” (God), “the smoke-drift of puffed-out heroes” (myth), nor even “human” meaning, but “the cry of leaves that do not transcend themselves.” The cry, that is, exists in “the absence of fantasia,” where “fantasia” indicates both the imagination and its purported ability to weave things together into a whole. Ultimately, then, the poem comes to the conclusion that the leaves mean nothing more “Than they are in the final finding of the ear,” which, as I’ve said many times by now, is an uncertain type of meaning, one that is constantly straining to end in meaning, but cannot because it is caught in the infinite referral that resounds between the subject of listening, who is nothing himself but the space or function of this referral, and sound itself, which is no thing, but sense itself, or, as Nancy put it, “sense completely ahead of
signification, meaning in its nascent state, in the state of return [renvoi] for which the end of this return is not given (the concept, the idea, the information), and hence to the state of return without end, like an echo that continues on its own and that is nothing but this continuance going in a decrescendo, or even in moriendo” (27).

On the whole, then, what Stevens is interested in in these three poems that we have traditionally taken to be about “the thing itself,” is not a thing at all, but sound. This immediately takes us out of the realm of epistemology, since sound permeates and disrupts the borders between inside and outside or subject and object. Moreover, it takes us out of the realm of the phenomenological subject, since when it comes to listening, we are not dealing with a subject who is already given and posed to a point of view, but with a resonant one who exists as incomplete totality of referrals. In other words, by focusing on the act of listening in Stevens, I hope to have shown that his presumed concern with “the thing itself” does not stem from a logic of presence, but, as Nancy put it, “from a different logic, which would have to be called evocation, but in this precise sense: while manifestation brings presence to light, evocation summons (convokes, invokes) presence to itself” (20). But perhaps Stevens says this all better himself in the last canto of “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”:

The less legible meanings of sounds, the little reds  
Not often realized, the lighter words  
In the heavy drum of speech, the inner men

Behind the outer shields, the sheets of music  
In the strokes of thunder, dead candles at the window  
When day comes, fire-foams in the motions of the sea,

Flickings from finikin to fine finikin  
And the general fidget from busts of Constantine
To photographs of the late president, Mr. Blank,

These are the edgings and inchings of final form,
The swarming activities of the formulae
Of statement, directly and indirectly getting at,

Like an evening evoking the spectrum of violet,
A philosopher practicing scales on his piano,
A woman writing a note and tearing it up.

It is not in the premise that reality
Is a solid. It may be a shade that traverses
A dust, a force that traverses a shade. (CPP 417)

“The less legible meanings of sounds”: these, more than “the thing itself,” are what Stevens is interested in. They might not always make sense, but, if we listen closely enough, they might give us sense itself, which is to say, not a reality that is solid, but one that is sonic, a force that traverses the shade between hearing (understanding) and listening so as to provide us not the meaning of Stevens’s thought, but the illegibly powerful timbre of it.
CHAPTER THREE...

THE REST OF IT: ROBERT FROST AND THE LIMITS OF METAPHOR

All metaphor breaks down somewhere.¹

— Robert Frost

Robert Frost did not share many of the same concerns as Stevens. But, then again, he did not share many of the same concerns as most modernist poets. Consider, for example, the story of his time abroad and his encounter with some of the imagistes. In 1912, at the age of thirty-eight and still without a published volume of poetry, Frost set out for England where he hoped he would be able to live “a life that followed poetically.”² Living with his family in a cottage just north of London, in Buckinghamshire, Frost spent the better part of his first months abroad editing and arranging the poems which would eventually comprise A Boy’s Will. This effort paid off as the manuscript was soon accepted by Mrs. M. L. Nutt of David Nutt’s publishing house, who, in addition to offering Frost a generous financial contract, wanted an option to publish his next four books as well. Frost had some reservations about being published in England before he had been published in America, but, in the end, he was simply happy to have his work legitimated. More than this, though, Frost’s contract with Nutt gave him a new sense of confidence and creativity as, over the next several months, he wrote the bulk of the poems that would make up North of Boston and, after spending his


² Quoted in Jay Parini, Robert Frost: A Life (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1999), 113. All further references will be given in the text.
first months abroad in relative isolation, he finally worked up the courage to venture into the world of London’s literary elite.

One particularly important outing took place on January 8, 1913, when Frost and his wife, Elinor, attended the opening of Harold Monro’s Poetry Bookshop on Devonshire Street in London. There were almost three-hundred people in attendance, but, almost immediately, Frost ran into the poet F.S. Flint and the poet-critic T.E. Hulme. Frost mentioned that his first book of poetry had just been accepted for publication, and, in response, Flint asked if Frost was familiar with Ezra Pound, another American poet of his acquaintance. Frost had not, and so Flint generously offered to arrange a meeting. Frost, of course, was thrilled, writing to Flint, shortly after their meeting: “I was only too childishly happy in being allowed to [be present] for a moment in company in which I hadn’t to be ashamed of having written verse. Perhaps it will help you understand my state of mind if I tell you that I have lived for the most part in villages where it were better that a millstone were hanged about your neck than that you should own yourself a minor poet” (quoted in Parini 127). Pound himself was apparently less thrilled, sending Frost a card, which simply read: “At home—sometimes” (quoted in Parini 127).

Two months later, when Frost had finally worked up the courage to try his luck, Pound, after making his visitor wait while he finished his “bird-bath” (127), answered the door barefoot, wearing a blue-and-green silk dressing gown and a ring in one ear—a sight that must surely have shocked the New England farmer. Pound chastised Frost for not having visited him sooner, and, despite the fact that Frost himself had not even seen the book, insisted that the two visit the publisher’s office right then and there so that he could read Frost’s work immediately. Pound was pleased with what he read—so pleased, in
fact, that he kicked Frost out of his flat so that, with his typical mixture of generosity and self-importance, he could start writing a review at once.

Pound’s review made it into Harriet Monroe’s *Poetry*, where after taking a swipe at American publishers for ignoring one of their own, Pound wrote the following:

Mr. Frost’s book is a little raw, and has in it a number of infelicities; underneath them it has the tang of the New Hampshire woods, and it has just this utter sincerity. It is not post-Miltonic or post-Swinburnian or post-Kiplonian. This man has the good sense to speak naturally and to paint the thing, the thing as he sees it. And to do this is a very different matter from gunning about for the circumplectious polysyllable.3

Pound is enthused here not—or, to be generous, not only—because of Frost’s poetry, but because he thought he could find his own poetic principles exemplified in that poetry. This was, of course, 1913, the year after Pound, H.D., and Richard Aldington had declared themselves *imagistes* and the same year that Pound, writing under Flint’s name, had laid out his imagist manifesto in *Poetry*:

1. Direct treatment of the “thing,” whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome.4

Thus, when Pound says that Frost “has the good sense to paint the thing, the thing as he sees it” and that he doesn’t gun about for “the circumplectious polysyllable,” we would do well to be wary of intentions. And so, too, with Flint’s own review of Frost in *Poetry and Drama*, where he wrote the following: “Each poem is the complete expression of one mood, one emotion, one idea. I have tried to find in these poems what is most characteristic of Mr. Frost’s poetry, and I think it is this: direct observation of the object and immediate correlation with the emotion—spontaneity, subtlety in the evocation of

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moods, humour, and ear for silence.” Clearly, the imagists saw something they liked in Frost, and wanted to appropriate that for themselves.

As Robert Kern points out, however, the imagist’s enthusiasm was most likely misplaced. Here, for instance, is the classic imagist poem, Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro”:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.  

And here is Frost’s “A Patch of Old Snow,” which, according to Kern, is the closest thing to an imagist poem that Frost ever wrote:

There’s a patch of old snow in a corner,
That I should have guessed
Was a blow-away paper the rain
Had brought to rest.

It is speckled with grime as if
Small print overspread it,
The news of a day I’ve forgotten—
If I ever read it.

Kern admits that Frost’s “poem is organized, very much in the imagist manner, as a brief comparison of two images, a strategy close to what Pound called the ‘super-position’ of one image upon another, and what T. E. Hulme called ‘the simultaneous presentation to the mind of two different images.’” Moreover, he admits that “[w]ith some editing, it could be reduced”—as Pound reduced his poem from thirty lines to two—“to a plausible imagist text” (9). But, at the same time, he claims that “such reduction would eliminate a

5 F. S. Flint, “A Boy’s Will” in Poetry and Drama 1 (June 1913), 250.
8 Robert Kern, “Frost and Modernism” in American Literature 60.1 (March 1988), 9. All further references will be given parenthetically in the text.
good deal of what Frost apparently intends to express” and that “the poem seems less imagist finally than a critique of imagism, since it refuses to pursue any sort of simultaneity of presentation in favor of the consecutiveness of its speaker’s language and the temporality of his experience” (9). Indeed, whereas Pound’s poem seeks—on his own account at least—to present “the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective,” Frost’s poem, according to Kern, “is constituted by the very time limits and space limits, in terms of its language and situation, that imagist poems like Pound’s normally try to abolish” (10). And so, on Kern’s reading, Frost’s so-called “imagist” poem does not present “the deliberate imagist confusion between figure and ground, between tenor and vehicle, characteristic of ‘In a Station of the Metro,’ but a recovery from such confusion, a moment of clarification or balance that is thoroughly typical of Frost,” which is to say that Frost “is not interested in Pound’s sense of ‘sudden liberation’ but in its aftermath, which constitutes a different kind of liberation—a freedom from or resolution of the very ambiguity that Pound’s poem generates in its refusal to specify precisely how its two images relate to one another” (10).

Kern is right here; for consider that, in the first stanza, the confusion between the patch of old snow and the newspaper that an imagist poem would want to focus on, is interrupted by the second line: “That I should have guessed.” That is, Frost’s speaker does not actually confuse the patch of snow with a newspaper, but notes that there is a similarity between them. Furthermore, consider that, in the second stanza, Frost includes an “as if”—“All virtue in ‘as if,’” he once said—at the end of the fifth line so as to emphasize that this is a consciously made metaphor, and not, as Pound—who played with
a number of different transitions between his two lines before settling on the semicolon—would have it, a sudden and almost unconscious break between the inner and outer.9 Indeed, as Kern says, Frost’s “concern is not with ‘the thing itself’ or its ‘direct treatment’ but with the speaker and ultimately the reader, who is invited to enter into the speaker’s experience by saying his words and then to recognize, through their intonation, his state of mind. We encounter, through his speech, the inwardness of a person, rather than just objects in the world, no matter how emotionally evocative” (11).10

Going beyond this particular poem, though, it is clear from many of Frost’s own comments that he had reservations about Pound and modernist literature in general. On a personal level, Frost complained that Pound had taken to “bullying” him, adding: “He says I must start to write something much more like vers libre or he will let me perish of neglect. He really threatens.”11 More significantly, though, Frost worried about Pound’s so-called “modern way of writing poetry” which sought “originality by subtracting meter and meaning” (quoted in Parini 295). And, in a clear attempt to distinguish himself from imagism, he wrote to John Cournos, one of the contributors to Pound’s Des Imagistes, that he was interested in “the hearing imagination” “rather than the kind that merely sees things” (L 130). But, the best place to see Frost’s apparent opposition to modernism is in his “Introduction” to Edwin Arlington Robinson’s King Jasper, which begins as follows:

It may come to the notice of posterity (and then again it may not) that this, our

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9 Frost said, “All virtue in ‘as if’” in Robert Frost, “Introduction to King Jasper” in The Collected Prose of Robert Frost, ed. Mark Richardson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2007), 122. All further references will be given parenthetically in the text.

10 One might note, in passing, that this is not always the case. Indeed, as Jonathan Culler has argued in a short reading of “Spring Pools,” we should not be too quick to imagine a speaker behind Frost’s poems. See, Jonathan Culler, “Why Lyric?” in PMLA 123.1 (January 2008): 200-206.

11 Selected Letters of Robert Frost, ed. Lawrance Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1964), 84. All further references to Frost’s letters will be given parenthetically as L, followed by the page number.
age, ran wild in the quest of new ways to be new. The one old way to be new no longer served. Science put it into our heads that there must be new ways to be new. Those tried were largely by subtraction—elimination. Poetry, for example, was tried without punctuation. It was tried without capital letters. It was tried without metric frame on which to measure the rhythm. It was tried without any images but those to the eye; and a loud general intoning had to be kept up to cover the total loss of specific images to the ear, those dramatic tones of voice which had hitherto constituted the better half of poetry. It was tried without content under the trade name of poesie pure. It was tried without phrase, epigram, coherence, logic and consistency. It was tried without ability. I took the confession of one who had deliberately to unlearn what he knew. He made a back-pedaling movement of his hands to illustrate the process. It was tried premature like the delicacy of unborn calf in Asia. It was tried without feeling or sentiment like murder for small pay in the underworld. The limits of poetry had been sorely strained, but the hope was that the idea had been somewhat brought out. (116)

And yet, despite his insistence, those who read Frost closely were hesitant to take his prose statements at face value—as they should have been about a poet who was so utterly cagey. Indeed, as Peter Viereck put it in his review of the 1949 edition of *Frost’s Complete Poems*, in spite of Frost’s “smug, folksy, [and] Rotarian” public persona, the poet had

a Greek cheerfulness. And the apparent blandness of the Greeks was, as Nietzsche showed in his *Birth of Tragedy*, the result of their having looked so deeply into life’s tragic meaning that they had to protect themselves by cultivating a deliberately superficial jolliness in order to bear the unbearable. Frost’s benign calm, the comic mask of a whittling rustic, is designed for gazing—without dizziness—into a tragic abyss of desperation. This is the same eternal abyss that gaped not only for the Hellenes but for such moderns as Pascal, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, [and] Baudelaire.12

Something similar came to the surface during Lionel Trilling’s famous speech on Frost’s eighty-fifth birthday. Earlier, Trilling had had his reservations about Frost, particularly the public persona which he had cultivated. After attending one of Frost’s lectures at Kenyon College, for instance, Trilling wrote the following in his journal: “At Kenyon: Frost’s strange speech—apparently of a kind that he often gives—he makes himself the

buffoon—goes into a trance of aged childishness—he is the child who is rebelling against all the serious people who are trying to organize him—take away his will and individuality” (quoted in Parini 365). Trilling admitted as much at Frost’s party in New York, saying that the America that Frost made manifest was not the one that had a place in his mind, and, moreover, that he had harbored a long-standing “resistance to Frost’s great canon of work,” which had only recently “yielded to admiration.” What Trilling had recently found in Frost was a poet who had not, as he previously suspected, avoided the complexities of modern life. Indeed, as he explained: “I have to say that my Frost…is not the Frost I seem to perceive existing in the minds of so many of his admirers…He is not the Frost who reassures us by his affirmations of old virtues, simplicities, pieties, and ways of feeling” (quoted in Burnshaw 105). Rather, Trilling claimed that Frost’s poems got at “the terrible actualities of life,” and that he was “a terrifying poet” (quoted in Burnshaw 105).

Such a split indicates that, critically speaking at least, there were, as M.L. Rosenthal put it in his review of In the Clearing, two different Frosts. One of them (“the ‘real’ Frost”), Rosenthal says, “is a natural, sometimes broodingly bitter or fearful lyric poet and storyteller” who “has a fine ear for traditional English metric and combines it beautifully with the tones of native American speech.” The other (“the cracker barrel” Frost), is “the handsomely craggy-faced sage and official bard who was chosen to compose a poem for the inauguration of President Kennedy and whose birthday…was celebrated at a formal affair sponsored by the Secretary of the Interior,” and “we hardly

13 Quoted in Stanley Burnshaw, Robert Frost Himself (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1989), 103. All further citations will be given parenthetically in the text.

14 M. L. Rosenthal, “The Two Frosts” in Reporter 26 (April 12, 1962): 50. All further references will be given parenthetically in the text.
know what to do with him” (56). This second Frost is the one who wrote “For John F. Kennedy His Inauguration” and “Kitty Hawk,” and the one who presents himself in public—the one that had been showing up more and more in his later years and who Rosenthal finds so frustrating. In the end, however, he says that “we shall not be terribly troubled by the second, or false, Frost and the almost innocent garrulity with which he too often beguiles himself and his trusting public” (56). Indeed, as he goes on to say, “We shall mostly forget the work of that sort, and move among the frightening depths and bright or shadowed surfaces of his characterizations and impressions of places and of significant moments” (56).

And yet, even by the 1960s, Frost was still not considered a great modern poet. In Roy Harvey Pearce’s *The Continuity of American Poetry*, for example, he was relegated from the two sections on “The Modern Age” as one whose “poetry is not at all slippery,” and, in J. Hillis Miller’s influential *Poets of Reality*, he was left out altogether. By the ‘70s, however, a new group of critics had emerged, who, perhaps unburdened by the living, public Frost, were able to provide new studies of his poetry that set him on equal footing with other modernists, who, at that time, had by and large been defined by their epistemological concerns, or, as they were more likely to describe it, the relationship between imagination and reality. The examples here are legion, but the best is Frank Lentricchia’s *Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscapes of Self*. Lentricchia begins by noting how, until at least the mid ‘70s, Frost had been “excluded from the company of the great modern poets” because of the “widespread and casual

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assumption among the cognoscenti of literary theory that Frost [could] not bear sustained theoretical contemplation,” before going on to claim “that the difficulty in Frost’s poetics is not absence of depth and modernist sophistication, but too much subtlety.” In fact, on Lentricchia’s view, it is Frost’s “subtlety” that accounts for “[t]he most striking feature of [his] thought”: “the way that it unifies what at the surface appear to be mutually exclusive dimensions of the modern literary mind,” namely, “the idea we find everywhere in Kant and the romantics that our mental acts constitute the world of our experience” and “the philosophy of common sense realism which posits a world ‘out there,’ independent of our acts of perception” (3). It’s a tall order, to be sure; but it’s one that Frost is able to fill, according to Lentricchia, because his “thinking has its basis in the pragmatism of William James,” whose peculiar strength it was “to recognize a difficult real world which plays some determinative role in our lives, while also allowing for the possibility of the active consciousness to carve out, to a certain extent, the world of its desire” (3).

In other words, what Frost gets from James, Lentricchia says, is “that naturalistic toughness which kept James from floating out of time in search for resolutions to human dilemmas,” combined with his “faith—usually associated with a post-Kantian view of mind—in the creative potential of human consciousness” (7). Indeed, on Lentricchia’s view, “[w]e might imagine that James’s reconciliation of scientific naturalism and [Josiah] Royce’s idealism saved for Frost the truths of two distinct but not utterly incompatible philosophical traditions,” which is to say that it

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17 Frank Lentricchia, Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscapes of Self (Durham: Duke University Press, 1975), 3. All further references will be given parenthetically in the text.

18 For another take on the relationship between Frost and James, see Richard Poirier, Poetry and Pragmatism (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).
allowed him to “accept the proposition that mind actively participates in the constitution of the world of fact without also accepting [the] idealist theory of timeless mental categories” and, at the same time, “the skeptical and common sense view of the world of objects as indeed ‘out there,’ as hard, dense, and often dangerous” (8). For Lentricchia, therefore, James provided Frost with a way to reconcile Kantian and realist views by positing “an objective world that is yet always caressed and bathed in human consciousness, receiving its final touches from the excursive (or ‘intentional’) tendency of consciousness to reach out beyond itself and by so doing insinuate its needs and shapes into the given world” (8).  

More specifically, though, Lentricchia says that James provided Frost with an insight into what he called the “marriage-function” of consciousness, a function which, as Lentricchia explains it, “implicitly analogized the creative act of mind to the dynamic, integrative process of metaphoric activity” (11). For Lentricchia, therefore, it is ultimately through the use of metaphor that Frost is able to resolve his problems with post-Kantian epistemology. At the same time, though, since Frost also held that all metaphor is partial—and even repressive—he knew quite well that such thinking had its

19 Here’s how James puts it in the first volume of The Principles of Psychology: “Out of what is in itself an indistinguishable, swarming continuum, devoid of distinction or emphasis, our senses make for us, by attending to this notion and ignoring that, a world full of contrasts, of sharp accents, of abrupt changes, of picturesque light and shade.” Or, as he also says there: “The mind, in short, works on the data it receives very much as a sculptor works on his block of stone.” See William James, The Principles of Psychology, Vol. I (New York: Dover Publications, 1950), 284, 288.

20 Here’s how James himself described this “marriage-function”: “Purely objective truth, truth in whose establishment the function of giving human satisfaction in marrying previous parts of experience with newer parts played no role whatsoever, is nowhere to be found…‘to be true’ means only to perform this marriage-function.” See William James, Pragmatism and Other Writings, ed. Giles Gunn (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 37.

21 In a letter to Louis Untermeyer, for example, Frost wrote: “We are all toadies to the fashionable metaphor of the hour. Great is he who imposes the metaphor.” See The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer, ed. Louis Untermeyer (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), 285.
limits. Thus, as Lentricchia notes, always alongside this “redemptive act of consciousness” (12) is “the act of ironic consciousness” that “enables Frost to maintain his double vision, his skepticism, and his common sense” (7). Indeed, for Lentricchia, Frost’s “ironic, realistic awareness” was “necessary, as a therapeutic corrective” to the excessive “form-making power of artistic consciousness,” since, for all its value, “this redemptive act of consciousness” also had “its terrible moments when, impelled by a disturbed psyche, it shapes out a ‘lesser’ (not a ‘better’) world destructive to self” (12).

Hence Lentricchia’s reading of a poem like “All Revelation,” from Frost’s 1942 collection *A Witness Tree*:

A head thrusts in as for the view,
But where it is it thrusts in from
Or what it is it thrusts into
By that Cyb’laean avenue,
And what can of its coming come,

And whither it will be withdrawn,
And what take hence or leave behind,
These things the mind has pondered on
A moment and still asking gone.
Strange apparition of the mind!

But the impervious geode
Was entered, and its inner crust
Of crystals with a ray cathode
At every point and facet glowed
In answer to the mental thrust.

Eyes seeking the response of eyes
Bring out the stars, bring out the flowers,
Thus concentrating earth and skies
So none need be afraid of size.
All revelation has been ours.23

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According to Lentricchia, Frost’s subject here “is a common poetic and philosophical subject after Kant and the romantics”: it is the mind (evoked by the metaphor of the cathode ray) thrusting into and illuminating the world (evoked by the metaphor of the earth-like geode). Thus, one way of reading the poem, he says, “is to see it as a poet’s confrontation with the leading idea of post-Kantian epistemology: that the mind is in some part constructive of the world” (5-6). At the same time, though, Lentricchia notes that “there are other, complicating philosophical features in the poem which once perceived make a simple Kantian reading impossible to sustain” (6). In the first stanza, for example, he points out that Frost brackets a number of questions “that many traditional philosophers make the central concern of their quests” (6). “[T]he question of the origins of mind (‘where it is it thrusts in from’); the question of the nature of the objective world considered as a thing in itself (‘what it is it thrusts into’); the question of the final and enduring value of the constitutive acts of mind (‘what can of its coming come’)”—all of these, for Frost, “can be answered only provisionally, if at all,” since, as he puts it in the second stanza, “These things the mind has pondered on / A moment and still asking gone” (6). Moreover, Lentricchia points out that the third and fourth stanzas “particularize a philosophical paradox which is crucial to Frost’s poems and poetics”:

By affirming contrary philosophical perspectives—by insisting, on the one hand, that consciousness insinuates itself into the world, in part constituting that world (the geode was entered, the crystals do ‘answer’ to the “mental thrust”), and by insisting as well (with realists) that the object is there, independent of the mind (the geode is ‘impervious,’ to use Frost’s word, and resists flagrant transformation) Frost asks us to accept a poetic stance which (logically) is impure and ambiguous. (6)

Logically impure and ambiguous, indeed; but, as Lentricchia goes on to say, “for a neoromantic in pursuit of the complicated feel of his experience in the world—a world
now open to human imperative and wish (a shapeable place); a world now repressive and intractable in its thereness—it is a stance far more adequate than what we are generally given in philosophical traditions since Kant” (6). Indeed, as Lentricchia says to conclude his analysis, “[w]hen in the last stanza Frost does question the value of this peculiar meeting of mind and object (this ‘strange apparition’), his answer is pragmatic”—meaning that while it acknowledges the thereness of stars, flowers, earth, and sky, it still allows for consciousness to shape “its environment in order to concentrate ‘the immensities’ (‘So none need be afraid of size’), make them manageable for the self and thereby supply a psychic need to feel in our confrontations with nature that we are not hopelessly lost and adrift in a world that engulfs and drowns us” (6). “All revelation has been ours,” Lentricchia therefore explains, because, while it “is we who reveal the world…as we desire to see it revealed,” such revelation is always subject to “an ironic self-consciousness which tells [us] that constitutive visions of a better nature are ‘apparitions’ in the sense of ‘illusions’” (7), which is to say, that, for better and worse, all revelation has been ours.

In the end, though, all of this is essentially just a more sophisticated way of explaining what Frost had been saying along: that, as he famously put it in “The Figure a Poem Makes,” a poem is “a momentary stay against confusion,”24 which, in Lentricchia’s terms, means that the metaphoric integrations of poetry provide us with temporary footholds against the slipperiness of reality. But, granting that—as well as the fact that

24 Robert Frost, “The Figure a Poem Makes” in The Collected Prose of Robert Frost, ed. Mark Richardson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2007), 132. All further references to this essay will be given parenthetically in the text. For more on this phrase, see Frost’s interview with C. Day Lewis in the Claremont Quarterly (Spring 1958), where he says: “Yes, I suppose that's a good deal backward-looking theory, that I can see in nearly every poem some answer to some doubt or some question, you know, that's come up in my mind—even in argument with people or something—a difficulty in a situation, you know, that needs a phrase to finish it off. The same as in diplomacy they find a phrase. It's just like diplomacy—you find a phrase.”
Frost is occasionally interested in epistemology—I would like to suggest that, in the effort to incorporate Frost into the folds of modernism, there is yet another Frost that has been lost: one that provides us with a way of attaining something, if not more than, then certainly other than, momentary stays against confusion. In fact, while it is the last five words of the passage that people tend to focus on, Frost provides a glimpse of what I’m talking about in the sentences that come directly before his famous saying: “The figure a poem makes. It begins in delight and ends in wisdom. The figure is the same as for love. No one can really hold that the ecstasy should be static and stand still in one place” (131-132). But, better perhaps, is this one from a lecture he gave at Yale: “Education does not change life much. It just moves us to a higher plane of regard”\textsuperscript{25}—which, as Robert Faggen points out, we should hear not as “a higher plane of regard” but as “a higher plane of regard.”\textsuperscript{26} In either case, though, what I take Frost to be saying here is that, while “education” (ie. the “knowledge” purchased through those “momentary stays”) does not lead us closer to reality itself, it can—if we are willing to accept its inevitable failings—move us out of the epistemological register and into the “higher,” ethical one of “regard,” wherein the goal is no longer to transfer the thereness of things into the realm of discernible human meaning, but simply to show respect and concern for them, or, in a word, to “love” them (an act which, as Derrida insists, does not have to do with loving this or that particular aspect of something or -one, but with loving it, him, or her as a complex, contradictory, and, ultimately, unrepresentable singularity).\textsuperscript{27} And this, I think,


\textsuperscript{27} See Derrida: Screenplay and Essays on the Film, eds. Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman (New York: Routledge, 2005).
is the “wisdom” that Frost speaks of when he says that a poem, like love, “begins in
delight and ends in wisdom”: it is the wisdom that comes from recognizing that, while
delightful, all of our “momentary stays” are, in fact, deflections from the intractable
difficulties of reality.

Indeed, while Frost was a virtuoso at the metaphoric integrations that, according
to Lentricchia, resolved his problems with post-Kantian epistemology, and while he
believed that, as he put it in “Education by Poetry,” “metaphor [was] the whole of
thinking” (104), he knew all the while that “[a]ll metaphor breaks down somewhere”
(107). In fact, in the same essay in which he touts the importance of metaphor, he gives
us an example of metaphor breaking down:

Somebody said to me a little while ago, “It is easy enough for me to think of the
universe as a machine, as a mechanism.”
   I said, “You mean the universe is like a machine?”
   He said, “No. I think it is one...Well, it is like...”
   “I think you mean the universe is like a machine.”
   “All right. Let it go at that.”
   I asked him, “Did you ever see a machine without a pedal for the foot, or a
lever for the hand, or a button for the finger?”
   He said, “No—no.”
   I said, “all right. Is the universe like that?”
   And he said, “No. I mean it is like a machine, only...”
   “…it is different from a machine,” I said. (106-7)

Frost’s interlocutor, here, wants “to go just that far with metaphor and no further” (107).
And so should we all, he suggests; for “[i]t is touch and go with the metaphor,” he says,
“and until you have lived with it long enough you don’t know when it is going. You
don’t know how much you can get out of it and when it will cease to yield. It is a very
living thing. It is as life itself.” (107).

The question that I want to pursue in the rest of this chapter, then, is this: what
happens in those moments in Frost’s poetry when metaphor does break down? Or again:
what, for a poet who believed so strongly in the ubiquity of metaphoric thinking, is left when such thinking fails?28 And what is left, I will argue, is seeing—a term which, as will become clear below, I use not in its visionary sense (ie. Harold Bloom’s “visionary strain” of American poetry29), but rather to get at something like what Paul Valéry means when he says, apocryphally or not, that “seeing is forgetting the name of the thing one sees.” In other words, I want to argue that when metaphor breaks down for Frost—which is to say, when he cannot find an adequate description for something—he turns to the act of attentive looking (or what I will also have occasion to call regarding), wherein, instead of attempting to carry over, and thus assimilate, the object or event of his focus into the realm of discernible human meaning, he simply lets it stand in its alterity or its ultimate inappropriability. My ultimate claim, therefore, is that, in addition to the well-documented epistemological Frost, there is also an ethical Frost, or perhaps a Frost that is interested in the ethics of epistemology.

Before getting to this ethical Frost, however, let me first discuss a poem in which the tension between the powers and limits of metaphor is at its peak. Frost’s long poem “Maple,” from his 1923 collection New Hampshire, begins when a girl named Maple is told by her teacher that her name is not Maple but Mable. This makes her take notice of her name for the first time, causing her so much grief that, when she gets home, she is compelled to ask her father, who says:

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28 I should mention here that when speaking of metaphor, I am following Frost’s rather loose definition of it; that, as he put it in “The Constant Symbol” in The Collected Prose of Robert Frost, ed. Mark Richardson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2007), it is just “saying one thing and meaning another, saying one thing in terms of another, the pleasure of ulteriority” (146). In other words, I am following the etymological definition of the Greek metaphora, where meta means over or across and pherein means carry or bear so that, in its most basic sense, metaphor is any transference of meaning (including simile, metonymy, and synecdoche) from one term to another.

“Teachers don’t know as much
As fathers about children, you tell teacher.
You tell her that it’s M-A-P-L-E.
You ask her if she knows a maple tree.
Your mother named you. You and she just saw
Each other in passing in the room upstairs,
One coming this way into life, and one
Going the other out of life—you know?\(^{30}\)

He then explains the origins of her name:

“She had been having a long look at you.
She put her finger in your cheek so hard
It must have made your dimple there, and said,
‘Maple.’ I said it too: ‘Yes, for her name.’
She nodded. So we’re sure there’s no mistake.”

And yet, he is unable to tell her what it means:

“I don’t know what she wanted it to mean,
But it seems like some word she left to bid you
Be like a good girl—be like a maple tree.
How like a maple tree’s for us to guess.
Or for a little girl to guess sometime.
Not now—at least I shouldn’t try too hard now.
By and by I will tell you all I know
About trees, and something, too,
About your mother that perhaps may help.”

Thus, Maple is left with the following information: 1) her name is, in fact, Maple (although there’s always the possibility that there was a miscommunication between husband and wife); 2) her mother named her that because, according to her father, she wanted to bid Maple to “be a good girl” (although, again, there’s the chance that the father has not understood things correctly; he does, after all, say “seems”); 3) being a good girl has something to do with being like a maple tree; 4) what this “something” is is a mystery; and 5) it is possible that her father knows the secret of this mystery, but is unwilling to tell it.

At this point, however, the mystery is not that important, since all Maple wants of her name is “to rebuke her teacher with it next day / And give the teacher a scare as from her father.” But, as the speaker says, her father’s are “Dangerous self-arousing words to sow”; and, while he tries to tell himself that “Anything further [has] been wasted on her”—that “She would forget it”—we are told that:

What he sowed with her slept so long a sleep,
And came so near death in the dark of years,
That when it woke and came to life again
The flower was different from the parent seed.

And, indeed, someday later on, as she is standing in front of the mirror “saying her name over aloud, / Striking it gently across her lowered eyes / To make it go well with the way she looked,” it all comes back “vaguely.” She feels, that is, that her name has “too much meaning,” and that she must, somehow, figure out “what it asked / In dress or manner of the girl who bore it.”

Maple remembers her father’s story, of course, and so immediately thinks that “If she could form some notion of her mother— / What she had thought was lovely, and what good,” then she would be on the right track; but this proves rather difficult:

Once she found for a bookmark in the Bible
A maple leaf she thought must have been laid
In wait for her there. She read every word
Of the two pages it was pressed between,
As if it was her mother speaking to her.
But forgot to put the leaf back in closing
And lost the place never to read again.

Being sure, though, “that there had been nothing in it,” she moves on to look “for herself, as everyone / Looks for himself, more or less outwardly”; and it is this “fitful,” “self-seeking,” the speaker tells us, that may “have been what led her on to read, / And think a little, and get some city schooling” until, eventually, “she found herself in a strange place
Strange as it may be, though, it is here that, while daydreaming, she hears someone say, “in such natural tones” that “She almost wrote the words down on her knee”:: “Do you know you remind me of a tree— / A maple tree?” To which she responds: “Because my name is Maple?” And he: “Isn’t it Mabel? I thought it was Mabel.” She soon corrects him, though, and they are “both stirred that he should have divined / Without the name her personal mystery.” Indeed, “It made it seem as if there must be something / She must have missed herself.” And so, as the speaker casually mentions, “they were married, / And took the fancy home with them to live by.”

Soon, however, curiosity gets the best of them and they go on a pilgrimage to her father’s house “To see if there was not some special tree / She might have overlooked,” but “They could find none, / Not so much as a single tree for shade, / Let alone a whole grove of trees for sugar orchard.” Thus, her husband asks the reasonable question, “‘You’ve never asked your father outright, have you?…Because no telling but it may have been / Something between your father and your mother / Not meant for us at all.’” To which Maple responds by saying, “‘Not meant for me? / Where would the fairness be in giving me / A name to carry for life and never know / The secret of?’” Her husband, therefore, offers a second possibility: “‘And then it may have been / Something a father couldn’t tell a daughter / As well as could a mother.’” And then, before waiting for her to respond, he offers a third:

“…And again
It may have been their one lapse into fancy
‘Twould be too bad to make him sorry for
By bringing it up to him when we was too old.
Your father feels us round him with our questing,
And holds us off unnecessarily,
As if he didn’t know what little thing
Might lead us on to a discovery.”

Thus, as if tempted by her husband’s words, Maple tells him that she will take just one more look around before she gives up.

This last look also comes to nothing, but, as the speaker tells us, “though they now gave up the search forever, / They clung to what one had seen in the other / By inspiration” since “It proved there was something,” a word Frost often uses to refer to that which is immediately unidentifiable and ultimately unknowable but which is nevertheless felt to weigh upon a given situation. The couple, however, is not content to leave it at “something,” and so, once, when they are on vacation and find “a maple in a glade, / Standing alone with smooth arms lifted up, / And every leaf of foliage she’d worn / Laid scarlet and pale pink about her feet,” they pause before realizing that “Twenty-five years ago at Maple’s naming / It hardly could have been a two-leaved seedling / The next cow might have licked up out at pasture.” Still, they wonder if it “could have been another maple like it,” and so hover “for a moment near discovery, / Figurative enough to see the symbol, / But lacking faith in anything to mean / The same at different times to different people.” And anyway, the speaker says, “it came too late for Maple,” who “used her hands to cover up her eyes,” before she says, “‘We would not see the secret if we could now: We are not looking for it anymore.’” But it is the speaker who has the last word:

Thus had a name with meaning, given in death,
Made a girl’s marriage, and ruled in her life.
No matter that the meaning was not clear.
A name with meaning could bring up a child,
Taking the child out of the parents’ hands.
Better a meaningless name, I should say,
As leaving more to nature and happy chance.
Name children some names and see what you do.

According to the speaker, then, the moral of the poem seems to be that Maple’s metaphoric naming had too much meaning for her and thus came to dominate the course of her life, which, as we saw Frost put it earlier, is to say that she didn’t how much she could get out of it and when it would cease to yield. Indeed, for the speaker, it would have been better if she had had “a meaningless name” so that more could have been left “to nature and happy chance.”

At the same time, though, it is this name with too much meaning that brings her together with her husband, who, considering the husbands in Frost’s other narrative poems, seems to be quite a catch. Moreover, in spite of the speaker’s claim that it would have been better for her to have “a meaningless name” so that more could have been left “to nature and happy chance,” it is clear from the poem that this is precisely how her life works out. The real problem, therefore, seems to be not the metaphoric name itself, but Maple’s overdeterministic interpretation of it. Indeed, as Judith Oster puts it:

What Maple saw as a “problem” requiring a solution, Frost would surely have seen as a glorious opportunity to enter into a poetic game. To analyze the ways in which the couple “failed” is to enter into the whole question of how to read a metaphor: the danger of overreading, and the opposite pitfall of being too literal, or even too narrowly analogical. To be good like a maple, or scarlet like a maple, or beautiful like a maple is not to be a maple. Finding a point of similarity with a maple is far narrower than finding the essence of “mapleness.”

Thus, as Oster goes on to say, the mistake the couple makes is that “[i]nstead of really looking at maples, they [keep] looking for clues, for a particular maple, the particular message” (157), or as Frost might have put it, they persisted in “the evil search for

synonyms.” That is, they are bound by a certain essential understanding of the metaphor rather than remaining open to its possibilities, or, as Oster puts it, “to the fullest range of shared attributes, meanings, and implications” (159). Maple’s problem, in other words, is that she was “unable to reconcile herself to mystery—the mystery of her own being, the mystery of her husband’s intuitive apprehension of her essence, [and] what Karsten Harris considers the transcendent possibility of metaphor to express the not-present” (159). On Oster’s reading, therefore, Frost ultimately “seems to be demonstrating that to be too literal, or to remain at the level of one-to-one analogy is to limit the range of one’s understanding” (159).

Another way to put this, though, is to say that the couple, and especially Maple, are too beholden to the idea that the name represents her; that there is a one-to-one correspondence between Maple and a maple tree, or, more generally, between a name and a thing. In fact, what Frost seems to be showing in this poem is not the dangers of metaphor itself, but the dangers of a strict analogical or representational understanding of it. Indeed, Frost himself would be more likely to adopt what Max Black refers to as the “interaction view of metaphor” wherein rather than seeing metaphor as a comparison between two things, it is seen as a dynamic interaction between tenor and vehicle that reveals new aspects of each. At any rate, though, what is clear in this poem is that there are both benefits and limits to a metaphoric understanding of the world.

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33 See Max Black, Models and Metaphors (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962). This view of metaphor has also been described by Mark Turner, The Literary Mind (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) as the theory of “creative blending.” And, of course, there is also the possibility that Frost would not have endorsed this view, since, as Quintilian noted long ago in his Institution Oratoria, Vol. III, trans. H.E. Butler (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1922), the understanding of metaphor “is a subject which has given rise to interminable disputes among the teachers of literature, who have quarreled no less violently with the philosophers than among themselves over the problem of the genera and species into which tropes may be divided, their number and their correct classification” (301).
There are other poems, however, where Frost shows a more definite resistance to metaphor, including “A Missive Missile.” Initially published in the Autumn 1934 issue of the *Yale Review* and reappearing under the title “Afterthought” in both the 1936 edition of *A Further Range* and the 1939 edition of *The Collected Poems*, “A Missive Missile” is certainly no mere afterthought. In fact, I would even go so far as to say that it’s a necessary antecedent to the reading of Frost’s poetry; I mean, there’s a reason, after all, why he eventually called it “A Missive Missile,” with “missile” calling to mind the homophone *missal*: the Catholic liturgical book containing all of the necessary instructions and texts for the celebration of Mass. But, before getting to that, let’s look at the poem itself.

As it stands in the current edition of Frost’s *Collected Poems*, “A Missive Missile” begins with the speaker recounting how:

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Someone in ancient Mas d’Azil
Once took a little pebble wheel
And dotted it with red for me,
And sent it to me years and years—
A million years to be precise—
Across the barrier of ice. 34
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This “little pebble wheel” has “Two round dots and a ripple streak, / So vivid as to seem to speak”; this much is clear. But what, the speaker wants to know, does it *mean*? At first, he thinks that the two dots might be tears and “the wave line a shaken sigh”; but, upon noticing that “the color used is red,” he concludes that they must not be tears “but drops of blood instead,” just as the line he previously read as “a shaken sigh” is now taken to be “a jagged blade.” In fact, as the speaker now understands things, “The sender

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must have had to die, / And wanted someone now to know / His death was sacrificial-votive.” But, then, he immediately questions this, too: “So clear and yet obscure. / If only anyone were sure / A motive then was still a motive.”

But they’re not, of course; and so, the speaker delivers the following entreaty, which not only evinces a world-weary tone of resignation, but also reveals that the pebble was not just sent to him, but brought to him, too:

O you who bring this to my hand,
You are no common messenger
(Your badge of office is a spade).
It grieves me to have had you stand
So long for nothing. No reply—
There is no answer, I’m afraid,
Across the icy barrier
For my obscure petitioner.

The “you,” that is, is not the pebble, but the one (judging from the spade, an archaeologist) who has brought it to the speaker for analysis, just as what “grieves” the speaker is not the mystery of the “message,” but that he has had his “obscure petitioner” stand “So long for nothing.” Thus, to relieve his grief, he gives it one more go, this time by attempting to imagine the maker’s ghost:

Suppose his ghost is standing by
Importunate to give the hint
And be successfully conveyed.
How anyone can fail to see
Where perfectly in form and tint
The metaphor, the symbol lies!

But he does fail to see, and so is left with only “the ocher-written flint, / The two dots and the ripple line,” which is to say, the object-without-its-meaning:

The meaning of it is unknown,
Or else I fear entirely mine,
All modern, nothing ancient in’t,
Unsatisfying to us each.
Thus, expanding on this fact, he concludes as follows:

Far as we aim our signs to reach,
Far as we often make them reach,
Across the soul-from-soul abyss,
There is an aeon-limit set
Beyond which they are doomed to miss.
Two souls may be too widely met.
That sad-with-distance river beach
With mortal longing may beseech;
It cannot speak as far as this.

He concludes, in other words, by claiming that his failure to interpret the message of the stone is not his failure, but a failure—or, better, a limit—of interpretation itself.

Thus, on the most basic level, “A Missive Missile” is about the difficulties—we might even say the impossibilities—of interpretation, since the moral of the poem, after all, is that the speaker cannot figure out what the marks are supposed to mean. But, once we note the parenthetical line that comes directly after the ghost’s question about why the speaker won’t analogize—“(I do too much in some men’s eyes)”—as well as the fact that this poem comes directly after “To a Thinker”—which concludes with the lines “So if you find you must repent / From side to side in argument, / At least don’t use your mind too hard, / But trust my instinct—I’m a bard”35—it becomes clear that poem is also, simultaneously, about Frost’s relationship with his readers, a comment on what they expect of him and on what he intends to give. Indeed, as I said before, the poem really is a missive missal: a guide for readers of Frost’s poetry written by the man himself.

Seeing, however, that this man is one of the most frustratingly subtle poets to have written, it’s not altogether clear how he’s guiding us. Indeed, the more one looks for clues in this poem, the more one starts to feel like the speaker who is unable to

interpret the pebble. And yet, there are a few things that we can say when we read the poem from this perspective. If we let the speaker stand for Frost and the archaeologist stand for the reader, then what becomes clear, I think, is that we readers should not expect Frost to interpret the world for us; that is, we should not expect him to render experience into some discernible meaning through a metaphor or a symbol; for, in the end, the meaning of it will either be unknown or else entirely his. Moreover, if we let the pebble stand for the poem, then it becomes clear that “meaning” is the wrong question altogether. For consider what happens when Frost gives up his search: he looks down to see “the ocher-written flint, / The two dots and the ripple line,” and “slowly” and “uncomprehendingly” (words which we might take to mean “lacking in keenness of mind” and “unintelligent,” but which I read as “careful” and “unwilling to grasp”) realizes that no meaning can “speak as far as this”—an ambiguous deictic which I take to mean “this stone,” or, to stick with the idea of poem-as-missal, “this poem.” In other words, what Frost is guiding his readers to do in this poem is to stop trying to get blood out of a stone; for, as it was with the speaker and his “obscure petitioner,” the “blood” will ultimately either be indecipherable or else entirely theirs.

But, then, this is something that defensive poets and appreciative critics have been saying about poetry for ages; and, while I think it’s true enough, what I would like to suggest is that, for Frost at least, this dismissal of knowledge or meaning is not just defensive. That is, I would like to suggest that Frost forfeits knowledge (and, indeed, epistemology itself) so as to make room for another way of being in the world, an ethical or relational one that does not seek to “comprehend” or “seize” it, but respond to it—and to explain what I mean, let me now turn to “For Once, Then, Something,” from Frost’s
1923 collection *New Hampshire*:

Others taunt me with having knelt at well-curbs  
Always wrong to the light, so never seeing  
Deeper down in the well than where the water  
Gives me back in a shining surface picture  
Me myself in the summer heaven, godlike,  
Looking out of a wreath of fern and cloud puffs.  
*Once*, when trying with chin against a well-curb,  
I discerned, as I thought, beyond the picture,  
Through the picture, a something white, uncertain,  
Something more of the depths—and then I lost it.  
Water came to rebuke the too clear water.  
One drop fell from a fern, and lo, a ripple  
Shook whatever it was lay there at bottom,  
Blurred it, blotted it out.  What was that whiteness?  
Truth?  A pebble of quartz?  For once, then, something.\(^36\)

Frost begins here by again acknowledging his audience of “others.” This time, however, they do not, as the archaeologist did, petition him to analogize, but “taunt” him (a word that suggests both mockery and provocation) for having “knelt” (a word that suggests both passionate devotion and idle rest) at well-curbs always wrong to the “light” (a word that suggests both knowledge—i.e. enlightenment—and the conditions of knowledge—i.e. that which makes things visible). They taunt him, that is, because he has never been able to “see” (which, here, carries the sense of “know”) deeper than the surface, which, in their eyes, only gives him a shining picture of himself. The accusation, then, is one of a solipsism. But, then, when we hear in the next line that the image in the reflection is of Frost “in the summer heaven, godlike / Looking out of a wreath of fern and cloud puffs,” it becomes clear that Frost is drawing on the myth of Narcissus and that the accusation, therefore, is really one of *narcissism*. The “taunt,” in other words, is that, selfishly, Frost

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has only shown the light on himself and that his meanings are, in the words of “A Missive Missile,” “entirely his.”

But, before going on to consider how Frost responds to this accusation in the second half of what Lawrence Buell identifies as this “inverted sonnet (6-8, not 8-6),” it will be helpful to briefly remind ourselves of the story of Narcissus that Frost invokes. Narcissus—who has a long history of showing up in sonnets—was a supposedly handsome Greek youth who, after rejecting the advances of Echo, is doomed to fall in love with his own reflection, which he gazes at so longingly that, depending on the version you’re reading, he either withers and becomes a narcissus flower or becomes aware of his error and kills himself with his hunting knife. More important than the ending, however—at least in terms of the myth’s relation to Frost’s poem—is what leads Narcissus to his end, and that is, at least in one version of the story, that he reads too much into his image; which is to say, he doesn’t stay with the “shining surface picture,” but attempts to imbue it with some greater depth, which is, inevitably, of his own making. The tragedy of Narcissus, therefore, is not that he is obsessed with an image of himself, but that he is unable (or, perhaps, unwilling) to see it as an image, which is to say, he is always looking for more than what the water gives him. Thus, we might say that the taunts of narcissism that Frost ventriloquizes in the first 6 lines of the poem are, in fact, more applicable to those who demand some soul-satisfying meaning than they are to Frost himself, who, as they accuse, simply looks at surfaces.

For example, consider the implications of the parallel that Frost draws between

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himself and the water in the last nine lines of the poem: Frost is at the well-curb, resting his chin, and staring down through the picture (of himself), when a drop of water falls from a fern and shakes whatever it was that lay at the bottom. For me, this reveals a lot about what Frost thinks of surfaces, depths, and meanings (or the lack thereof); for just as the drop of water from above rebukes the “too clear water” of the surface, so, too, it seems, does Frost rebuke what he sees when he tries to get to “the bottom of it.” Indeed, the moral of the poem seems to be that the penetrating mind will necessarily distort—or, in this case, “shake,” “blur,” and “blot”—whatever it sets its cathode ray on; that, in trying to look “beyond the picture” and “through the picture,” it will ultimately destroy the picture. So, instead, what Frost does here is let it stand—or, rather, “ripple”; that is, he does not attempt to ascribe meaning to the “white,” “uncertain” “whatever” that he sees (or thinks he sees), but simply calls it “something,” which, as I’ve already mentioned, is a key word in his lexicon. In short, he resists the narcissistic fantasy of reading discernible human meaning into nature and, instead, decides to acknowledge its inappropriability and the limits of his own finite powers of comprehension.

But, even more revealing than the “heroic skepticism” of “For Once, Then, Something,” is the stance that Frost adopts in “The Most of It,” from his 1942 collection *A Witness Tree*:

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39 As I mentioned before, Frost often uses the word “something” to refer to that which is immediately unidentifiable and ultimately unknowable but which is nevertheless felt to weigh upon a given situation. This is the “something” that he uses in “Mowing” when says “Perhaps it was something about the heat of the sun, / Something, perhaps, about the lack of sound—.” It is the one he uses in “Mending Wall” when he says “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.” It is the one he uses in “The Death of the Hired Man” when he says “I should have called it / Something you somehow haven’t to deserve.” It is the one he uses in “Maple” when he says, “It proved there was something.” It is the one he uses in “A Passing Glimpse” when he says, “Was something brushed across my mind / That no one on earth will ever find?” It is the one he uses in “Bereft” when he says, “Something sinister in the tone / Told me my secret must be known.” And it is the one he uses in “West-Running Brook” when he says, “We must be something.”

He thought he kept the universe alone;  
For all the voice in answer he could wake  
Was but the mocking echo of his own  
From some tree-hidden cliff across the lake.  
Some morning from the boulder-broken beach  
He would cry out on life, that what it wants  
Is not its own love back in copy speech,  
But counter-love, original response.  
And nothing ever came of what he cried  
Unless it was the embodiment that crashed  
In the cliff’s talus on the other side,  
And then in the far-distant water splashed,  
But after a time allowed for it to swim,  
As a great buck it powerfully appeared,  
Pushing the crumpled water up ahead,  
And landed pouring like a waterfall,  
And stumbled through the rocks with horny tread,  
And forced the underbrush—and that was all.  

Frost begins, here, with a line that, as he put it in a 1962 lecture, “could be a whole poem”: “He thought he kept the universe alone.” Frost said this, I think, because, in that first line, we have a graceful and economical presentation of the fundamental Frostian problematic; that is, we have a solitary man, the vast universe, and a description of what he thinks his relationship to it is: “kept.” And “kept” is no ordinary word for Frost. Indeed, as he put it towards the end of a passage from “The Constant Symbol,” which is worth citing at length due to the relationship it draws between be “keeping” and metaphor:

And there are many other things I have found myself saying about poetry, but the chiefest of these is that it is metaphor, saying one thing and meaning another, saying one thing in terms of another, the pleasure of ulteriority. Poetry is simply made of metaphor. So also is philosophy—and science, too, for that matter, if it

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will take the soft impeachment from a friend. Every poem is a new metaphor inside or it is nothing. And there is a sense in which all poems are the same old metaphor always.

Every single poem written regular is a symbol small or great of the way the will has to pitch into commitments deeper and deeper to a rounded conclusion and then be judged for whether any original intention it had has been strongly spent or weakly lost; be it in art, politics, school, church, business, love, or marriage—in a piece of work or in a career. Strongly spent is synonymous with kept.  

What Frost is saying, here, is that metaphor is how we spend our intellectual capital, and that, in spending it strongly, we are able to “keep” the world—both in the sense that it is what allows us to “hold” or “grasp” it and in the sense that it is what allows us to “maintain” and “care for” it (as the word is used in “An Old Man’s Winter’s Night,” for example).

But, then, crucially, there is that word “thought.” That is, we are not told that the man keeps the universe alone, but that he thinks he keeps it alone—implying that he does not, in fact, do so. He thinks he keeps the universe alone, Frost says, because “all the voice in answer he could wake / Was but the mocking echo of his own / From some tree-hidden cliff across the lake.” That is, he thinks he keeps it alone because whenever he attempts to make contact with the world or someone else in it, he only hears the mocking echo of his own voice, and, thus, his experience tells him that there is nothing or no one else. Speaking more broadly, however, we might say that he thinks this because the only thing he gets back from the world are his own projections. In either case, though, it is clear that the man is disappointed by this, since, as Frost puts it in lines 6-8, “He would cry out on life, that what it wants / Is not its own love back in copy speech, / But counter-love, original response.” In other words, while the man thinks that he keeps the universe

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alone, he does not want this to be the case; that is, he does not believe that life wants its own love back in copy speech (like the echoes he receives), but that it wants “counter-love, original response,” or, as we saw Frost refer to it earlier, in “Education by Poetry”—and as I will discuss explicitly below—regard.

And yet, for as much as the man wants this (or at least claims to), he fails to recognize it when it occurs; for, as Frost says in line 9, “nothing ever came of what he cried”; adding “Unless,”—and this word is key, indicating that he might have received some “original response”—“it was the embodiment that crashed / In the cliff’s talus on the other side,” which, as we find out later, is a “great buck.” But before considering whether or not this buck does constitute an “original response,” we first need to understand why the man doesn’t take it as one—and here the word “embodiment” is crucial. This word suggests many things (including the possibility that the buck is the physical manifestation of the response that the man wants), but most importantly, I think, is that it suggests that what the man receives is on another level than what he expects. That is, the man does not receive another voice in the register of legibility, intelligibility, etc., but something wholly other, something contained and unknowable. Thus, when the buck lands “pouring like a waterfall,” stumbles “through the rocks with horny tread,” and forces “the underbrush,” we are told that “that was all.” In other words, the man does not take the buck’s appearance to be an original response because, since the buck is operating in a realm outside of human legibility, the man does not know what to make of it, and so makes nothing of it at all. Indeed, as Frost suggests in lines 14 and 15, the man does not take it as a response because “Instead of proving human when it neared / And someone else additional to him,” it appeared as a great buck.
But, just because the *man* doesn’t take it as an “original response,” does not mean that it doesn’t constitute one for Frost—and here, we need to consider the final four words of the poem: “and that was all.” In one sense, these words mean exactly what they say: “And that was all the man received,” meaning that he did not, in fact, receive an original response, but only this non-human embodiment. However, when we relate these words to the title, “all” takes on a very different meaning; for, if we take the title to mean something like “this is the most you’re going to get,” then the fact that the buck’s appearance is described as “all” becomes quite significant: it is the fulfillment of the limited satisfaction available to us. Indeed, Frost’s statement in line 16—“As a great buck it powerfully appeared”—indicates that, for him at least, the surprise appearance of the buck is precisely what original response consists of, something uncalculated and unassimilable. And that the man does not recognize this suggests that he is no Frostian hero, but is, instead, like one of the “taunters” from “For Once, Then, Something” who demands a discernible human meaning from what Frost prefers to merely describe as “something.”

This becomes even clearer, though, when we remember how the final words of this poem—“and that was all”—function in a related poem from an earlier volume: “Two Look at Two.” To quickly summarize, “Two Look at Two” tells the story of a couple who take a walk up a mountainside only to realize that they will not be able to finish their journey before nightfall, and so, saying “This is all,” decide to head back. But, as it turns out, it is not all; for, just after they say this, a doe appears from behind a spruce and proceeds to look at them, as they do at her, causing them to say, “This, then, is

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all. What more is there to ask?” But, again, there is more; for, shortly after the doe passes, they hear “a snort to bid them wait” while “an antlered buck of lusty nostril” emerges from behind the spruce to view them “quizzically with jerks of head,’ before also passing on, causing them, this time, to say, “This must be all.” And “It was all,” Frost concurs, before concluding as follows:

…Still they stood,
A great wave from it going over them,
As if the earth in one unlooked-for favor
Had made them certain earth returned their love.

Despite what we might immediately think, however, the implication here is not that the earth has, in fact, returned their love; for notice the “As if” in the second to last line. This implies that the great wave going over them is not really the earth returning their love, but an idea of their own creation, a metaphor to fulfill their desire for confirmation. The “all” of “Two Look at Two,” then, refers to what we might call the Romantic all, or the Overall, which produces, by means of the integrative, marriage-function of metaphor, a communion with nature, which does not—as Frost indicates with his “as if”—exist in fact.

Thus, when we read the words “and that was all” at the end of “The Most of It,” they carry a weight that exceeds the confines of the poem. Indeed, we might even take these words as a comment upon the earlier poem in which Frost mocks the “as if” of the couple in “Two Look at Two,” saying, in effect, that their certainty that earth returns their love, is a fabrication, and that this—this embodiment without meaning—is all; that they, like the taunters in “For Once, Then, Something,” narcissistically read human meaning into a nature that does not, in fact, possess any. In one sense, then, the “and that was all” of “The Most of It” manifests an identification with the man who wants, but does not
receive, an “original response”; that is, it manifests the painful diminution of expectations that comes when, once rid of the illusion that nature can reflect our desires, he realizes that this is all. But, in another sense, these words are a rebuke to the man, telling him that this—what he just saw—was, in fact, a response, and that he was only unable to notice it because it came in a form so totally other than that of human intelligibility. Indeed, once we recognize how much reverent detail Frost gives to the buck as he crosses the lake (as opposed to scant detail he gives to the man), it becomes clear that Frost does consider the buck to be a response and that, for him, the man doesn’t take it to be one only because he is unwilling to admit a response that does not translate into some discernible meaning.

On the whole, then, we might say that “The Most of It” provides us with a certain ethics of observation in which we are taught to look attentively at what occurs without attempting to make meaning of it, which is to say, to let it stand in its alterity, or as we also heard Frost put it, to regard it, a word which suggests not only close, steady observation, respect, and relation, but also, etymologically speaking, guarding, as in protecting and caring for. Thus, while we might not be able to “keep” the world in the sense of holding, grasping, or possessing it, the poem suggests that, if we are able to accept its absolute otherness, we can “keep” it in the other sense of the word, meaning that we can maintain it by not imbuing it with some meaning which it does not, in fact, possess. And, while we don’t, of course, get anything by adopting this stance towards the world, I would like to suggest that it can help us to be what Frost might call “a good neighbor”—and, to see why, I’d like to conclude with two poems that illustrate this: “Home Burial,” which shows what happens when one insists on knowing (ie. when one adopts an epistemological stance towards the world) and “Mending Wall,” which shows
what happens when one accepts the alterity of the other (ie. when one adopts an ethical
stance towards the world).

“Home Burial,” from Frost’s 1914 collection North of Boston, begins as a
husband takes note of his wife’s hesitating steps down the stairs:

He saw her from the bottom of the stairs
Before she saw him. She was starting down,
Looking back over her shoulder at some fear.
She took a doubtful step and then undid it
To raise herself and look again.

What, exactly, she’s looking at here is as uncertain as her movements since Frost only
tells us that it is “some fear”—a phrase which teeters between the physical and
metaphysical. The husband, who sees this from below, wonders, of course, what she
sees, and so advances towards her in what she may well take as another fear, saying:

“What is it you see / From up there always?—for I want to know.” He starts here with
what seems like genuine concern, in the form of a question spoken in the cadences of the

45 Let me just note in passing that I find this to be one of Frost’s most Emersonian poems. This is not only
because the poem alludes to the famous stairs introduced at the beginning of Emerson’s “Experience,” or
because it is haunted by the death of a child, as Emerson was when he wrote that essay and as Frost must
have been, too, after his own son met an early death, but because the poem deals quite directly with the
problem of skepticism, and with what Stanley Cavell might call the tragedy of its denial. See Stanley
Cavell, Disowning Knowledge: In Seven Plays of Shakespeare, updated ed. (New York: Cambridge

Latham (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1969), 51-55. All further references to this poem are to
this edition. For a bit of background on this poem, let me note here, by quoting Joseph Brodsky, that:
“‘Home Burial’ is not a narrative; it is an eclogue. Or, more exactly, it is a pastoral—except that it is a very
dark one. Insofar as it tells a story, it is, of course, a narrative; the means of that story’s transportation,
though, is dialogue, and it is the means of transportation that defines a genre. Invented by Theocritus in his
idylls, refined by Virgil in the poems he called eclogues or bucolics, the pastoral is essentially an exchange
between two or more characters in a rural setting, returning often to that perennial subject, love. Since the
English and French word “pastoral” is overburdened with happy connotations, and since Frost is closer to
Virgil than to Theocritus, and not only chronologically, let’s follow Virgil and call this poem an eclogue.
The rural setting is here, and so are the two characters: a farmer and his wife, who may qualify as a
shepherd and a shepherdess, except that it is two thousand years later. So is their subject: love, two
thousand years later” (18-19). See Joseph Brodsky, “Grief and Reason” in Homage to Robert Frost (New
York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1996), 5-56. And, for a nice summary of Frost’s relation to pastoral see
country. But, immediately after this, he explains his motivation in five monosyllabic words that come off as a command: “for I want to know.” Not I want to understand or sympathize, but I want to know, which is to say, to dominate or to overstand—a phrase which becomes literal when he mounts the stairs until she, sitting on a step, cowers under him, as he repeats, in vaguely menacing language: “I will find out now—you must tell me, dear.” By this point, though, the wife’s face has “changed from terrified to dull,” and, perhaps as a counter to her husband’s threat, she refuses “him any help, / With the least stiffening of her neck and silence.” That least stiffening of her neck, however, is just enough to let her husband, that “[b]lind creature,” see. “Oh,” he says, “and again, Oh.” To which she responds: “What is it—what?” And he: “Just that I see.”

Note that, at this point, the roles have been reversed. Whereas, at the beginning of the poem, the husband was below his wife, asking her what she was looking at, he now stands above her, and it is she who asks him what he sees. Moreover, the wife’s inquiry follows a similar progression, first asking and then challenging: “Tell me what it is.”

The husband is slow to get to the point:

“The wonder is I didn’t see at once.  
I never noticed it from here before.  
I must be wonted to it—that’s the reason.  
The little graveyard where my people are!  
So small the window frames the whole of it.  
Not so much larger than a bedroom, is it?  
There are three stones of slate and one of marble,  
Broad-shouldered little slabs there in the sunlight  
On the sidehill. We haven’t to mind those.  
But I understand: it is not the stones,  
But the child’s mound—.”

The husband has already occupied his wife’s physical space, and now, next to her, looking out the window, he attempts to occupy her mental space as well, giving voice to
what he thinks she sees, first with a close attention to detail—“There are three stones of slate and one of marble, / Broad-shouldered little slabs there in the sunlight / On the sidehill”—as if to point out the beauty of the scene framed by the window, and then with a focus on the apparent source of fear: “the child’s mound—.”

Here the wife breaks in, finishing the pentameter line with a “Don’t, don’t, don’t, don’t.” She then withdraws from her husband, “shrinking from beneath his arm” so as to slide to the foot of the stairs, where she turns on him “with such a daunting look” that he says, twice over before knowing himself: “Can’t a man speak of his own child he’s lost?” To which she responds, “Not you!” before threatening to leave. And he: “Amy! Don’t go to someone else this time. / Listen to me. I won’t come down the stairs.” Then, sitting with his chin fixed between his fists, he says: “There’s something I should like to ask you, dear.” But, since he doesn’t know how to ask, he instead delivers the following monologue, which I cite at length due to what it reveals about the husband’s thought process:

“My words are nearly always an offense.  
I don’t know how to speak of anything  
So as to please you. But I might be taught,  
I should suppose. I can’t say I see how.  
A man must partly give up being a man  
With womenfolk. We could have some arrangement  
By which I’d bind myself to keep hands off  
Anything special you’re a-mind to name.  
Though I don’t like such things ‘twixt those that love.  
Two that don’t love can’t live together without them.  
But two that do can’t live together with them.”

She moved the latch a little. “Don’t—don’t go.  
Don’t carry it to someone else this time.  
Tell me about it if it’s something human.  
Let me into your grief. I’m not so much  
Unlike other folks as your standing there  
Apart would make me out. Give me my chance.  
I do think, though, you overdo it a little.
What was it brought you up to think it the thing
To take your mother-loss of a first child
So inconsolably—in the face of love.
You’d think his memory might be satisfied—”

What’s significant about this passage is that the man performs the same maneuver of approach and withdrawal three times. The first time he acknowledges that he might be taught how to speak to his wife so as not to cause her offense (and note here the pun on offense/a fence, as in “My words are nearly always a fence” or a barrier between us), only to say that he can’t see how. The second time he says that he would be willing to keep his hands off anything special that his wife’s “a-mind to name,” only to say that he doesn’t “like such things twixt hose that love.” And the third time he claims that he wants a chance to understand, only to say that he thinks his wife overdoes it. In short, the husband claims that he wants to be allowed into his wife’s grief, only to show that he really wants to transform it, and thus make it his.

Thus, quite understandably, the wife interrupts his speech on the word “satisfied,” to accuse him of sneering (which, of course, the man denies) before delivering her own monologue:

“You can’t because you don’t know how to speak.
If you had any feelings, you that dug
With your own hand—how could you?—his little grave;
I saw you from that very window there,
Making the gravel leap and leap in air,
Leap up, like that, like that, and land so lightly
And roll back down the mound beside the hole.
I thought, Who is that man? I didn’t know you.
And I crept down the stairs and up the stairs
To look again, and still your spade kept lifting.
Then you came in. I heard your rumbling voice
Out in the kitchen, and I don’t know why,
But I went near to see with my own eyes.
You could sit there with the stains on your shoes
Of the fresh earth from your own baby’s grave
And talk about your everyday concerns.
You had stood the spade up against the wall
Outside there in the entry, for I saw it.”

The wife’s complaint here, it seems, is not just that she thinks her husband reacts inappropriately to the death of their child, but that, in reacting in this way, he becomes unrecognizable: “I didn’t know you.” Significantly, though, the husband is not unrecognizable because he changes in some way, but because he doesn’t change; because, in her eyes, the loss of their child does not affect him. Indeed, as she goes on to say after a brief interruption:

“I can repeat the very words you were saying:
‘Three foggy mornings and one rainy day
Will rot the best birch fence a man can build.’
Think of it, talk like that at such a time!
What had how long it takes a birch to rot
To do with what was in the darkened parlor?”

The wife’s complaint, in other words, is that her husband is denying the reality of what has occurred—although, in a sense, it is he who faces it most directly since he digs the grave while she cannot even bring herself to mention the son’s body, referring to it, instead, as “what was in the darkened parlor.”

But, nevertheless, the wife persists and, in a move typical of Frost’s narrative protagonists, attempts to draw some general lesson from her particular situation:

“You couldn’t care! The nearest friends can go
With anyone to death, comes so far short
They might as well not try to go at all.
No, from the time when one is sick to death,
One is alone, and he dies more alone.
Friends make pretense of following to the grave,
But before one is in it, their minds are turned
And making the best of their way back to life
And living people, and things they understand.
But the world’s evil. I won’t have grief so
If I can change it. Oh, I won’t, I won’t!”
The wife’s point here is that while people claim that they will accompany you through the greatest difficulties, they ultimately do so little that they might as well do nothing; in fact, according to her, we are irremediably alone. But, then, she also says that she won’t have it so if she can change it; hence her refusal to do all those things that people usually do: turn their minds and make “the best of their way back to life / And living people, and things they understand.” Indeed, she seems intent on blocking the progress of her grief so that she will not have to complete the process of mourning in which, according to Freud, “all libido [is] withdrawn from its attachments to [the] object.”

That is, she wants to remain in her grief, while her husband wants to pull her out of it. And, in fact, by getting her talk about it, he thinks he has:

“There, you have said it all and you fell better. You won’t go now. You’re crying. Close the door. The heart’s gone out of it: why keep it up? Amy! There’s someone coming down the road.

But, as the wife says, in what is one of the most crucial passages of the poem: “You—oh, you think the talk is all. I must go— / Somewhere out of this house. How can I make you—”; before the poem concludes as follows: “If—you—do!’ She was opening the door wider. / ‘Where do you intend to go? First tell me that. / I’ll follow and bring you back by force. I will!—,” a final word that contrasts perfectly with the wife’s resolute “I won’t!”

In short, then, “Home Burial” presents a family drama brought on by the death of a son in which the husband seems to be coping far better than the wife; that is, he has begun to mourn his son (literally burying the object of his affections), while she refuses

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to do so. At the same time, though—and this, I think, is one of wife’s big complaints—there is a sense in which the husband has not only buried the object of his affections, but his affections themselves, meaning that he has not truly begun to mourn. Indeed, there is even a sense in which the husband’s attempt to pull his wife out of her grief can be seen as a displacement of his desire to pull his son out of the earth. But, setting such psychoanalytic speculation aside, what I really want to emphasize about the poem is this: that the tragedy of “Home Burial”—and, thus, what comes to bury the home (one of Frost’s master tropes)—is that neither husband nor wife will regard the alterity of the other. The husband wants his wife to let him into her grief, to tell him about it if it’s something human, while the wife, recognizing that her feelings are not on the level of human intelligibility, is unable to tell him, leading the husband to attempt to will his way into her mind, to occupy and comprehend her mental space so as to make her grief legible, and the wife to attempt to prevent this from happening by closing herself off and, by the end of the poem, shutting herself out. Thus, on one level, the husband is clearly at fault here since it is his imperious desire to know that sends the wife away. But, then, we must realize that the wife makes a similar mistake since she, too, attempts to occupy and comprehend her husband’s mental space. Indeed, her understanding of his lack of feelings regarding their dead child is based entirely on her own partial interpretation of his actions; that is, she assumes he must not care because she sees him digging the grave and standing the spade up against the wall, and, moreover, refuses to let him explain. In other words, both husband and wife presume to know the mind of the other, when what would be more beneficial, the poem suggests, is if each would give up their desire to fully

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inhabit the other’s grief and, instead, regard it, which is to say, to respect and care for it in its absolute alterity; or again, not to penetrate and seize the other through an act of will (or won’t), but to acknowledge and tend to the other’s separate—and ultimately illegible—existence.

This becomes even more apparent in “Mending Wall,” the poem that opens North of Boston:

Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,  
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it  
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,  
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.  
The work of hunters is another thing:  
I have come after them and made repair  
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,  
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,  
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,  
No one has seen them made or heard them made,  
But at spring mending-time we find them there.  
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;  
And on a day we meet to walk the line  
And set the wall between us once again.  
We keep the wall between us as we go.  
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.  
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls  
We have to use a spell to make them balance:  
“Stay where you are until our backs are turned!”  
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.  
Oh, just another kind of outdoor game,  
One on a side. It comes to little more:  
There where it is we do not need the wall:  
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.  
My apple trees will never get across  
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.  
He only says, “Good fences make good neighbors.”  
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder  
If I could put a notion in his head:  
“Why do they make good neighbors? Isn’t it  
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.  
Before I built a wall I’d ask to know  
What I was walling in or walling out,  
And to whom I was like to give offense.
Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,
That wants it down.” I could say “Elves” to him,
But it’s not elves exactly, and I’d rather
He said it for himself. I see him there,
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father’s saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, “Good fences make good neighbors.”

Most readers of this poem tend to take sides with the speaker. They like his casually-vague way of speaking (“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall”); his imaginative play (“We have to use a spell to make them balance”); his rationality (“There where it is we don’t need the wall”); his mischief (“I wonder / If I could put a notion in his head”); and, most of all, his willingness to go behind stock responses like his neighbor’s “Good fences make good neighbors.” But, in doing so, they quite often forget that the speaker is the one who, in fact, initiates the mending (“I let my neighbor know beyond the hill”) and that it is therefore he who, in a sense, lives the saying. Moreover, they often forget (or, more likely, are unaware of the fact) that, in questioning the neighbor’s saying, the speaker is himself relying on a stock response; for, when the speaker says, “Why do they make good neighbors? Isn’t it / Where there are cows? But here there are now cows,” he is paraphrasing a passage from Thoreau’s journal that reads as follows: “What are bad neighbors? They who suffer their neighbors’ cattle to go at large because they don’t want their ill will, —are afraid to anger them. They are abettors of the ill-doers.”


(“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall”), which, even after he goes behind it to explore what this “something” is, he still proffers as the most effective expression of his feelings.

In other words, what Frost gives us in this poem is not one, but two men who won’t go behind their sayings; two men separated by their sayings—and, if we allow for the metonymic substitution of plant for man (“He is all pine and I am all apple orchard”), separated absolutely as well—who meet once a spring to “walk the line” in what, given Frost’s interest in the classics, may well be seen as a modern-day Terminalia: the Roman ritual in which the god Terminus was celebrated by reaffirming boundaries between neighbors. But, more than Terminalia, what the two neighbors are celebrating here, I think, is the relationship that comes from regarding the other as other, as one who exists behind the wall of his sayings. Indeed, consider what happens after the speaker stops pressing his neighbor to go behind his saying. He pauses to look, and says:

…I see him there,
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.

The speaker starts here by acknowledging his neighbor’s separateness (“I seem him there”), before attempting to make him understandable through a metaphor (“like an old-stone savage armed”). But, then, immediately after, he calls his description into question by saying that he cannot really see (“He moves in darkness”) and, moreover, that this is a darkness that has to do with more than a lack of visibility (“Not of woods only and the shade of trees”). Indeed, for the speaker, his neighbor is shrouded in darkness not

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because of the fading light, but because of his own finite understanding ("as it seems to me"); his inability to carry him into the legible order by means of metaphor.

And yet, significantly, the speaker still gives his neighbor the final word: "Good fences make good neighbors"—a phrase which, according to George Monteiero, can be traced back to the Spanish, "Una pared entre dos vecinos guarda mas la amistad," so that it literally translates as something like: "A wall between two neighbors keeps the friendship better." But while "keeps" is the easiest way to bring this saying over into English—and while that word certainly carries weight for Frost (as we saw in "For Once, Then, Something")—it is significant, I think, that the original word is "guarda," since it has many of the same implications as "regard": to protect, to care for, to watch closely, etc. Thus, in a sense, the saying tells us that putting a wall between neighbors actually strengthens the friendship; for, as the men set the wall between them and keep it there as they go, they are provided with the opportunity not to know each other—and note that the speaker cannot put a notion in his neighbor’s head (ie. he cannot enter the other’s mental landscape)—but to regard each other in their differences. In other words, despite the speaker’s claim, the two neighbors’ meeting comes to a lot more than "just another kind of outdoor game." Indeed, we might even see the speaker’s eventual acknowledgment of their fundamental separation as the conditions of possibility for “neighborliness”: that, paradoxically, it is only in deciding not to cross the wall, so to speak, that we able to “mend” our relations.

On the whole, then, while metaphor is the most of Frost’s thought, it is not the whole of it. Indeed, what I hope to have shown in the preceding pages is what we may

now call the rest of it: those intervals when, instead of attempting to comprehend, seize, grasp, and re-present reality in our own image, we simply respond to its inappropriability or otherness. Throughout, I have alternately referred to this as looking, regarding, and relating. Moreover, I have even spoken of it as a way in which we might live our skepticism, or, as Stanley Cavell puts it, a way in which we might inhabit it. But, perhaps more practically, I hope to have shown that, alongside the epistemological Frost that Lentricchia, Poirier, and others have helped propel into the ranks of serious modernist poets, there is also an ethical Frost—one who can not only provide us with momentary stays against confusion, but also teach us how to regard those moments in between.

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CHAPTER FOUR...

FLOW CHART: JOHN ASBHERY’S ECONOMIES OF ATTENTION

…The words have, as they always do, come full circle, dragging the meaning that was on the reverse side all along, and one even expects this, something to chew on. I’m rubber and you’re glue, whatever you say bounces off me and sticks to you; in which gluey embrace I surrender. We are both part of a living thing now.1

—John Ashbery

According to Jonathan Crary, “It is possible to see one crucial aspect of modernity as an ongoing crisis of attentiveness, in which the changing configurations of capitalism continually push attention and distraction to new limits and thresholds, with an endless sequence of new products, sources of stimulation, and streams of information, and then respond with new methods of managing and regulating perception.”2 Substitute “reading John Ashbery’s poetry” for “modernity,” and “his writing” for “capitalism,” and you have a pretty good description of how most people feel about “America’s preeminent living poet.”3 My own first encounter with Ashbery came in my second year of graduate school. I was at the house of a friend who had just picked up a copy of The Tennis Court Oath at a used bookstore and, knowing that I was studying English, asked me if I knew it. Embarrassed that I did not (especially after reading on the book jacket that Ashbery was the unprecedented winner of the literary world’s triple-crown award for his 1975 collection Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror), I asked her to read me something. The

1 John Ashbery, Flow Chart (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 25-26. All further references will be given parenthetically in the text.


poem she chose, “An Additional Poem,” was one of the shorter ones from this collection, which, coming after the Auden-approved Some Trees\(^4\), marked a radically new direction for Ashbery:

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Where then shall hope and fear their objects find?
The harbor cold to the mating ships,
And you have lost as you stand by the balcony
With the forest of the sea calm and gray beneath.
A strong impression torn from the descending light
But night is guilty. You knew the shadow
In the trunk was raving
But as you keep growing hungry you forget.
The distant box is open. A sound of grain
Poured over the floor in some eagerness—we
Rise with the night let out of the box of wind.\(^5\)
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The poem seemed pregnant with meaning, and over the next few days I read it again and again. The only problem was I couldn’t say what, exactly, the meaning was.

This was partially because, as John Emil Vincent has argued, Ashbery’s “you” involves the reader in the meaning-making process, forcing “you” to interact with the poem rather than simply receiving its message.\(^6\) But it was also because Ashbery’s style is both discursive and disjunctive, having an effect on the reader similar to the one that Marianne Moore’s poetry had on him:

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[T]here are…cases in which I become aware before the end of a poem that Miss Moore and I have parted company somewhat further back…We are brought up
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\(^4\) It should be noted that Auden’s selection of Ashbery’s Some Trees for the Yale Series of Younger poets was made only after Auden decided that he was not happy with any of the other entries. Ashbery’s book (along with his friend Frank O’Hara’s) had even been rejected by the screeners, who only asked him and O’Hara to resubmit after nothing else was found satisfying. Indeed, as Ashbery told Mark Ford in a 2002 interview, Auden “hadn’t liked either my book or Frank O’Hara’s very much, but he finally chose mine by default. And apparently one reason he did so was because otherwise he wouldn’t be paid for editing the series that year, and he was short of cash!” See John Ashbery and Mark Ford, John Ashbery in Conversation with Mark Ford (London: Between the Lines, 2003), 38.


against a mastery which defies attempts to analyze it, an intelligence which plays just beyond our reach...[Moore’s poems] start out smoothly and calmly enough...like a ride on a roller coaster, and in no time at all one is clutching the bar with both hands, excited and dismayed at the prospect of “ending up in the décor,” as the French say of a car that drives off the road. And not infrequently, this happens.\textsuperscript{7}

Indeed, as David Lehman has acknowledged about his own reading of Ashbery, one can follow his sentences with the greatest of ease for about three lines before one realizes that Ashbery has seamlessly transitioned to an entirely different subject from the one from which he started.\textsuperscript{8}

Here, for instance, is a stanza from Ashbery’s “The Skaters,” from his 1966 collection \textit{Rivers and Mountains}:

\begin{quote}
A great wind lifted these cardboard panels  
Horizontal in the air. At once the perspective with the horse  
Disappeared in a \textit{bigarrure} of squiggly lines. This image with  
the crocodile in it became no longer apparent.  
Thus a great wind cleanses, as a new ruler  
Edits new laws, seeping the very breath of the streets  
Into posterior trash. The films have changed—  
The great titles on the scalloped awning have turned dry and  
bright-colored.  
No wind that does not penetrate a man’s house, into the very  
bowels of the furnace,  
Scratching in dust a name on the mirror—say, and what about letters,  
The dried grasses, fruits of the winter—gosh! Everything is  
trash!  
The wind points to the advantages of decay  
At the same time as removing them far from the sight of men.  
The regent of the winds, Aeolus, is a symbol for all earthly  
potentates  
Since holding this sickening, festering process by which we  
are cleansed  
Of afterthought.\textsuperscript{9}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{8} See David Lehman, \textit{The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets} (New York: Anchor, 1999).

Certainly, there is a current of “wind” that runs throughout this stanza, from the “great wind” of the first line to the wind that “penetrate[s] a man’s house” in line 8 to the “regents of the winds” in line 13. But it is unclear how these winds are related to each other or to everything that comes in between, such as the “dry and bright colored” film titles of line 7 to “the dried grasses” and “fruits of winter” in line 10. And while one can, of course, make connections, they’re not, even within the full context of the poem, exactly “there.” Indeed, one is tempted to say about Ashbery’s poetry what Gertrude Stein said about Oakland: “there is no there there.”

Such temptation is even greater when one comes to Ashbery’s later work, and not only his more explicitly experimental books like *Girls on the Run*. Here, for instance, is “The Weather, for Example,” from his purportedly more accessible 2005 collection *Where Shall I Wander*:

Coasts are loud. Silences sin
at the meander of their doing.
All along the gatepost was wrong
as we suffered under that song,
wrong to shake the apron out
with crumbs the children marked
the way back with after it got dark.
Spoon the leaven in, there is more
To the hoods than flaps and strings.
A margin oozes.
It’s Bakelite he said. I think it’s Bakelite.
There’s so much more we know,
Time that wraps us in a swarm,
Mongrels in nettle tilth,
Percentages of doubt that shift unease,
Bright locks along the shore.

I was once happy abed,

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I could see it coming like a beach
Then very fast. We are here to tell
Some account of ourselves,

grab favor from the circumcised gods,
be replaced in a box or pocket.
Nothing coming from the quarter,
It behooveth the moth to inch back

Against the steep Atlantic tides.
I found us here with toy fish,
choice clusters of whatever
you desired in time past,

rushing in to fill the unthinkable well.¹¹

With its loose use of indefinite pronouns, its mix of both high and low culture, its shifts between various registers of discourse and diction, and its quick transitions between seemingly unrelated subjects, this is typical Ashbery: tantalizingly close to a relatable meaning and yet ever elusive.

The poet Joseph Campana once described this sort of experience with Ashbery as one of “blank reading,” in which, mesmerized by the poet’s brilliant use of language and unannounced topical shifts, one tends to tune out even while continuing to read.¹²

Similarly, Dennis O’Driscoll has said about Ashbery that “the danger of such writing is that it can make a fetish of novelty, becoming a trivial TV-age poetry in which the screen continually changes as the writer’s attention span proves shorter than the reader’s.”¹³

And, in writing about T.S. Eliot’s numerous memorable lines, Denis Donoghue has said that Ashbery’s poems tend to “sink into the vagueness of their reputation” so that, in spite of Ashbery’s “cultivated voice,” “nothing of the voice stays with [one] but a fading

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¹² Joseph Campana, Personal Communication, April 2012.

echo,” its quality being “consistent with a culture that reads with the eye and keeps the ear idle.”

Indeed, there is a sense in which Ashbery’s poetry seems to be nothing more than a symptom of what the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has called “liquid modernity.”

And yet, while I certainly sympathize with these responses to Ashbery (as indicated by my own first encounter with his work), there is, once you spend enough time with him, always something more going on in an Ashbery poem than a mere reflection of modernity. Indeed, as Andrew DuBois has put it, Ashbery “knows what he’s doing”:

He knows how we pay attention in a world of commercially utilized airwaves, of sensory glut, and he knows how to manipulate our minds and desires with style from underneath a surface sheen. Indeed, the style is all, and, far from being a condemnation, this is merely to say that something so full of insinuation can never be shallow. Ashbery’s work throbs with meaning, yet some meanings will be made hard to articulate, as Ashbery circumvents or obstructs our strategies for transparency. He does this in part by overwhelming us (in imitation of the world in which we live), by failing to cull from his work the happenstance, the “merely” suggestive; nor does he excuse us from the obligatory desire to organize all this, to locate all the possible meanings in a proliferation of words…We readers, the potential explicators, are thus faced with a crisis of attention, for which we are not always let off the hook.

This is quite insightful; and his explanations of many Ashbery poems are too. But, when it comes to Ashbery’s longer poems like “Europe,” “A Wave,” Flow Chart, and the pantoum of Hotel Lautréamont, DuBois is largely silent.

These are precisely the ones most in need of explanation, however. For consider how people have responded to Flow Chart. Here, for instance, is Vincent:


Flow Chart, the 216-page book length poem published in 1991, has always fascinated me. I’ve read it dozens of times. Some of these times were bliss, some of them pure frustration. Even, or maybe especially, when I feel that I have a handle on the poem, a sense that I have found reading it thrilling in the past and have some idea why, it can leave me feeling bored and dismayed. (23)

Here, for another, is Fred Moramarco:

Flow Chart is a cacophony of sentences rising and falling, building and deconstructing, swelling and imploding. What’s this poem really about? we want to ask again and again as we read it. And we read it with the sense of hearing a whole range of contemporary discourses simultaneously, catching snatches of lucidity intermittently, but never quite grasping the whole of a particular sequence.17

And here, for one more, is Helen Vendler:

In my own case, by entering into some bizarrely tuned pitch inside myself, I can find myself on Ashbery’s wavelength, where everything at the symbolic level makes sense. The irritating (and seductive) thing about this tuning in is that it can’t be willed; I can’t make it happen when I am tired or impatient. But when the frequencies meet, the effect on me is Ashbery’s alone, and it is a form of trance.18

Certainly there is confusion in all three of the responses. But, at the same time, there is also a testament to the power of Ashbery’s longest poem, a testament that is comparable to his own account of reading Gertrude Stein’s Stanzas in Meditation: “There is certainly plenty of monotony in the 150-page title poem which forms the first half of this volume, but it is the fertile kind, which generates excitement as water monotonously flowing over a dam generates electrical power.”19

This is a perfect description of how one feels while reading Flow Chart. But it can only get us so far. For it is one thing to say that Ashbery’s writing “is a form of


trance,” and another to explain how or why it is like this. And, here, even the more serious treatments of the poem have not been much help. Martin Kevorkian, for instance, begins his treatment of the poem by attesting to the same strange power that we saw Vincent, Moramarco, and Vendler describe—“John Ashbery’s poetry asks its Gentlereaders not so much to recover some ‘deep’ significance, but rather to hear its capacity to nudge toward oblivion the ordinary meanings of almost ordinary phrases”—only to explain the poem as an internecine feud amongst poets, critics, and theorists, or as his subtitle describes the poem, “John Ashbery and the Theorists on John Ashbery against the Critics against John Ashbery.”

Nick Lolordo, for another, reads the poem as Ashbery’s attempt to position himself in relation to the debates on whether he is, as Harold Bloom would have it, a belated romantic in the great tradition, or, as Bruce Andrews and others would have it, a poet of the avant-garde, ultimately claiming that “Ashbery positions himself both in the present tense of writing (the moment of writing in ‘open form’ that puts him in recognizable continuity with radical contemporary practice) and within literary history (by means of an allusiveness that puts his poem in a problematic contact with ideas of high modernism, specifically those of Eliot and the New Criticism.” And John Bayley, for one more, claims that the Ashbery of Flow Chart “is clearly in revolt against modern academic and deconstructive practices where


poetry is concerned: against the whole apparatus of university English departments.\textsuperscript{24} But while there is certainly some truth to these claims, the interpretation they offer is of the most self-absorbed kind, asking, in effect, what the poem says about them, the rarefied critics to whom Ashbery must surely be speaking.

It is with great pleasure, then, that one comes to the most thorough treatment of \textit{Flow Chart} to date, John Shoptaw’s 40-page explication of the poem in his comprehensive study of Ashbery. Shoptaw begins, like everyone else, by expressing his confusion about the poem—“\textit{Flow Chart} is a retrospective ramble, wandering, seemingly without premeditation or embarrassment, from one vaguely defined scene or topic to the next”\textsuperscript{25}—before going on to explain that the poem is an autobiography in the style of Stein’s \textit{Everybody’s Autobiography}. But, as Shoptaw tries to explain this self-reflexive autobiography to us by tracing a number of different connections between the poem’s disparate topics, his account begins to splinter into fragments that he is never quite able to shore against the empty center of Ashbery’s ruins. Indeed, while he provides us with insightful commentary on the poem’s many threads (ie. the [misrepresented] literary allusions, the references to the Iran-Contra scandal [Oliver North’s explanation of which supposedly influenced Ashbery’s choice of title], the relevance of the 1988 U.S. election, the “homotextual” component of \textit{Flow Chart}, etc.), one gets the sense that these threads are just as arbitrary as any others that one could find.

But this is not to say that one could do any better than Shoptaw. Rather, it’s to point out the lengths to which critics will go to make sense of the poem. For consider,


\textsuperscript{25} John Shoptaw, \textit{On the Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery’s Poetry} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 301-302. All further references will be given parenthetically in the text.
how different readers have made sense of just the first half of the first stanza of *Flow*.

*Chart:*

Still in the published city but not yet
overtaken by a new form of despair, I ask
the diagram: is it the foretaste of pain
it might easily be? Or an emptiness so sudden it leaves the girders
whanging in the absence of wind,
the sky milk-blue and astringent? We know life is so busy,
but a larger activity shrouds it, and this is something
we can never feel, except occasionally, in small signs
put up to warn us and as soon expunged, in part
or wholly. (3)

According to Marjorie Perloff26, these first lines are a response to Wordsworth’s 1805 version of *The Prelude*, which begins:

Oh, there is blessing in this gentle breeze,
That blows from the green fields and from the clouds
And from the sky; it beats against my cheek,
And seems half conscious of the joy it gives.
O welcome messenger! O welcome friend!
A captive greets thee, coming from a house
Of bondage, from yon city’s walls set free,
A prison where he hath been long immured.27

According to Jane Mendelsohn28, they are an echo of the preamble to Stevens’s “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction”:

And for what, except for you, do I feel love?
Do I press the extremest book of the wisest man
Close to me, hidden in me day and night?
In the uncertain light of single, certain truth,
Equal in living changingness to the light
In which I meet you, in which we sit at rest,
For a moment in the central of our being,
The vivid transparence that you bring is peace.29


And, according to Shoptaw, because of the first word “still,” they are a reference to “the still point of the turning world” from Eliot’s autobiographical *Four Quartets*.

All of these, of course, are plausible enough; and, in fact, they might even be right. But, at the same time, it raises some question about the desirability of this method of interpretation. For, as Ashbery puts it in the third section of the poem, while “it is possible at the end that a judgment / may be formed,” the judge may well just be “hypnotized by his reflection” (87), which is to say that he has probably just found what he wanted to find. The question that I want to pursue in the rest of this chapter, therefore, is not only what *Flow Chart*’s really about? but also why readers have been so slow to accept it?

The second of these questions has something to do with Ashbery’s method of composing *Flow Chart*. As is well known, Ashbery got the idea for the book from his friend Trevor Winkler who, in the fall of 1987, told Ashbery that he should write a 100-page poem about his mother who had died the previous January. Ashbery, having recently won a MacArthur grant, which, in his words, allowed him “to give up everything for five years,” was apparently intrigued, saying, “Say, that’s something I haven’t done before!” (quoted in Shoptaw 302), before adding to the 100-page rule by giving himself the deadline of July 28, 1988, his 61st birthday. Ashbery made almost daily additions to the poem, giving it the feel, as he described it, of “a kind of continuum, a diary, even

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though it’s not in the form of a diary.” And one gets the sense in reading the poem that what Ashbery said of it is exactly right: “It’s the result of what I had to say on certain days over a period of six months, during the course of thinking about my past, the weather outside. I free-associate and come up with all kinds of extra material that doesn’t belong—but does.”

Moreover, there is the fact that, as he put it in an earlier interview, he often writes while listening to a classical music station, and that occasionally when there are announcements or commercials they get sucked into the poem, as do all kinds of things in my immediate environment: papers that happen to be on my desk at the time, or letters, stray books, magazines...I always answer the phone when I'm writing and I frequently find that it has helped me either to forget an unprofitable line of thinking, or that whoever I'm talking to will say something that gives me an idea. . . . These things are very important. They're the environment that we live in and there's no point in trying to pretend that it's different or should be different.

But, no matter where the material came from, the point is that Ashbery’s typically New York School compositional method helps to explain at least part of the reason why the poem seems to be so incoherent even as it remains compelling.

More significantly, though, the infamous difficulty of Flow Chart has do with our own false assumptions about the relationship between writing and meaning, which are best revealed by the poet Steve McCaffery. In his essay “Writing as a General Economy,” McCaffery approaches literature as an economy rather than a structure, the difference being that while “[t]he latter tends to promote essence as relational, which has the clear advantage of avoiding all closed notions of the poem as ‘a well-wrought urn’ but suffers from a presupposed stasis, a bracketed immobility among the parts under


34 Bolstering this point is Ashbery’s casual response to John Shoptaw’s question about why page 33 of the typescript was left out of the finished poem: “a page must have been accidently left out of the poem when it was transcribed into the computer.” See Shoptaw 373.
observation and specification,” the former “is concerned with the distribution and
circulation of the numerous forces and intensities that saturate a text.” More
specifically, though, he approaches literature as a general economy, in the sense that
Georges Bataille gives to the phrase: “[t]he general economy, in the first place, makes
apparent that excesses of energy are produced, and that by definition, these excesses
cannot be utilized. The excessive energy can only be lost without the slightest aim,
consequently without meaning” (quoted in McCaffery 90). Bataille, of course, used this
phrase to designate practices beyond the literary (such as sacrifice, ritual, and dreams),
but, setting these aside, McCaffery uses it to “serve a praxis of challenge to conceptual
dominants of traditional writing such as transmission theory of communication, the
continuous subject, the valorization of representational and referential procedures, etc.,”
and, moreover, to “show how a strategy of the general economy can help loosen the
philosophical hold that utility, as an unquestionable value, has maintained historically
over writing” (202).

To begin with, though, McCaffery differentiates the general economy from
several other types, including: 1) a restricted economy, “whose operation is based upon
valorized notions of restraint, conservation, investment, profit, accumulation and cautious
proceduralities in risk taking; 2) political economy, “which articulates the bourgeois
theory of production”; and 3) Rousseau’s general economy, “where general and political

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are bracketed together and contrasted with *private* and *particular* economies, ie. the economies of an individual household or family” (203). Moreover, he makes clear that he is “*not* proposing ‘general’ as an alternative economy to ‘restricted’” since “one cannot replace the other because their relationship is not one of mutual exclusion” (203). Indeed, as he puts it in a passage worth citing at length due to its clarification of what I referred to in the Introduction as Emerson and company’s difference from pragmatism:

In most cases we will find general economy as a suppressed or ignored presence within the scene of writing that tends to emerge by way of rupture within the restricted, putting into question the conceptual controls that produce a writing of use value with its privileging of meaning as a necessary production and evaluated destination. Often we will detect a rupture made and instantly appropriated by the restrictive. The meaningless, for example, will be ascribed a meaning; loss will be rendered profitable by its being assigned a value. In effect, what will be dealt with is a complex interaction of two constrastive, but not exclusive economies, within the single operation of writing. (203)

And, as he continues, in resonance with my claim that literature exceeds—or at least *can* exceed—philosophy to become genial thinking, while “[r]estricted economy, which is the economy of Capital, Reason, Philosophy and History, will always strive to govern writing, to force its appearance through an order of constraints,” the “general economy would forfeit this government, conserve nothing and, whilst not prohibiting meaning’s appearance, would only sanction its profitless emergence in a general expenditure; hence, it would be entirely indifferent to results and concerned only with self-dispersal” (203). That is, “[a] general economy can never be counter-valuational nor offer an alternative ‘value’ to Value for it is precisely the operation of value that it explicitly disavows” due to the fact that it “will engender neither uses nor exchanges but eruptions without purpose within structures of restraints as that economy which shatters the accumulation of meaning” (203).
But, to see how this general economy actually operates—and operates so as to disrupt—we need to focus on some of the specifics of language, and, in particular, on materiality, metaphor, and paragram. In terms of materiality, McCaffery reminds us that “speech and writing ‘originate’ as material substances in the act of incising graphic marks upon a substance, in the physical act of gesticulating (sign language for instance) and in the expulsion of certain sounds through the buccal cavity” so as to establish that “there is an uncontestable graphic, phonic or gestural materiality that is a necessary condition of, yet insubsumable to, the ideality of meaning” (204). Moreover, he reminds us that “[a] profit, in this way, shows itself to be predicated upon a loss” since “the physical act of speaking or writing must withdraw so that what has been said or written can appear meaningful” (204). This implies that meaning “is staged as the telos and destination of the de-materialization of writing,” or, in other words, that “sound and ink are separable from the signifying process, but at the same time the process is unsupportable without it” (204). For McCaffery, therefore, this means that “one could consider language’s materiality as meaning’s heterological object, as that area inevitably involved within the semantic apparatus that meaning casts out and rejects” since “[l]anguage fractures at this radical point of support, severing the system per se from a plurality of speech and writing effects” (204). At the same time, though, he is careful to remind us that “[i]t is because of this general economy of materiality that writing can function as an entirely referential project, pointing out beyond itself to an adecuated zone of non-linguistic ‘reality,’” meaning that in the meaning-making process “writing’s initially general economy is immediately recuperated as a restrictive operation by which writing does not lose a

37 Let me just note in passing that this would make for an interesting avenue of research into a poem like Ashbery’s “Litany,” which, according to the author’s note, is “meant to be read as simultaneous but independent monologues.”
world of objects but appropriates and retains this in itself as an homogenized territory of meaning, ideality and sign” (204-205).

Similarly, McCaffery claims that metaphor “attacks the notion of absolute meaning” (205). This is because while “[a]t least one aspect of the metaphoric operation involves the institution of an identity between dissimilar things, an annexation of otherness and the suppression of difference,” “this reduction of difference to identity is never an absolute moment in metaphor” since “there is always another constitution that threatens presence, an operation of metaphor not as trope but as locus for the contestation of difference” (205). With metaphor, therefore, there is, in effect, “always the threat of substitution going astray in the substitutional passage, of the movement elsewhere towards the appropriation of the otherness collapsing and actually engendering a heterogeneity” (205):

In a simple metaphor such as “the talons of the law,” there is a loss of clear, incontestable reference to bird and a similar loss of abstraction in the term “law.” Rather than effecting an indisputable substitution (which would presuppose the transcendental principle of equivalence that institutes the exchangist economy) the semantic mechanism is rendered nomadic, meaning wanders from one term to another and any relationship through substitution and equivalence can only be asserted within the framing and staging of a certain loss. (206)

Moreover, McCaffery argues that “metaphor, as a substitutional figure, requires a necessary passage through metonymy (its other term)” because “any purported resemblance between two terms (such as metaphor necessitates) must be predicated upon a contiguous scene, a pre-figurational, pre-rhetorical placement of terms in a scene allowing the spatio-cognitive assertion of resemblance” (206). For McCaffery, that is, “metaphor shows itself to be much more than a discrete figure, indeed it reveals itself to be radically contaminated by metonymy, unavoidably ambivalent in its functional
relationship to both substitution and equivalence” (206). In fact, as he goes on to say, we might even see metaphor “as a figure of economy rather than structure, predicated upon a certain scarcity (ie. the lack of a univocal designator of an object or target term) that distributes its indeterminacies among the significatory scenes it helps to establish, offering displacement as a potential disposition but fixing a residual potentiality between the two terms” (206). But, on the whole, his point is that while metaphor’s “movement to resemblance effects an escape of difference,” “there is always an irreducible, unmasterable remnant in the figure that is neither resemblance nor difference but the indeterminacy of both” (207).

In terms of the paragram38, then, McCaffery defines it, following Leon S. Roudiez, as the general condition of the text “in the sense that its organization of words (and their denotations), grammar, and syntax is challenged by the infinite possibilities provided by letters or phonemes combining to form networks of significance not accessible through conventional reading habits” (quoted in McCaffery 207). This means that the “percolation of language through the paragram contaminates the notion of an ideal, unitary meaning and thereby counters the supposition that words can ‘fix’ or stabilize in closure” (207). For McCaffery, that is, “[p]aragrammatic wordplay manufactures a crisis within semantic economy, for whilst engendering meanings, the paragram also turns unitary meaning against itself” (207). Thus, on his account, “[i]f we understand meaning in its classical adequation to truth and knowledge, then paragrammaticized meaning becomes a secretion, an escape or expenditure from semantic’s ideal structure into the disseminatory material of the signifier” (207). Indeed,

38 When discussing the paragram, it is important to note that, for McCaffery, it “should not be seen necessarily as a latent content or hidden intention, but as a subproductive sliding and slipping of meaning between the forces and intensities distributed through the text’s syntactic economy” (207).
for McCaffery, paragrams are “figures of antisemantics”: “they constitute that aspect of language which escapes all discourse and which commits writing unavoidably to a general economy and to the transphenomenal paradox of an unpresentability that serves as a necessary condition of writings capacity to present” (208).

Overall, then, McCaffery’s discussion of the general economic operations of writing—and, in particular, of materiality, metaphor, and paragram—“[does] not destroy the order of meaning, but complicate[s] and unsettle[s] its constitution and operation” (209). That is, “through their presentation of constitutive contaminats (loss in presence, metonymy in metaphor, etc.),” they complicate “essentialist notions of meaning and the operation of a subject within such unicities” (209) so that, in a way that seems particularly relevant to Flow Chart, “[t]he local passage from meaning to meaning” can no longer be “conceived as an accumulation or integration within a larger meaning and instituted upon the productive basis of a value” (218).

But while this account of the relationship between writing and meaning helps to explain why it is so hard to make sense of Flow Chart, it doesn’t bring us any closer to an explanation of what Ashbery is up to in the poem. To explain this, then, let me turn to Charles Bernstein’s poem/essay “Artifice of Absorption.” As one might expect from one of the key L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, Bernstein’s emphasis there is not on the transparency of poetry, but on its “artifice,” its “intractability to being read as the sum of its devices & subject matters.”39 That is, he sees poetry as “the contradiction of ‘realism,’ with / its insistence on presenting an unmediated / (immediate) experience of facts, either of the / ‘external’ world of nature or the ‘internal’ world / of the mind” (9).

39 Charles Bernstein, “Artifice of Absorption” in A Poetics (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 9. All further references will be given parenthetically in the text.
For Bernstein, therefore, to read through poetry to some reality that lies outside it is to fail to read it as poetry; that is, it is to falsely read it as the representation of reality rather than, as it really is, the construction of a particular version of reality. Indeed, as he goes on to say, quoting Veronica Forrest-Thomson:

Critical reading must never try to impose meaning in the form of an extension of meaning into the non-verbal world until the reader has determined by examining the non-meaningful levels just what amount of meaning is required by the poem’s structure from each phrase, word, and letter. Only when this is done can the critic hope to reach a thematic synthesis which will make contact with the poem itself on its many levels and not with some abstract, or indeed concrete, entity created out of his own imagination. The reader must...use his imagination...but he must use it to free himself from the fixed forms of thought which ordinary language imposes on our minds, not to deny the strangeness of poetry by inserting it in some non-poetic area: his own mind, the poet’s mind, or any non-fictional situation. (quoted in Bernstein 12)

Bernstein refines this to say “that such elements as line breaks, acoustic / patterns, syntax, etc., are meaningful rather than, / as she has it, that they contribute to the meaning of the poem” (12), but, overall, he agrees with her claim that we should resist readings that have “an exclusive emphasis on the overt ideology or / content of a poem” (14). For, as he puts it, in a passage that has resonance with McCaffery’s essay, “[m]eaning is no where bound / to the orbit of purpose, intention, or utility” (13). For Bernstein, in other words, meaning is embodied not in but “as the poem / in a way that is not transferable to another code / or rhetoric “ (18; my emphasis).

We are clearly far away from traditional accounts of poetry like Martha Nussbaum’s notion that it is something that absorbs us in the lives of others in order to increase our “sympathetic identification.”40 In fact, Bernstein even goes so far as to say that one of the prerequisites to understanding poetry is a “refusal of absorption” (21; my

emphasis); for, as soon as one forgets that one is reading a work of poetry—that is, as soon as one becomes absorbed in the work to the point where the page disappears from consciousness—one is no longer reading the work as poetry (which is to say, as artifice), but merely participating in what David Foster Wallace liked to call “spectation”: the passive, uncritical absorption of what one is presented with. Of course, such absorption is one of the distinct pleasures of literature, and so I don’t think we should dismiss it as quickly as Bernstein would like to, but his point is still well-taken; for even the most absorbing work requires—and, in a certain sense, is nothing but—artifice: an accumulation of rhetoric and formal technique designed to hold (or focus) one’s attention. Hence Bernstein’s belief—and here we might see him as Plato-in-reverse—that so-called realist literature “charms” one into believing its version of things, and so is, at root, insidiously ideological. And hence, too, his promotion of the so-called anti-realist work (i.e. his own poetry, John Barth’s fiction, etc.) that foregrounds its artifice so as to prevent “an initial / ‘illusionistic’ reading” (41-42). In fact, on Bernstein’s view, rather than heightening our ability to identify with the lives of others, poetry should provoke us to say: “Hell, I don’t recognize the place or the time or / the ‘I’ in this sentence. I don’t know it” (42). In a word, then, poetry, for Bernstein, has to do with what the Russian Formalists called ostranenie, or defamiliarization; that is, it drives “a


43 In Viktor Shklovsky’s famous formulation: “Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war. ‘If the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been.’ And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are
wedge / between words and their meanings, lessen[s] as / much as possible their designatory force and thereby / inhibit[s] our all too ready flight from them to things they point to” (45).

Of course, as anyone who has read (and tried to understand) a poem like Susan Howe’s “Thorow” knows, such seemingly anti-absorptive works can be highly absorbing precisely because of their anti-absorptive techniques. In fact, as Bernstein says about his own poetic practice: “I / frequently use opaque & nonabsorbable / elements, digressions & / interruptions, as part of a technological / arsenal to create a more powerful / (‘souped-up’) / absorption than possible with traditional, / & blander, absorptive techniques” (52-53). But then, this is a very different sort of absorption; for it is one whose “project is to wake / us from the hypnosis of absorption” (54; my emphasis). Indeed, for Bernstein, this “more intensified, technologized / absorption made possible by / nonabsorptive means may get the reader / absorbed into a more ideologized / or politicized space; if not to say, / less programmatically, / one that really can engross: not / ersatz but, at last, the real / goods” (53-54). Moreover, since “the ideological strategy of mass entertainment, / from bestsellers to TV to ‘common voice’ poetry, / is to contradict this ever-present other reality through / insulation into a fabricated ‘lowest’ common / denominator that, among its many guises, goes under / the Romantic formula ‘irreducible human values’” (55), he finds that anti-absorptive techniques such as the use of disjunctive syntax, unfamiliar vocabulary, typographic invention, obscure dialect, etc. can

perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object” (16). See Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique” in Literary Theory: An Anthology, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 1998).

serve to highlight the exclusionary nature of such normative discursive formulations. In short, Bernstein claims that anti-absorptive works can absorb us in the work of undoing our common modes of absorption.

Bernstein’s ultimate argument, then, is that “[s]omething powerfully absorptive is needed to pull / us out of the shit, the ideology in which we slip— / mind altering as the LSD ad used to put it,” and that literature (and specifically poetry) has “a mission to be as powerful as / the strongest drug, to offer a vision-in-sound / to compete with the world we know so that we can find / the worlds we don’t” (76). And while he admits that “we don’t / in fact escape ideology” in doing so, he insists that we can achieve “an alternate point / of perspective, a supplemental attentional / focus/unfocus” (76). What the anti-absorptive does, Bernstein therefore concludes, is “not so much prevent / absorption as shift its plane / of engagement—forcing / a shift in attentional focus” (76). Or, as Nick Piombino puts it in a passage worth citing at length:

Since the poet is as vulnerable to the spell of accepted reality as anyone else, she or he must somehow find a way to concentrate the attentional beam on areas of experience that were hitherto...not apprehendable...[T]he poem must find some way of directing the gaze of consciousness onto literally inconceivably complex and entangled linkages between various modes of experience...Although indeterminacy is one way to describe the oscillation (or discontinuity) that underlies the perceptual process, this blur is actually one state in the focusing of the attentional beam...These oscillations may form an exchange of energy so great as to cause a shift in magnitude of attentional focus...[T]he poetic state of consciousness...makes possible an expansion of the absorbability of experiential data by the attentional mind. Intense wakefulness is stimulated by an oscillation of types of mental attention-reverie, obsessive attention to detail, symbolic transpositions...Such a conception of poetics would be a call for actuality over reality, actuality consisting not only of the area of experience now available to the attentional focus, but all actualities which can be felt and sensed in the total experiential process. (quoted in Bernstein 77-78)

But, in either case, the point, for Bernstein, is the same: “Poetry is like a swoon / with this exception: / it brings you to your senses” (78), which is to say, it possesses “the
power of / making aware, which necessarily involves a / disruption of a single plane of
attention or / belief” so as to achieve “a hyperattentiveness / that has its own economy of
engagement” (83).

The disruption of a single plane of attention or belief so as to achieve a
hyperattentiveness that has its own economy of engagement: there is perhaps no better
way to describe Flow Chart than this. Indeed, the genius of the poem—and Ashbery in
general I would argue—is that, as if in answer to Piombino, the poem does find a “way
of directing the gaze of consciousness onto literally inconceivably complex and
entangled linkages between various modes of experience.” That is, it does not just
absorb us into a trance (as so many readers have claimed); it also makes possible an
expansion of the absorbability of experiential data by the attentional mind, an expansion
that might not bring us closer to reality, but can, in Piombino’s sense, provide us with a
greater actuality.

There are numerous examples of this in Flow Chart, but the most prominent (and
one that has been the subject of the most intense critical debate) is the double sestina that
comes at the end of Section IV of the poem. Angus Fletcher, for instance, has written
that this is the “island in the stream,” that “the six-fold character of the double sestina
allows us to see, finally, that the whole six-part mediation of Flow Chart is, in fact, one
immense sestina.” For Fletcher, that is, the sestina “anchors or gives shape to an
otherwise exceedingly elusive poem, whose six-fold structure might otherwise stand
unrevealed” (224). In fact, as he goes on to elaborate:

45 Angus Fletcher, A New Theory for American Poetry: Democracy, the Environment, and the Future of
the Imagination (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 219, 223. All further references will
be given parenthetically in the text.
As experience and theme, Ashbery’s double sestina gives the reader an idea of democratic excellence, since the chivalric and elite poetic form of the sestina, so like a great athletic tournament, is embedded in the open, diagnostic, democratic excursion of the rest of *Flow Chart*. The sestina formally transforms the surrounding poem into a celebration of human life—the private becomes public, entering the larger sphere. (224)

That’s quite the achievement! The only problem is that, in the words of Vincent, it “is patently ridiculous” since “one may as well make the equally meaningless observation that any sestina is one miniscule ‘flow chart.’” (66). For Vincent, though, the double sestina is nothing more than “virtuosity…breaking off into an interior, rule-driven rill,” “a ruse in the game that insists on an exterior rule-driven relationship” (66). And while I wouldn’t say that this is patently ridiculous, it is still just as wrong. For what becomes clear when one reads the sestina carefully is that, as Piombino put it, it is a “way of directing the gaze of consciousness onto literally inconceivably complex and entangled linkages between various modes of experience.”

One could write a whole book on these linkages in the sestina, but, for the sake of economy, let me just focus on one aspect of it: the relationship that emerges between “breath” and “death.” First, though, to give some sense of what Ashbery is up to here, let me provide the first stanza of the double sestina with the end words italicized:

We’re interested in the language, that you call *breath*,
if breath is what we are to become, and we think it is, the southpaw *said*.
Throwing her
a bone sometimes, sometimes expressing, sometimes expressing something like mild concern, the *way*
has been so hollowed out by travelers it has become cavernous. It leads to *death*. We know that, yet for a limited time only we wish to pluck the *sunflower*,
Transport it from where it stood, proud, erect, under a bungalow-blue sky, grasping at the *sun*,
and bringing it inside, as all others sink into the common mold. The day had begun inauspiciously, yet improved as it went along, until at *bed*-time it was seen that we had prospered, I and *thee*.
Our early frustrated attempts at communicating were in any even long since *dead*. 
Yet I had prayed for some civility from the air before setting out, as indeed my ancestors had \textit{done} and it hadn’t hurt them any. And I purposely refrained from consulting \textit{me}, (186)

And also the \textit{envoi}:

The story that she told me simmers in \textit{me} still, though she is \textit{dead} these several months, lying as on a \textit{bed}. The things we used to do, I to \textit{thee}, thou to me, matter still, but the \textit{sun} points the way inexorably to \textit{death}, though it be but this, not our \textit{way}. Funny the way the \textit{sun} can bring you around to \textit{her}. And as you pause for \textit{breath}, remember it, now that it is \textit{done}, and seeds flare in in the \textit{sunflower}. (193)

\textit{Flow Chart}, we will remember, was written in response to Ashbery’s mother’s death; and, even though he claimed in an interview that “of course, it’s not about my mother” (quoted in Shoptaw 302), his mother’s death is everywhere in this poem. Indeed, as David Herd has shown in detail, “death in general and his mother’s death in particular, have a shaping effect on the poem.”\footnote{David Herd, \textit{John Ashbery and American Poetry} (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 210.} Here, for instance, is just one of many passages:

\begin{verbatim}
  The stationary saraband of our considering it but deciding not to put it to a vote absorbs any hint of the disorder that highmindedness sometimes trails in its wake like a wisp of something in the sky, and in any case, our hands, our faces are clean, our plates empty and brimming with moonlight, a pious reminder to the unwashed and unready that we will come again someday and make sense of this arbitrary and tangled forest of misplaced motives and other shades of imperfect sympathies that do no comprise us perhaps as yet, yet I feel their aura, Mother, like a water table ascending, and I haven’t the answer, don’t know if I’ll ever have it, yet it looks so young, pitiful and hopeless in morning light that one tries to suppress the intuition that to go forward will be to do battle with some angry titan, sooner or later, and all one’s bad reactions will confront at every one of the house’s apertures: slay me and then leave me here, if that’s going to help; just don’t stand around looking at me that way, that’s all. (72)
\end{verbatim}
...I would like to go on for a while anyway, but wonder under the circumstances whether it wouldn’t be like setting out on a long journey in rain so heavy it takes your breath away. Even one step is out of the question, I think, now. I no longer have the energy to breathe on the windowpane so that the frost will transform into garlands of chiseled steel that draw one out like a rapt interlocutrix. (28)

Thus, putting these two strands together, I want to consider what Ashbery is focusing our attention on here.

The words that have been circling around in the sestina are “breath,” “said,” “way,” “death,” “sunflower,” “sun” “day,” “bed,” “thee,” “done,” “dead,” and “me.” But of particular importance here is the rhyming pair “breath” and “death.” By relating these words throughout the turns of the double sestina, these natural opposites (life and death) start to take on a new relation to one another so that by the time we get to the *envoi* the difference between them has been erased, and it makes perfect sense that the “sun” (as a source of life) “points the way inexorably towards death” and “to her” (his dead mother). Similarly, after these two words have been rousted about in the sestina, it now makes sense that “breath” should lead to a reminder that “it is done.” For what Ashbery has done in the sestina is actualize a complex of relations between breath and death that puts them into a new and strange relation.

But the poet Li-Young Lee describes this relationship better than I ever could. Speaking at UC Berkeley on November 7, 2002, Lee begins, as he often does in his poetry, with a story about his father:

When I was a child, very tiny, my father asked me one day, he said, “Do you know how many breaths a human being takes in a day?” And I, I said, “No.” He said, “On the average, fourteen- to sixteen-thousand.” And I started counting,
like, is that true? And he said, “What I want you to start doing is, as you inhale, say ‘goodbye,’ and as you exhale, say ‘thank you.’ Don’t think anything else. Just do that.” And I tried to do that. And after about three years of trying to do that, everything was grief stricken for me. I would, you know, be looking at my father’s face, he’d be talking to me, and I’d be saying, “goodbye, thank you, goodbye, thank you.” That was a very strange experience.⁴⁷

Then, as a way of introducing a love poem, he mentions that his wife recently said to him that he only writes about love so that he can write about death—a comment he finds true, but which he has been wondering about:

Well, it’s obvious…All speech is performed with the outgoing breath, that is, the exhaled breath. When we inhale, our bodies get filled with life. Our blood gets filled with oxygen. Our bones actually get harder. Our muscles get more tone when we inhale. And when we exhale, our bodies actually soften. Our bones actually soften. Our muscles get softer. So that when we inhale, you can think of it as an in-feeding breath, and when we exhale it’s the outgoing breath, or the dying breath. But since speech, all speech, is performed with the outgoing breath, all speech is done with the dying breath.

What interests Lee about this, he says, is that “as we speak meaning gets divulged. The more of a sentence that you unspool, the more of your meaning gets disclosed. So that meaning increases in opposite ratio to vitality.” And this, he continues, “is paradigmatic of life” in that “as we die, the meaning of our lives gets unfolded.” More specifically in terms of poetry, though, he says:

When we score human speech in poetry…it seems to me that poets are obsessed with death because the medium is the dying breath. So you can’t even begin a poem without…I mean, that’s the medium, right?—your death, your dying. But there’s no way around it because there’s no other way to disclose meaning…So I think the anxiety of making poems is one becomes so aware that one’s medium is the dying breath, and what you’re trying to do is ransom that with as much psychic, intellectual, emotional content as possible. And it seems to me that poetry is the perfect medium for that…So that when I read these poems, the more I think about it, the more I feel that the poems I’m about to read you…And I have to apologize…They seem insufficient to me because, ultimately, there doesn’t seem to be enough that I can do to ransom this medium that, ultimately, it’s always about dying.

⁴⁷ Li-Young Lee, “Lunch Poems – Li-Young Lee,” online video clip, You Tube. August 21, 2007. All further references to Lee are from this video.
This, then, I think, is the relationship that emerges between “breath” and “death” in Ashbery’s double sestina.

But this is not to say that death is what *Flow Chart* ultimately about. Rather, it’s to say that Ashbery actualizes this otherwise inconceivable linkage through the intense focus he gives to the terms in his double sestina. Indeed, Ashbery makes clear that this is just one possible attentional focus by calling the whole sestina enterprise into question immediately after it ends:

And left it that way, and then it kind of got shelved. It was a missing increment, but as long as no one realized it was missing, calm prevailed. When they did, it was well on the way to being a back number of itself. So while people cared, and some even wept, it was realized that this was a classic, even a generic, case, and soon they called attention to other aspects of the affair. (193)

*Flow Chart’s* double sestina, then, is not, as Fletcher would have it, the final resting place of the poem, but one among many examples of how Ashbery disrupts a single plane of attention so as to achieve a hyperattentiveness that has its own economy of engagement. That is, it is an example of what hitherto unforeseen possibilities might arise when we stop attempting to read through the poem to some reality that lies outside of it, and, instead, come to focus on the version of reality that the poem actualizes. For once we do this, new worlds will open up to us in Ashbery’s poetry; or should I say, his poetry will open up new worlds in us.
CONCLUSION...

ATTENTION

And they don’t pay attention,
and they don’t pay attention, that’s all I can say.¹

—John Ashbery

In the Introduction, I claimed that this dissertation began in disappointment and, specifically, in disappointment with Kant’s settlement with skepticism; that, as Stanley Cavell puts it, “[t]o settle with skepticism…to assure us that we do know the existence of the world or, rather, that what we understand as knowledge is of the world, the price Kant asks us to pay is to cede any claim to know the thing in itself, to grant that human knowledge is not of things as they are in themselves” (63). More than this, though, I claimed that my disappointment stemmed from the fact that there have been so few viable suggestions as to how philosophical thought should proceed in the wake of Kant’s settlement. Thus, in the preceding pages, I attempted to show one way in which it can and has proceeded: by means of a practice running throughout the Emersonian tradition of American literature and which, after a passage from Emerson’s journal, I called genial thinking.

Acknowledging that genial thinking was a complex and contradictory process, I nevertheless ventured the following four part definition:

1. Genial thinking is genealogical; it is anti-metaphysical; it treats things not as ontological essences but as emergent occasions.

2. Genial thinking is genial; it is receptive; it does not grasp after things in an

attempt to master and know them, but responds to them in a gesture of hospitality which seeks to accommodate their singularity.

3. Genial thinking requires *genius*; it requires that one be willing to eschew all present certainties and connections so as to be drawn onwards by the promise of a call; it requires one to substitute founding for finding.

4. Genial thinking is *generative*; it is the production of new lines of relation; the creative response to an undecidable situation.

Or, as I also put it: genial thinking begins by unsettling the certainties of our conceptions; proceeds by receiving things as singularities; and ends by attempting to do justice to their call by creating new lines of relation—again and again, *ad infinitum*.

But then, as I also said there, my goal was not necessarily to compose a comprehensive definition of genial thinking, but to offer a useful byword for the complex mode of thought that I would be exploring and drawing out in the chapters that followed. Thus, in Chapter Two, I focused on the act of listening in Stevens’s poetry as a way to show how Stevens is not, as is typically thought, interested in “the thing itself,” but in what he refers to as “the less legible meanings of sounds,”2 the slight, keen indecision that resonates *in between* sense and understanding. In Chapter Three, I focused on those moments in Frost’s poetry when, instead of attempting to comprehend, seize, grasp, and represent reality through the use of metaphor, he chooses to regard its inappropriability or otherness. And, in Chapter Four, I focused on how Ashbery’s constant shifts of focus are not just the wanderings of his mind, but a technique for disrupting our absorption in a single plane of attention so as to achieve a hyperattentiveness that directs “the gaze of

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consciousness onto literally inconceivably complex and entangled linkages between various modes of experience.”

Overall, though, my goal in this project has been to move the discussion about this line of poets beyond frame of knowledge and epistemology. In fact, as I said in the Introduction, there is a sense in which the whole dissertation can be read as an extended meditation on these poets’ resistance to knowledge and epistemology. In another, more positive, sense, though, I claimed there that it was also an attempt to describe another way of being in the world than that of knowing, one that is comfortable with the uncertainties of our conceptions, is less interested in grasping the world than in responding to it, and, in a word, is genial.

Having gone through the study of these poets, though, I am now ready to more precisely describe what this mode of being is. It is one of attention, one that resists the urge to reduce or fix what Emerson described as the “enigmatical” quality of the world by noticing all the ways in which the world exceeds our grasp, or, as Emerson himself might put it, “that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-day, and under every deep a lower deep opens.” But there is perhaps no better way to describe this attentional state, then to say that it is the application of Nietzsche’s method of slow reading to the “reading” of life, and so, I will conclude with preface to *Daybreak*:

This preface is late but not too late—what, after all, do five or six years matter? A book like this, a problem like this, is in no hurry; we both, I just as much as my

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book, are friends of lento. It is not for nothing that I have been a philologist, perhaps I am a philologist still, that is to say, a teacher of slow reading: —in the end I also write slowly. Nowadays it is not only my habit, it is also to my taste…no longer to write anything, which does not reduce to despair every sort of man who is ‘in a hurry.’ For philology is that venerable art which demands of its votaries one thing above all: to go aside, to take time, to become still, to become slow—it is a goldsmith’s art and connoisseurship of the word which has nothing but delicate, cautious work to do and achieves nothing if it does not achieve it lento. But for precisely this reason it is more necessary than ever today, by precisely this means does it entice us and enchant us the most, in the midst of an age of “work,” that is to say, of hurry, of indecent and perspiring haste, which wants to “get everything done” at once, including every old or new book: —this art does not so easily get anything done, it teaches to read well, that is, to read slowly, deeply, looking cautiously before and aft, with reservations, with doors left open, with delicate eyes and fingers.  

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