

The Ontological Imagination: Living Form in American Literature

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ABSTRACT

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“The Ontological Imagination: Living Form in American Literature” proposes a new theory of the imagination as a way forward from the long academic critique of the human subject. It is unclear how we should conceive of the human—of our potential, for example, for self-knowledge, independent thought, or moral choice—after the critiques of self-presence, intentionality, and autonomy that have come to define work in the humanities. This dissertation offers an image of the human responsive to such challenges. I argue that a set of major nineteenth-century American writers (Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James, Henry James, and Walt Whitman) held a paradoxical conception of the imagination as *both* the mark of human uniqueness—the faculty that raises the mind above the world’s sheer givenness, allowing for creative action—*and* the space of our greatest intimacy with the nonhuman world. For these writers, the highest human achievements simultaneously differentiate us from the rest of nature and abolish our difference from it.

Chapter 1, “Emerson’s ‘Doctrine of Life’: Embryogenesis and the Ontology of the Fragment,” presents an Emerson whose investigations of emotional numbness reveal a disintegrative force immanent to living beings. In the new science of embryology—a model of life at its most impersonal—he finds a non-teleological principle of growth by which a human life or an imaginative essay might attain fragile coherence. Chapter 2, “‘Concrete Imagination’: William James’s Post-Critical Thinking,” claims that James’s

multifaceted career is best understood as a quest for an intellectual vitality that would not abandon self-consistency. I argue that an ontology of thinking underlies his seemingly disparate projects: his theory of the will as receptivity, his conception of faith as mental risk, and his late practice of exemplification over sequential argument. Chapter 3, “‘The Novel is a Living Thing’: Mannerism and Immortality in *The Wings of the Dove*,” argues that Henry James envisions the novel as an incarnation, a means of preserving the life of a beloved young woman beyond her death. Through formal techniques inspired by painterly mannerism, James creates a novelistic universe that unfixes the categories of life and death. Chapter 4, “‘Like the Sun Falling Around a Helpless Thing’: Whitman’s Poetry of Judgment,” emphasizes the figural and perspectival features of Whitman’s poetry at even its most prosaic in order to show how the imagination grounds us in a common world rather than detaching us from it. In opposition to an ethics for which realistic recognition of the world demands suppression of the imagination, Whitman’s realism requires acts of imaginative judgment.

In sum, “The Ontological Imagination” hopes to reorient study of nineteenth-century American literature by revising both its traditional humanist reading and its recent posthumanist critique. On the level of the discipline, by defining literary form as a singular space in which the human imagination and impersonal life are revealed as indivisible, I make a case for the compatibility of the new formalist and ontological approaches to literary study.

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INTRODUCTION

Words of the world are the life of the world.

—Wallace Stevens, “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”

What was life, really? ... It was not matter, it was not spirit. It was something in between the two, a phenomenon borne by matter, like the rainbow above a waterfall, like a flame.

—Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*

Apart from the wish for selfhood (hence the always simultaneous granting of otherness as well), I do not understand the value of art.

—Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed*

The function of this poetry that I write is not to ironize the relationship of persons to the objects of their desire but to de-ironize that relationship; that is to say, to remind persons that the very fact of desire...is evidence, compelling evidence, of the reality of the object.

—Allen Grossman, *The Sighted Singer*

This dissertation is an account of what I call the ontological imagination in the work of four major nineteenth-century American writers: Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James, Henry James, and Walt Whitman. By “ontological imagination” I mean two things. On one level, I trace visions of being, understandings of the ground of human and nonhuman existence—what I often simply call life—as they are conveyed through writing. But my larger claim, and the motivating idea of this dissertation, is that for nineteenth-century American writers the imagination is *itself* ontological: it connects us to reality. As opposed to the Romantic idea of the imagination as the human endowment that raises us above nature by allowing us a quasi-divine power of original creativity, and against the conventional connotation of imagination as an evasion of reality, I argue that these writers saw the imagination, at its strongest, as our best means of access to the world as it is. These writers held what might be called a realism of the imagination: the imagination as a means of access to truth.

Further, for each of the writers I consider, this belief in the imagination as a realistic faculty is linked to their specific practices of writing: it is through the written text that the imagination realizes itself in the world. The forms and figures that compose a text's style—its way of being itself—are the scene of the imagination in action; and thus I use the term imagination as a synecdoche for the literary as such.

Each chapter tells a story of discovery: a writer finding a way of accessing reality through the activity of writing. For example, as I discuss in chapter 1, in his essay "Experience" we find Emerson isolated from life. To be alive is to be sensate, to feel; and yet he cannot feel. His life is indistinguishable from death. In the midst of the essay's wanderings he finds, in an image of a developing embryo, a model of life's "tendency"—a kind of bare persistence—in a universe without a divine plan. This discovery allows him a new awareness of writing as a manifestation of life, a state between activity and passivity, in which instead of struggling for mastery he becomes able, as Henry James puts it, to "work in the dark." The auto-poetic or self-organizing form that emerges out of the discontinuous parts of "Experience" is like that of a living thing; the essay's form displays the acquiescence to the force of life that Emerson narrates. Through the imagination, Emerson writes himself into life.

For each of the writers I discuss, the imagination is ontological because a text is understood as the primary reality, rather than (as it is usually understood) an ontologically secondary representation of a pre-existing reality. These texts are not just "like" or "about" life; instead, their force and meaning emerge only when we are able to see that, in a very specific sense, they *are* life. A comparison to Angus Fletcher's account of what he calls the "environment-poem" will help to clarify my argument:

This view would assert that there are two external real worlds, the one we daily walk around in (or drive cars through), and the one the environment-poem has invented. Both would have equal shares of the real—equal shares of Being. This view blurs the sharp distinction between fictions of fact and fact itself, but the point is that such poems are not *about* the environment. In some sense they share the same character, the same intrusion, the same coextension in our lives as has the environment. Supposing then that such poems are intended to surround us in exactly the way an actual environment surrounds us, there will occur a breakdown of the old distinction—a classical distinction throughout critical history, no matter how complex its profile at different historical periods—between the world within the poem and the world ‘out there,’ outside the poem. The environment-poem seeks symbolic control over the drifting experience of being environed, and it introduces the experience of an outside that is developed for the reader inside the experience of the work.¹

Like Fletcher’s environment-poem, the texts I discuss are meant to be understood, I argue, as real: as ontologically equal to the flesh and blood world in which we live, while remaining, of course, distinct from it. Fletcher’s conception of text and reality as “two external real worlds” conveys both the obvious difference between text and reality and the counterintuitive equivalence between them that I am arguing for. But whereas for Fletcher this equivalence arises from the fact that we are meant to experience the poem as an environment in the same way (“in some sense”) that we experience our ordinary environment—and so for Fletcher it could make sense to say that one could inhabit or live in a poem—my conception of the ontological imagination does not rely on the reader’s experience of a text. Rather, my readings track a different logic by which texts attain a reality beyond the merely symbolic. In each case, the realism of the text derives from its entwinement with a flesh and blood reality beyond the textual, an entwinement that is required in order for the text to exist *as* a work of literature. The text requires something that is irreducibly of life and not of language or representation, in order to *be*

¹ Angus Fletcher, *A New Theory for American Poetry: Democracy, the Environment, and the Future of Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 227.

itself. It draws reality into itself not as representation but as fact—and through its indissoluble linkage to, even its *parasitism* upon, what is undeniably real, the text demands to be taken as itself real.

Let me try to make this as concrete as I can. In chapter 3, I read Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove* as a technology created to immortalize an actual young woman, Minny Temple, long dead, whom James had loved in his youth. I mean "immortalize" in a sense for which the conventional distinction between the symbolic and the real does not hold. *The Wings of the Dove* uses symbolic means to constantly gesture beyond the symbolic. It wants to signal that its meaning is dependent on a reality that cannot be captured in language. The novel's paradigmatic scene, the encounter between its protagonist Milly Theale and a Bronzino portrait said to resemble her, enacts what I call a mannerist theory of art premised on an insoluble ambiguity between the real and the symbolic—a theory that informs the structure of *The Wings* itself. The novel insistently foregrounds its artificiality as a means of gesturing toward and thereby fusing itself to the actual woman upon whose life and death it depends. I read *The Wings* as a kind of incantation or magical spell that seeks, through literary form, to connect itself to life—which can never be contained within a work of art but which can thereby be preserved, held aloft, *by means of* the form of the work of art. The work uses representational means to preserve or shelter an actual life; it goes beyond representation *through* representation. This is what I mean by its realism.

My account of Whitman in chapter 4 follows a related logic. Whitman writes what I call a poetry of judgment in which the poet is always implicated in his acts of vision; there is a vestige of self in even his seemingly most impersonal perceptions. And

so against a conventional image of Whitman's "bad universalism"—in which he runs roughshod over all difference, either absorbing the universe into himself or dispersing himself into the universe, which amount to the same thing—I read Whitman as creating a poetry surprisingly related to Kant's faculty of judgment, for which the pleasure we derive from our intimations of purpose or coherence (or, I argue, life) in the world is precisely the ground of our connectedness to the world. For Kant, in judging something to be "purposive," as having an unspecifiable but real quality of design, what we take pleasure in is precisely our *ability* to see pattern, form, meaningfulness in the world. It is thus the structure of our own minds that gives us pleasure; a structure we share with all of humanity. And so Kantian self-feeling, or Whitmanian self-delight, is paradoxically a way of recognizing or resonating with the world beyond the self. I draw out the figural and perspectival features of Whitman's poetry—its acts of judgment—at even its most prosaic in order to show how the imagination can ground us in a common world rather than detaching us from it. In opposition to an ethics for which realistic recognition of the world depends on self-abnegation and suppression of the imagination, Whitman's realism is *dependent* on imagination.²

"The Ontological Imagination" is an Americanist project, offering new readings of major figures in order to contribute to an understanding of nineteenth-century American ideas of the relation between thinking and being, and between the human and the nonhuman world. I show that an elusive conception of life—neither separable from

² For a paradigmatic anti-imagination ethics, see James Agee, who speaks in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* of the need to "suspend or destroy imagination" in order "to perceive simply the cruel radiance of what is": in his case the lives of impoverished Alabama sharecroppers during the Great Depression. James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941; repr., Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 9.

nor reducible to matter—is at the center of some of the era’s most ambitious searches for meaning and value, replacing traditional ideas of religion. I do not aim for anything like a comprehensive survey of the period’s thinking on this vast topic; rather, I give examples of the range and intensity of the ontological imagination through four case studies. In future work I hope to extend my account to include other writers. For instance, think of Emily Dickinson’s relentless, radical efforts to convey the *reality* of unnamable experiences through a poetry that refuses to produce phenomenal images with which that reality could be confused (e.g.: “I taste a liquor never brewed” (207); “I heard a Fly buzz – when I died” (591); “The Tint I cannot take – is Best” (696); “In many and reportless places” (1404).)³ Or think of Henry David Thoreau, who spent his life developing a practice of writing that could trace the shifting boundaries between mind and world, and who oscillated between a desire for self-abandonment in which he could apprehend “the language which all things and events speak without metaphor” and a penetrative conception of the “intellect [as] a cleaver; it discerns and rifts its way into the secret of things.”⁴ Between passivity and activity, Thoreau’s “elastic” imagination traces the “thin and undulating drapery” through which we make contact with the world: “That which had seemed a rigid wall of vast thickness unexpectedly proves a thin and undulating drapery. The boundaries of the actual are no more fixed and rigid than the elasticity of our imaginations.”⁵ Or think of Charles Chesnutt’s *Conjure Stories*, in which the

³ *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*, ed. R. W. Franklin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005). I cite the poems according to Franklin’s numbering.

⁴ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings*, ed. William Rossi, 3rd ed., Norton Critical Editions (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008), 78, 70.

⁵ *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen, Vol. 5: March 1853–November 1853 (1906; repr., Salt Lake City, UT: Peregrine Smith Books, 1984), 203 [May 31, 1853].

ontology of African American conjure—premised on metamorphoses between the human and nonhuman—is both borne out by the plots of the stories and used as a symbolic device to reveal the ways in which racial violence converts persons into things. In Dickinson, Thoreau, and Chesnut—to name just three further writers—ontology and imagination are not opposed. Imaginative writing allows a paradoxical means of access to something irreducibly real: being or life beyond any text.

I also intend “The Ontological Imagination” as an intervention into discussions of the current state of literary study. I provide an account of nineteenth-century American thought; but in so doing I rethink questions arising in the nineteenth century that are at the heart of current debates about the nature and value of literature, and, by extension, the purpose of literary study. I contend that the various strands that compose the discipline of literary study are united by a shared account of the ontology of the literary text despite their seemingly profound ideological differences. In the current atmosphere of “post-critique” there have been a variety of attempts to embrace the real, the material, the affective, the immediate, the world; a frustration with critique’s “paranoid” conception of all human products (including texts) as symptoms or epiphenomena of one or another form of power, the revelation of which had been critique’s central project.⁶ There has been a desire to overcome the unhappy consciousness or recursive spiral of textuality and access something real and shareable. Following theorists such as Gilles Deleuze and Bruno Latour, the latest forms of anti-Cartesianism want to dissolve the distinction between the real and the representational, and see texts as “actants” (Latour’s term) in the

⁶ “Paranoid” registers the affect that has been most commonly linked with critique, or theory generally, since Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s influential essay “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,” in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

world, as involved in networks of relation between persons and things on a single “plane of immanence” (Deleuze’s term). For this line of thinking, texts are real because they emerge out of a network of causes in the world, and they have real effects in the world; and in this regard they are ontologically equivalent to any other aspect of reality.⁷ Against the new realism’s monism there have been efforts to maintain the dualist distinction between the real world and the representational or imagined. For this line of thinking, it is more important to emphasize the difference between reality and representation than their relatedness. If we see a book as the infinite web of relations within which it exists, “book” no longer has any meaning. It is only a book in any meaningful sense if we legislate what is and is not part of it. There is a kind of hysteria in this position, a fear that words will lose their meaning, that nothing will be itself any longer, if the Latourians have their way; everything will be melted into a stew of relatedness.⁸

⁷ Think of the relations that are compressed into what we call a “book”: instead of the usual account of a book as ideas expressed in language—plot, characters, themes, perhaps some of the author’s psychology, perhaps some politics, etc.; all of the things a typical interpretation might include—on the Latourian account, to quote Henry James, “relations stop nowhere”: the influence of the food the author eats and how much sleep he gets; the impact of the editor on the published book; the conditions of the factory in which the book is printed; or the format of the digital technology by which the book is read; the advertisements interspersed with the text; the distractions or anxieties the reader experiences during the reading; the larger cultural ideas or lifestyle choices with which the book resonates or is aligned for a reader, and so forth, *ad infinitum*—any and all of these, for a strand of new realism, are just what a book *is*. The ontology of a book, its actual existence as a thing in the world, it is claimed, is falsified by the conventional “idealist” model that limits a book to its ideas.

⁸ I am obviously leaving out great complexity and diversity of thought for the sake of a generalizing contrast. For versions of the Latourian position, see Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010) and Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). For versions of the dualist or representationalist position, see Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004) and Ruth Leys, *The Ascent of Affect: Genealogy and Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), esp. 307-349.

I believe that both positions rely on a conventional opposition between the real and the representational that powerful literary texts—such as those I discuss in this dissertation—do not necessarily uphold. And so the theoretical intervention this dissertation makes is to propose an alternative conception of the literary in which literary texts are not *either* real (as in of one substance with everything else, and thus not primarily representational objects) *or* representations of a pre-existing reality that must be carefully distinguished from that reality. Rather: their representationalism just *is* their realism. Realism demands representationalism. The imaginative techniques of the texts I discuss are a necessary means of access to something beyond the merely textual. Textuality—the forms the imagination takes in realizing itself through writing—is precisely what links us (as thinking, which is to say, symbol-using animals, to invoke Kenneth Burke’s definition of man) with our world. Literature is real by being literature, not by being life. Attending to the literary imagination is a way of attending to the world, a way of being engaged in the world.

And so this dissertation gestures toward a new image of literary study. Instead of the value of literature residing primarily in its documentary function—as revealing historical, sociological or anthropological “data”—we might look to literary texts as models of how we might take imaginative *interest* in the world; how we might find persons and things worthy of passionate subjective involvement, attention, and care. Literary study might be directed not only toward knowledge but also toward intensifying the capacity for valuing that is at the heart of a truly human life.

CHAPTER ONE

EMERSON'S "DOCTRINE OF LIFE": EMBRYOGENESIS AND THE ONTOLOGY OF THE FRAGMENT

The common charge against Emerson is that he is a naïve optimist. He is not troubled by the bad in life because he simply ignores it. He is an idealist both metaphysically and morally: if mind or what Emerson calls the self—as in self-reliance—can triumph over matter, we can escape suffering. This chapter argues against this image of Emerson. I read him, instead, as attempting a radically original intellectual project: to discover a way of affirming life itself, simply because it exists. He believes that our highest task is to value the fact of existence, not in order to justify God's plan by overcoming the problem of evil, in the manner of a theodicy, but in order to live in the absence of God without despair or idealistic illusions. There are vestiges of Christian faith throughout Emerson's writings, but I argue that at his most original he does not appeal to a God but rather looks to material life for an understanding of who and what we are. Nor does he relocate Christian teleology to natural processes, imagining a benign or salvific nature. Rather, he worships fate or "beautiful necessity," like his disciple Nietzsche who will later aspire to *amor fati* or the love of fate.¹ Emerson believes that our

¹ Another word should be said here about Emerson's relation to Nietzsche, who understood his own central project to be an affirmation of life, and who is an important presence behind my thinking in this dissertation. Emerson's powerful influence on Nietzsche has by now been well documented and interpreted. Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen in *American Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012) discusses the powerful influence of Emerson, especially his essay "Fate" and *The Conduct of Life* generally, on the young Nietzsche's understanding of the relationship between will and necessity, which anticipates Nietzsche's later conception of the eternal recurrence as the love of fate or affirmation of life. For a careful exposition of this theme in Nietzsche, see Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006). Crucial for this chapter is the question of the status of suffering in Emerson's and Nietzsche's accounts of the affirmation of life. Mark

prospects are founded on nothing but life's unfolding toward an unknown future, and his essays are attempts to affirm this reality in the face of the uncertainty and suffering it necessitates.

According to an influential account, Emerson's career represents an intellectual struggle between freedom and fate: an effort to affirm human freedom against forms of limitation and finitude. For Stephen Whicher, Emerson's early confidence in freedom gradually darkens into a settlement with the "beautiful necessity": a synthesis of freedom and fate by means of a third term, power, through which one becomes able to will the necessary.² Emerson writes in "Fate": "He who sees through the design, presides over it, and must will that which must be."³ This will become the very formula of Nietzsche's affirmation of life. In contrast to this dualist Emerson desperate to preserve human freedom against fatalism by overcoming their opposition, Branka Arsić has recently portrayed Emerson as a monistic vitalist: for Arsić's Emerson there is no Manichaean struggle between dark and light but rather a single immanent principle of life that

Noble writes that Emerson's worship of fate is finally less compelling than Nietzsche's because Emerson fails to give full credence to suffering: Emerson writes as if the finite person can be overcome without suffering, whereas Nietzsche dramatizes the suffering involved in self-overcoming. See Mark Noble, *American Poetic Materialism From Whitman to Stevens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). Sharon Cameron had earlier made a similar argument that Emerson inadequately accounts for the suffering that would be involved in the access to impersonality his essays repeatedly stage. See Sharon Cameron, "The Way of Life By Abandonment: Emerson's Impersonal," in *Impersonality: Seven Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). In contrast to the accounts of Cameron and Noble, I argue in this chapter that "Experience" is Emerson's great reckoning with our all-too-human suffering.

² Stephen Whicher, *Freedom and Fate: An Inner Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953).

³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), 956. Hereafter cited in the body of the text.

manifests as ceaseless metamorphosis, a principle that gives rise to ethical, political and aesthetic practices of “leave-taking” that resist the reification of identity.⁴ In this chapter, I follow Arsić in characterizing Emerson as a vitalist. As I will argue is also the case with the other writers I discuss in this dissertation, Emerson’s conception of life is elusive: life is neither matter nor spirit but rather something harder to express in language—the activity of change itself. One could say life is that which is never itself. It is the principle of non-identity. As Emerson puts it in “The Method of Nature”: “total nature is growing like a field of maize in July; is becoming somewhat else.” (121)

In distinction from Arsić, however, I emphasize the anguish that this conception of life caused Emerson. If, as he came to believe, a single principle of generativeness simply *is* all we know on earth—and thus his transcendentalism is better understood as a vitalism—how is it possible to account for the parts of life that are resolutely opposed to life? How is it possible that death, destruction and loss are *immanent* to life, part of life’s very nature? If life contains its own opposite, what does it mean for it to still “be” life? How can we affirm life if that means affirming the destruction of everything we cherish? I argue that Emerson was deeply troubled by this consequence of his vitalism, and that life’s contradictoriness led to his most powerful thinking.

⁴ Branka Arsić, *On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010). It might be charged against Arsić that she leaves out the “fate” side of the equation in order to give a new account of Emerson’s freedom. Indeed, her account is built on readings of the younger “radical” Emerson and she rarely mentions the “moderate” Emerson of *The Conduct of Life*. In a spirit consistent with Emerson’s principle of “creative” (i.e., selective) reading, this may not trouble her. And yet I think that her monistic/vitalist reading of Emerson can be extended to account for both phases of his career if Emerson’s anguished attempts at synthesis—“fate” folded into “freedom,” death understood as part of life—are attended to. I attempt to do this in this chapter.

This chapter centers on a close reading of the essay “Experience” (1844) because that essay reveals, with extraordinary candor and imaginative richness, Emerson’s effort to work through the “hard problem” of vitalism: to come to terms with the fact that life requires death, *is* death; and more crucially, to do so as a person who, like everyone, will die. It makes all the difference that Emerson grapples with the problem not only, or not simply, as a philosopher, but also as a person who is implicated in, subject to, what he describes. As in Stanley Cavell’s lifelong account of skepticism,⁵ vitalism’s linkage of life and death is not a problem to be solved intellectually; it must be lived, and Emerson’s writing is a lived writing: not automatic or random but still subject to the blindnesses and blockages of everyday life. The drama of Emerson’s writing—conveyed with particular intensity in “Experience”—derives not only from Emerson’s intellectual power and mastery of prose but from the fact that in reading his essays we witness a person trying to make sense of life from within it rather than from a fantasized position of detachment and imperviousness. Emerson exposes his bewilderment to us. His effort to see obstruction and limitation as integral to life translates into a practice of writing in which the inconclusive, the dead end, the obscure formulation, are necessary to expression.

In section 1, I read the presentation in “Experience” of the problem of subjectivity in a new light: not, as it is often read, as an epistemological problem of doubt with reference to the world’s appearances, but as an *ontological* condition: the fact that life

⁵ The theme of skepticism as requiring a “lived” response recurs throughout Cavell’s career, beginning with his early essays such as “Knowing and Acknowledging” and “The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*” collected in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1969) and continuing in his major work *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), especially Part IV, “From Avoidance to Acknowledgment.” Particularly pertinent here are his essays on Emerson published in *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), to which I’ll refer in this chapter.

can somehow be alienated from itself. “Experience” might be called an existential phenomenology, a catalogue of ways in which we experience life’s self-alienation. In section 2, I claim that “Experience” discovers in the model of the developing embryo life’s “faith” in its own persistence—Emerson calls this “the universal impulse to believe”—which inspires him to formulate an ethics premised on tolerating one’s failures of self-knowledge. In section 3, I argue that by its refusal to resolve the ontological problem it has so vividly represented, “Experience” models a vitalist aesthetics in the deepest sense: Emerson’s essay, like the other works I discuss in this dissertation, wants to *be* life, wants to be understood *as* life, rather than to merely represent life (in the sense of being ontologically secondary to life). But this does not necessitate an abandonment of authorial intentionality, a “death of the author” into flows of affect:⁶ my portrayal of Emerson’s vitalism diverges from both the poststructuralist Emerson’s celebration of the instability of language and the posthumanist Emerson’s celebration of the impersonality of the person.⁷ I argue that Emerson at his most interesting is not so cheerful about the flux. In “Experience,” loss is too real and too terrifying for that. He knew that we live in a universe of death. And yet, what is most precious in Emerson’s thinking is his non-religious faith in life’s unfolding and in the fragile coherence of the person against the

⁶ I am conflating several generations of theory here, but I believe not without justice, because the common denominator of theory as a whole has been a consistent attempt to demonstrate the hidden forces that are said to actually control our lives, especially our “fantasies” of autonomy and intentionality. For history and critique of anti-intentionalism, see Ruth Leys, *The Ascent of Affect: Genealogy and Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017) and Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

⁷ Examples of these characterizations can be found in Branka Arsić and Cary Wolfe, eds., *The Other Emerson* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

odds.⁸ He understands this faith as a manifestation of a real material force in the world that holds things together, forming “momentary stays” or “ductile anchors” (to quote two Emersonians)⁹ against the constant peril¹⁰ of disintegration.

1. Ontology: Life Against Itself

At the beginning of “Experience,” we are plunged into the bewildering present moment:

Where do we find ourselves? In a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none. We wake and find ourselves on a stair; there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight. (471)

We find ourselves, then, at a loss. It is a moment of awakening into a lethargy indistinguishable from sleep. Alluding to the Greek myth in which, as a condition of being reincarnated, the dead must drink from the river Lethe in order to forget their previous lives, Emerson writes that our cup of lethe has been “mixed...too strongly, and we cannot shake off the lethargy now at noonday.” By lethargy he thus suggests a state of exhaustion or depletion that is also a forgetting of our past, of “the stairs below us, which

⁸ My understanding of “coherence” is indebted to Angus Fletcher’s account of Whitman’s poetry as committed to a principle of coherence which, in line with Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Kurt Gödel, refers to a quality of “completeness,” a loose hanging-together distinct from mechanical conformity, wholeness, or perfection. Angus Fletcher, *A New Theory for American Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

⁹ Robert Frost and Walt Whitman, respectively.

¹⁰ Note that “experience” shares a common root with “peril.” And both are related to “experiment.” Paul Grimstad, in *Experience and Experimental Writing: Literary Pragmatism from Emerson to the Jameses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) discusses Emerson’s “Experience” as an experiment. I emphasize its peril.

we seem to have ascended.” Lethe means “hidden” in Ancient Greek, and so as Heidegger discussed, the term for truth, *alethēia*, literally means “against hiddenness” or the overcoming of hiddenness, *a-lethēia*. Against the theory of truth as correspondence he attributed to Western metaphysics beginning with Plato, Heidegger attempted to recover the pre-Socratic conception of truth as the opening or “disclosure” of being as presence—understood as a literal overcoming of “lethargy” or an awakening.¹¹ Anticipating Heidegger, Emerson suggests by lethargy a half-sleep that represents a detachment from the source of our life.¹²

Inquiring into what he will call our “condition,” and alluding to pre-Socratic theories of life as composed of elements, Emerson asks:

Did our birth fall in some fit of indigence and frugality in nature, that she was so sparing of her fire and so liberal of her earth, that it appears to us that we lack the

¹¹ In his 1942-43 lectures on *Parmenides* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), Heidegger compares the Homeric and Platonic versions of the reincarnation story in order to claim that in Plato the primordial meaning of lethe as concealment or forgetting of being has itself been forgotten, replaced by a conception of truth as knowledge, technique, or representation rather than *a-lethēia* or disclosure of being. Awakeness as a longed-for openness to life that is somehow blocked by modernity is also a central trope throughout Thoreau and Nietzsche. Awakeness is perhaps the major ambition of *Walden*: “I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up.” Or: “I have never yet met a man who was quite awake. How could I have looked him in the face?” Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, Civil Disobedience and Other Writings*, 3rd ed., ed. William Rossi, Norton Critical Editions (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 5, 64. It is also the project of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra.

¹² Elsewhere, Emerson writes positively of this story as emblematic of the value of forgetting (another Emersonian theme Nietzsche absorbed): “The Genius of Life, you know, is said to give to every soul that enters this world, at birth, a cup of oblivion. I think it would add to the power & peace somewhat of these parties, if each guest... could forget all the particulars of yesterday & the day before, & all the expectations of tomorrow, & be driven to suck the deep life of the present hour.” Mar. 6, 1843 to Lidian Emerson. *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ralph Rusk, vol. 3, 1842-1847 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), 156.

affirmative principle, and though we have health and reason, yet we have no superfluity of spirit for new creation? (471)¹³

It is as though in coming into the world we were given life and deprived of it at the same time. We are alive, “we have health and reason,” and yet we are inert, we lack the “affirmative principle” that would allow us the “superfluity of spirit for new creation.” But if for Emerson the essence of life just *is* superfluity¹⁴—the overwhelming self-creative force he variously calls exaggeration (549), ecstasy (120), abandonment (414)—how is it that we are alive and yet lack aliveness? How can we be alive and yet at odds with life? Emerson here is introducing a paradox that, I’ll argue, is at the heart of the essay. He seems to suggest that life can somehow be turned against itself; that it contains a self-destructive impulse. This is a curious split in Emerson’s ontology, which posits a single force of life continuous with all things,¹⁵ rather than a struggle of life and death

¹³ By “fire” as the quickening principle of life he may have in mind Zoroaster, whom he mentions in this context (485) or Heraclitus (inspired by Zoroaster) for whom fire was the origin of life, and who argued that the nature of life is becoming. In this basic sense Emerson is a Heraclitean.

¹⁴ See Richard Poirier’s linguistic account of Emerson’s rhetoric of superfluity in “Superfluous Emerson,” in *Poetry and Pragmatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

¹⁵ There is a longstanding controversy as to whether he is best described as a transcendental idealist inspired by Kant via Coleridge (the traditional view) or a vitalist/pantheist more akin to Spinoza. The latter is persuasively argued by Branka Arsić in *On Leaving*. I believe that for Emerson there is a single force of creativeness—immanent to material life—called God, nature, the soul, or life, which is identical with natural processes of growth, and by extension informs all of Emerson’s ethical and political thinking. Emerson is profoundly anti-individualistic and does not attribute any independent power to mind (in fact, like a strain of mystical Christianity, such an attribution of individual power is the only sin). I argue that Emerson’s sometimes idealist-sounding *rhetoric*—in *Nature* of 1836, for example—paradoxically represents experiences in which mind in fact acquiesces to rather than controls or projects onto or vitalizes life. Individual power or genius (his terms) denotes the operation of life through us, a force that transcends the limited individual who is its mere vehicle. Freedom (or self-reliance) is paradoxically the ability to act in accordance with life, the capacity to obey by renouncing one’s willful resistance to life. I discuss these themes at length in this chapter.

forces in the manner of the Freud of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.¹⁶ And yet it raises the possibility that one could be alive and dead at the same time; or rather, that deadness is a part of life. Maybe what is distinctive about *human* life is that we can be alive while being detached from the source of our life.¹⁷ “Very little life in a lifetime,” Emerson once remarked.¹⁸ How are we to make sense of this paradox—that existence and aliveness are not the same—and how might we find the “affirmative principle” that we appear to lack, that would bring us fully into life?

To suggest that “Experience” is a search for life from within life is to go against the dominant reading of the essay as epistemological, an inquiry into what we can know of the world, which is suggested by Emerson’s own title and his emphasis in the essay on what he calls “subjectiveness,” our feeling of isolation from or lack of intimacy with the

¹⁶ Although as James I. Porter has argued, the death instinct in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* can be seen as ultimately subsumed within a single force of life—it is a part of life, not its antithesis—which leads Porter to classify Freud as a monist/vitalist alongside Lucretius, Spinoza, and Nietzsche. James I. Porter, “Love of Life: Lucretius to Freud,” in Shadi Bartsch and Thomas Bartscherer, eds., *Erotikon: Essays on Eros, Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 113-141.

¹⁷ Thoreau makes this point memorably in *Walden*: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.” (Thoreau, *Walden, Civil Disobedience and Other Writings*, 65.) In “Experience,” Emerson’s “essential facts” might be what he calls the “lords of life”: “Illusion, Temperament, Succession, Surface, Reality, Subjectiveness.” Rather than seeking a confrontation with them Emerson writes, “I dare not assume to give their order, but I name them as I find them in my way.” Another term for the distance between living and full aliveness is *alienation*, Marx’s term of the early manuscripts of 1844, exactly contemporary with the composition of “Experience.” Thoreau engages with the concept of alienation explicitly in the “Economy” chapter of *Walden* when he discusses being in debt as alienation. Stanley Cavell’s overarching term for alienation is *skepticism* in relation to other minds and the world, which his work (crucially through a series of essays on Emerson) enlarges from the epistemological to the existential register as a central problem of human life. In my reading, Emerson is interested in the relationship between what life is (ontology), and the ethical, or lived life. He often sees life as it is embodied in persons as, we might say, self-alienated.

¹⁸ Quoted in Barbara Packer, *Emerson’s Fall: A New Interpretation of the Major Essays* (New York: Continuum, 1982), 156.

world.¹⁹ In one poignant passage Emerson mentions the death two years earlier of his son Waldo, by way of suggesting that even the most devastating experiences cannot overcome the illusory quality of reality: he writes, “I grieve that grief can teach me nothing, nor carry me one step into real nature.” Waldo’s death has often been taken to be the essay’s unstated central topic, which it then develops into a general account of human experience as akin to the dislocating experiences of grief.²⁰ I don’t so much want to argue against this reading as to suggest that the dislocations of experience recorded in the essay are actually the surface effect of Emerson’s deeper concern, which is ontological. If life is a process of constant self-regeneration, there is something in us that seems *unregenerate*, and our isolation from the world is just how this underlying condition manifests itself to us. Emerson’s real inquiry is into the nature of life, and how it might be possible that the source of our life evades us even as we live.

The first sections of “Experience” are a phenomenology of our isolation from the world. While this isolation manifests itself in an epistemological register as doubt of the validity of our perceptions and as disaffection or numbness, I argue that what Emerson is representing is a perverse presence of death within life. Subjectivity, which Emerson also

¹⁹ To cite two influential readings: Stanley Cavell reads “Experience” as a work of ordinary language philosophy that would go beyond the Kantian settlement with the given world, an effort to defeat skepticism and bring the world nearer to the self. It is oriented epistemologically and linguistically and does not address an Emersonian ontology. Barbara Packer reads the essay as dealing with one of Emerson’s versions of the Fall of Man as the problem of “reflection”—related but not identical to Cavell’s skepticism. Stanley Cavell, “Finding as Founding: Taking Steps in Emerson’s ‘Experience’” in *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes*; Barbara Packer, “The Curse of Kehama” in *Emerson’s Fall*.

²⁰ Sharon Cameron’s essay on “Experience” is exemplary of this approach. She reads “Experience” as an elegy for Waldo’s death: it is the essay’s “first cause,” the “occasion that generates in a nontrivial way all other losses that succeed it.” Sharon Cameron, “Representing Grief: Emerson’s ‘Experience’” in *Impersonality: Seven Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 65.

calls personality or the individual, is our finitude, which separates us from the infinite becoming of life. “The individual is always mistaken,” he repeats twice in “Experience” (484); and our mistake is to “measure our individual forces against hers [nature’s]” instead of recognizing “the fathomless powers of gravity and chemistry, and over them, of life, preexisting within us in their highest form.” (“Nature,” 554) “Experience” is suffused with images of subjectivity as a kind of death. One of the essay’s rare mentions of physical death is that of Emerson’s son, but on my reading this functions primarily as an occasion by which his deeper conception of subjectivity-as-death can be accessed. “In the death of my son...I seem to have lost a beautiful estate,—no more...some thing which I fancied which I fancied was part of me...falls off from me, and leaves no scar. It was caducous.” The analogy is to a plant that sheds its leaves, the dead part of the organism falling away in order for the plant to continue its process of growth. This image of resilience suggests Emerson’s aliveness. And yet if to be alive according to Emerson is to be affected by life—indeed if “life is a train of moods,” which as Sharon Cameron has argued²¹ demonstrates the self’s openness to its outside—then the mood he attests to here seems a kind of anti-mood, an absence of affect that denotes deadness. (473)²² If life is the capacity to be affected, then Emerson here makes the radical suggestion that total disaffection can also be a part of life. He compares his numbness to the Indian chief “laid under a curse” of a life of total sensory deprivation: “the dearest events are summer-rain, and we the Para coats that shed every drop. Nothing is left us now but death.” (473) What

²¹ Cameron, “The Way of Life By Abandonment.”

²² In “Self-Reliance,” visionary access to impersonal life is associated with an absence of feeling: “when you have life in yourself” the soul is “raised over passion”... “Fear and hope are alike beneath it. There is somewhat low even in hope. In the hour of vision there is nothing that can be called gratitude, nor properly joy.” (271) In contrast, here Emerson’s absence of feeling is a sign of life’s paradoxical absence within life.

had seemed in the shedding of his dead son a sign of life seems in the parallel image of shedding raindrops a sign of death. Emerson's impermeability is a kind of living death; if "nothing is left us but death" it is questionable whether the intervening time would really count as life, or whether actual death would be redundant.

The perplexity that Emerson raises—between an identification of life with affection and the suggestion that radical disaffection is somehow contained within life—is dramatically original in the context of vitalist discourse of the late eighteenth- and early-nineteenth centuries, which Emerson knew well. The English physician John Brown's "excitability" theory of life, elaborated in his *Elements of Medicine* (1780) established a school of "Brunonian medicine" and provided a conceptual foundation and analogue for the Romantic science and philosophy with which Emerson was in dialogue, particularly the works of Goethe, Oken, Schelling, and Coleridge.²³ The core of Brown's theory is that life differs from death simply in that it is "excitable," that it "can be affected by external agents [such that] the phenomena peculiar to the living state can be produced."²⁴ The degree of health is based on the relationship between excitation, or external stimulus, and excitability, or the body's degree of responsiveness. Health consists of a balance of the two, and the cause of disease is their misalignment; Brown's medical techniques were attempts to realign inner and outer nature. What was new in Brown's theory, as opposed to competing theories such as Albrecht von Haller's theory

²³ Brown was also an associate of the brothers John and William Hunter, Scottish surgeons and anatomists, and with John Hunter's brother-in-law, disciple, and possible plagiarist Sir Everard Home—whom Emerson will later in "Experience" cite in reference to his theory of the embryo (see section 2 of this chapter).

²⁴ John Brown, *The Elements of Medicine, Vol. 1* (London: Johnson, 1795), 3. https://books.google.com/books?id=x2M_AAAAcAAJ.

of “irritation,” was that Brown posited an inner responsiveness that made living organisms essentially continuous with, not merely acted upon by, their environment. This was a conception of life as vital rather than inert or mechanistic. This vitalist continuum of internal and external stimuli provided a scientific basis for post-Kantian philosophy from Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* of the 1790s, premised on the pantheistic idea that human consciousness is nature “thinking itself,” to Coleridge’s *Theory of Life* (1816), itself inspired by a reading of the whole corpus of romantic vitalism.²⁵

Coleridge, though he finally rejected what he saw as the materialist consequences of Brown’s thought as incompatible with his own Christian perfectionism, engaged seriously with Brown’s ideas from 1800 through 1820, as Neil Vickers shows.²⁶ Writing in an 1810 notebook, he proposed introducing Brown’s conception of life as excitability as an aesthetic technique: “I wish I dared use the Brunonian phrase—& define poetry—the Art of representing Objects in relation to the *excitability* of the human mind.”²⁷ In his ode “Dejection” (1802) Coleridge describes a state of grief as the absence of excitability akin to Emerson’s “Experience”: “A grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear, / A stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief.”²⁸ In this “unimpassioned” or affectless state Coleridge experiences an “inanimate cold world” due to the absence of “my shaping spirit of imagination”: he gazes at the western sky “with how blank an eye” (a figure

²⁵ For background on romantic theories of irritability and excitation see Robert Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), esp. 313-325.

²⁶ On John Brown in relation to Coleridge and German philosophy, see Neil Vickers, “Coleridge, Thomas Beddoes, and Brunonian Medicine,” *European Romantic Review* 8, no. 1 (1997): 47-94.

²⁷ Quoted in Vickers, 79.

²⁸ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Major Works*, ed. H. J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 114.

Emerson draws on in *Nature* (1836) when he writes, “the ruin or the blank, that we see when we look at nature, is in our own eye” (47)) and concludes: “I may not hope from outward forms to win / The passion and the life, whose fountains are within.” In the Romantic idealist epistemology which I take Coleridge here (and some sentences of the Emerson of *Nature*) to represent, passion and life are internal and are projected onto an inert nature through the vitalizing or shaping power of imagination. In the classic account of the Romantic imagination in the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge describes the “secondary” or poetic imagination as “essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.”²⁹

By contrast, even by the time of the early *Nature*, generally read as his most unambiguously subjective-idealist work, Emerson generally refuses Coleridge’s conception of mind projected onto inert matter. *Nature* finally suggests a different relation between mind and nature: he remarks on the “wonderful congruity which subsists between man and the world...because he is its head and heart, and finds something of himself in every great and small thing, in every mountain stratum, in every new law of color [or] fact of astronomy”—a conception of mind as seeing itself in nature because it

²⁹ In Ch. XIII of the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge describes the imagination’s “esemplastic” or shaping power: “The Imagination then I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary Imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate: or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. *It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.* (My italics.) Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. W. J. Bate and James Engell (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 304.

is literally an expression of the same substance.³⁰ (47, 44) “Experience” is similarly anti-subjectivist: the disaffection it records, rather than a dearth of imagination, represents a literal force of death within life, not to be remedied by a mere perspectival shift.

If disaffection represents life’s opposition to itself, what Emerson calls temperament, our embodied being, also turns out perversely to be a threat or limit to the life in us. Emerson often figures temperament as the formal physical constraint of a kind of calcified shell or carapace that prevents an open, “living form” that can grow freely: in “Compensation” persons “imprisoned” in “dead circumstances” are contrasted to an exemplar of nature’s “law of growth,” the shellfish that “crawls out of its beautiful but stony case, because it no longer admits of its growth.” (301-302) In “Fate” Emerson writes of people “sheathed in their tough organization” in the way in which “the bill of the bird, the skull of the snake, determines tyrannically its limits.” (946) In “Experience” temperament is likened to “a prison of glass which we cannot see.”³¹ The essay is marked by images of persons as uncanny automata, suspended between life and death: “ghostlike we glide through nature,” Emerson writes. (471) In all of these characterizations of temperament, our physical being—which from a materialist perspective would seem to be

³⁰ In *Nature* Emerson uses the Coleridgean terms Reason/Understanding and Fichtean terms me/not-me, but these have encouraged a mischaracterization of the work’s metaphysics as subjective idealist. René Wellek observes Emerson’s outspoken enthusiasm for Schelling’s Spinoza-influenced monism or “identity philosophy” in “Emerson and German Philosophy” in Wellek, *Confrontations: Studies in the Intellectual and Literary Relations between Germany, England, and the United States During the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), 198-199. Paul Grimstad gives an alternate anti-Coleridgean reading of the essay as staging in its compositional practice a radical empiricism along the lines of William James or Gilles Deleuze. Grimstad, “Emerson’s Adjacencies” in Arsić and Wolfe, eds., *The Other Emerson*.

³¹ Temperament as a “prison of glass” also alludes to skepticism’s classic fear that the body is made of glass, unreal. See René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, First Meditation.

identical with our life—by its formal rigidity actually inhibits life. In “History” Emerson writes, “nothing is so fleeting as form; yet never does it quite deny itself” because “nature is a mutable cloud...always and never the same.” (242) Throughout Emerson life is seen as a constant “ecstasy” or overcoming of form; form is necessary if only to provide boundaries that are continually exceeded as organisms metamorphose. Too much formal rigidity can “solidify and hem in the life” and prevent receptivity. (“Circles,” 404) But hyper-receptivity can be equally dampening of life. Perhaps alluding to vitalist ideas of excitability, Emerson asks: of what use is the brain “if too irritable by pleasure or pain, so that life stagnates from too much reception?” (474) In contrast to Emerson’s inability to feel the death of his son, here it is as if the brain, by being temperamentally *too* sensitive, allows life to “stagnate.” So life can be averted by too much as by too little receptivity. Temperament is embodied life turned against itself.

Further, the predictability of temperament makes people seem dead: they initially “seem alive” but their animating “impulse” “turns out to be a certain uniform tune which the revolving barrel of the music-box must play” (474). What seems impulse—a key term in Emerson, as I will show, for life’s dynamism—turns out uncannily to be mechanism. But this vision of the deadness of others is, reciprocally, a symptom of our own deadness or “inanimateness”: “we animate what we can, and we see only what we animate.” (473) In contrast with the Coleridge of “Dejection” who celebrates the imagination’s primacy over inert nature, Emerson laments the subjectivism this entails as a lack of our continuity with a life that is already animate. While Emerson continues to be read as an idealist essentially compatible with Coleridge—who was, along with Carlyle, the major conduit by which the United States received the tenets of British and German romantic

theory—I am arguing that his thinking, especially after *Nature*, becomes profoundly anti-subjectivist.³² In “Experience,” in contrast to perhaps *the* central topos of romanticism, the experience of the deadness of the world is not an epistemological problem soluble by the redemptive power of imagination but rather a symptom of how embodied life can be turned against its own aliveness.³³

If it is a fact of life, temperament as embodiment is also a concept that can be cynically abused by those seeking power over others. It creates identity categories limiting of the vital, as yet unknown, parts of our selves. Ventriloquizing the racial pseudo-science of his day, Emerson writes: “given such an embryo, such a history must follow.” Later in “Experience” he will give a counter-image of the embryo, emblemizing how “the results of life are uncalculated and uncalculable”: in the embryo we observe the miraculous fact that organisms take shape even though “life has no memory” and “knows not its own tendency.” (483, 484) The belief that life is entirely determined, says Emerson, would make it not worth living. He calls the pseudo-scientists who propagate such beliefs “theoretic kidnappers and slave-drivers,” suggesting that they attempt to transmute a living thing into a mere object of use. The control of life through regimes of knowledge, as in Foucault’s concept of biopower, is for Emerson a destruction

³² A reading that continues the characterization of Emerson as a Coleridgean idealist, focusing on his figure of “transparency” as a mode of revisionary perception, is Lee Rust Brown’s *The Emerson Museum: Practical Romanticism and the Pursuit of the Whole* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), esp. 43-58.

³³ For the characterization of Romanticism as secularized Christianity, and its central belief in the power of imagination to redeem us from the deathliness of material life, see M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971); Harold Bloom, “The Internalization of Quest Romance,” and Geoffrey Hartman, “Romanticism and Anti-Self-Consciousness” in Harold Bloom, ed., *Romanticism and Consciousness* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970).

of a person's vitality.³⁴ Embodied life—through either the fact of temperament or its cynical abuse—can defeat life.

In addition to disaffection and the constraint of embodiment we are, as it were, spatially and temporally out of synch with life. We are constantly missing life, or oblique to it or sliding away from it: “all our blows glance, all our hits are accidents.” (473) In unfavorably comparing our lives to others, in time wasted preparing to live and remembering our past, the present moment escapes us (472). Even our longing for “anchorage” in the present, for permanence, is thwarted by life's lightning speed, what Emerson calls the “onward trick of nature” that is “too strong for us” and makes our experience a vertigo. (476) In order to stop the blur of the world we would need to be constantly leaving where we are in order to align inward and outward nature.³⁵ But in “Experience” Emerson finds “no power of expansion in men.” (477) He compares man to “a bit of Labrador spar,” a lusterless stone with “deep and beautiful colors” visible only at one angle, suggesting that at best we have a single power or talent mixed in with our banality. “The mastery of successful men” is in their adroitness in “turning” their angle of talent, in making it visible and converting it into power. (477) And yet Emerson concludes, “life is not worth the taking, to do tricks in,” which is all our use of our limited powers amounts to. In comparison with the unstoppable “onward trick of nature” our own tricks seem “pitiful.” Emerson laments our incapacity of rapid becoming, which is the state of life.

³⁴ On biopower see Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (1978; repr., New York: Vintage, 1990), esp. 133-159.

³⁵ Branka Arsić's *On Leaving* demonstrates the centrality of leave-taking as an ontological and ethical principle across Emerson's oeuvre.

In one of his great images, in “Compensation” Emerson discusses the “natural history of calamity” by which an organism grows by progressive shocks or “revolutions” to its being: “In proportion to the vigor of the individual, these revolutions are frequent, until in some happier mind they are incessant, and all worldly relations hang very loosely about him, becoming, as it were, a transparent fluid membrane through which the living form is seen.” (301)³⁶ Emerson imagines “some happier mind” that can tolerate incessant revolution (or “circling,” to use another of his major tropes), in which all inhibitions to growth have been overcome and the constraint of temperament has been shed for a total openness in which the “living form” has free movement. But in our present “lapsed estate...growth comes by shocks” rather than by constant expansion. (302) As he puts it later in “Experience”: “the mind goes antagonizing on, and never prospers but by fits. We thrive by casualties.” (483) Or in “Self-Reliance” he praises “the rugged battle of fate, where strength is born.” (275) Or in “Compensation,” again, in an idea Nietzsche would later appropriate: “Every evil to which we do not succumb is a benefactor.” (298) Human life resists the rapid becoming of life and encounters power only occasionally and obliquely.

In a major tonal shift in “Experience,” Emerson proposes what initially looks like a therapy for the living death of subjectivity. In a new voice rejecting what has come

³⁶ Transparency is a major trope in Emerson for impersonality, beginning with the “transparent eye-ball” image in *Nature*, which anticipates our failure of transparency toward the end of that book: “The ruin or the blank, that we see when we look at nature, is in our own eye. The axis of vision is not coincident with the axis of things, and so they appear not transparent but opaque.” (47) The opacity of objects is caused by our own failure of vision. In “Spiritual Laws,” Emerson writes of the man who has made “daylight shine through him,” who is no longer heterogeneous but rather “at one” with life. (321) Transparency is the ability to be penetrated by light without obstruction. It is a oneness between being and doing, perception and action, subject and object. For an alternate conception of transparency that prioritizes the self, see Brown, *Emerson Museum*.

before—“But what help from these fineries or pedantries? What help from thought? Life is not dialectics”—Emerson now encourages an acceptance of the present moment, an inhabiting of “the middle range of our being...the temperate zone.” (480) Our problem is what he calls *criticism*: a hyper-self-consciousness that separates us from life and our own being, denies the given world as illusory, and cannot transform ideas into action.³⁷ Against the thwarted desire to penetrate illusion into the reality of life—like that of the grieving Emerson, cut off from life, who wants to penetrate the “scene-painting and counterfeit” of “slippery sliding surfaces” to the “sharp peaks and edges of truth”—he now counsels: “we live amid surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well on them” (472, 478).³⁸ Instead of yearning for a life that escapes us we must make peace with wherever we find ourselves: “to finish the moment, to find the journey’s end in every step of the road, to live the greatest number of good hours, is wisdom.” (479)³⁹ This

³⁷ The conception of a hyper-reflectiveness that inhibits action by making representation itself into a problem is a central romantic trope, passed most prominently into American thought via Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* and his essay “Characteristics” of the 1830s. See Geoffrey Hartman’s “Romanticism and Anti-Self-Consciousness” in Bloom, ed., *Romanticism and Consciousness*, and Barbara Packer on the influence of Carlyle’s essay on American thought in *The Transcendentalists* (1995; repr., Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 32-36. Emerson’s criticism of “criticism” pertains to what he calls the “noblest theory of life” at the transcendentalist Education-Farm that could never convert itself into actual work, or the empty political promise that ends like a “Western road” in a squirrel track running up a tree. (478)

³⁸ For a reading that finds political value in resistance to the actual as pleasure in mere appearance, see Rei Terada’s *Looking Away* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), which reads Coleridge, among others, as a “phenomenophile” who deliberately cultivated optical illusions (understood as a queer form of perception) against the normative pressure (differently expressed by Kant and Nietzsche) to accept the given world against the consoling fantasy of a Christian afterlife. Perhaps Terada downplays the connection between Coleridge’s resistance to the given world and his Christian desire to transcend it.

³⁹ Cf. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) and *The Present Alone is Our Happiness: Conversations with Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009)

acceptance of the present seems radical advice: unlike “the fine young people” who “despise life” Emerson is “thankful for small mercies...I accept the clangor and jangle of contrary tendencies” (479, 480). He does not allow life’s incoherence to unsettle him.

And yet this vision comes to look like a contradiction of a central aspect of the Emersonian ethos.⁴⁰ Against one of the great proclamations of “Circles”—“people wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them”—in the “mid-world” mood Emerson writes: “so many things are unsettled which it is of the first importance to settle.” (413, 481) And so on my reading the seductive “mid-world” is finally an evasion of, rather than a solution to, the problems of life he has earlier enumerated. It represents an asceticism that diminishes experience, constraining life to “a

on the Stoic idea (memorably articulated by Marcus Aurelius) of living as if every moment was one’s last. Emerson was deeply informed by Stoicism and Epicureanism.

⁴⁰ Emerson is well known for his contradictions. In “Nominalist and Realist” he writes: “We must reconcile the contradictions as we can, but their discord and their concord introduce wild absurdities into our thinking and speech. No sentence will hold the whole truth, and the only way in which we can be just, is by giving ourselves the lie.” (585) George Kateb in *Emerson and Self-Reliance* (1995; repr., Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002) gives a powerful account of this love of contradictoriness as a performance of “impersonation”: “what is involved in Emerson’s joyous science is something less like seeing all sides of a disputed issue, and more like admiring all sides in an unstoppable struggle...he may theorize harmonization, but fortunately, does not practice it.” (9) This is a textual enactment of self-reliance or “democratic individuality” as the refusal of the merely personal perspective. Kateb reads Emerson back through his disciple Nietzsche as a practitioner of perspectivism despite being committed (as was Nietzsche) to the central value of self-reliance. I do think, however, that some moods are more fundamentally Emersonian than others, such as the commitment to mobility and unsettlement against the mid-world encouragement to settle. Perhaps we could say that the former is more conducive to self-reliance (thereby agreeing with Kateb)—although the later Emerson famously gives more credence to limitation than the earlier radical Emerson. (On this conception of the later Emerson see Stephen Whicher, *Freedom and Fate*.)

narrow belt,” a line of “a hair’s breadth” that man must walk, which seems life-denying (480, 482).⁴¹

The “mid-world” vision of life depends on a “mixture of power and form, and will not bear the least excess of either” (478).⁴² Human life must be hemmed in, limited, balanced. And yet as I have suggested, throughout Emerson, life is what resists balance—it is excessive, uncontainable, constantly breaking form: it is “the quick cause, before which all forms flee as the driven snows,” as he wonderfully puts it in “Nature” (546). Or in “Circles” he discusses how the cultural forms we have created “solidify and hem in the life. But if the soul is quick and strong, it bursts over the boundary on all sides, and expands another orbit on the great deep.” (404) Indeed, in “Experience” the promise of the “mid-world” is undermined by Emerson’s discovery that life unsettles achieved balances of power and form: “power keeps quite another road than the turnpikes of choice and will, namely, the subterranean and invisible tunnels and channels of life” (482). Everything that we achieve in life comes unbidden, by surprise surges of power. “Man lives by pulses; our organic movements are such...and the mind goes antagonizing on, and never prospers but by fits.” (483) Against our fantasies of control, life is reactive and fitful. And so life’s inner logic, at least from the viewpoint of our subjectivity, is

⁴¹ “Experience” might be interestingly related to Hegel’s “Stoicism, Skepticism, and the Unhappy Consciousness” in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, that extraordinary catalogue of moods or relations to otherness. “Experience” in the “mid-world” section tests out and rejects Stoicism. Emerson though implicitly rejects Hegel’s dialectical method with its structure of progress by negation. This is another sense of the Emersonian “affirmation” I am discussing. On this section of the *Phenomenology*, see Judith Butler, “Stubborn Attachment, Bodily Subjection: Re-Reading Hegel on the Unhappy Consciousness” in *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

⁴² This need for a balance of power and form is more heavily emphasized in the later essays in *The Conduct of Life* than in early essays which emphasize life as the breaking of form like “Method of Nature,” “Circles,” “Nature” (*Essays 2*)—although early essays like “Spiritual Laws,” “Compensation,” and “The Over-Soul” suggest the need to obey “spiritual” lawfulness even if life itself is without telos, always expanding beyond its current form.

unknowable. “The results of life are uncalculated and uncalculable. The years teach much which the days never know...the individual is always mistaken” (483-484) Is this account of life’s incalculability final? Are we to affirm the secret operation of life within us, or is there a more intimate relation to life that we can attain?

2. Ethics: “The Universal Impulse to Believe”

About two-thirds of the way through “Experience,” Emerson turns from the problem of subjective isolation from life and presents a powerful image of what life is in itself and how it might inform our own lives:

The miracle of life which will not be expounded, but will remain a miracle, introduces a new element. In the growth of the embryo, Sir Everard Home, I think, noticed that the evolution was not from one central point, but co-active from three or more points. Life has no memory. That which proceeds in succession might be remembered, but that which is coexistent, or ejaculated from a deeper cause, as yet far from being conscious, knows not its own tendency. So it is with us, now skeptical, or without unity, because immersed in forms and effects all seeming to be of equal yet hostile value, and now religious, whilst in the reception of spiritual law. Bear with these distractions, with this coetaneous growth of the parts: they will one day be *members*, and obey one will. On that one will, on that secret cause, they nail our attention and hope. Life is hereby melted into an expectation or a religion. (484)⁴³

⁴³ In *The Rites of Assent*, Sacvan Bercovitch discusses an 1842 journal entry, contemporaneous with “Experience,” that displays a closely homologous structure to this passage. There, Emerson images a future ideal America that, while partaking of the energies of existing socialist movements, would be “spiritual and not actualized,” in which “the Uniters are absolutely isolated.” In this ideal union if each man is willing to “go alone” and refuse “joining himself to others” ultimately “to the astonishment of all” each man will do “the work of a true *member*”: this would represent “actual individualism, actual union.” Emerson, quoted in Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 311. For Bercovitch this suggests the ideology of Jacksonian individualism “containing” Emerson’s subversive dissenting energy through a “dream vision of laissez-faire.” (312) Both passages involve images of initial

What is the “miracle of life” that so captivates Emerson? In referring to the Edinburgh surgeon and anatomist Sir Everard Home, Emerson may have in mind an 1816 article of Home’s on the development of the tadpole which he had read in 1832.⁴⁴ In the third volume of his *Lectures on Comparative Anatomy* (1823) Home credited himself with the discovery of the fertilized human ovum, in a dissection of a servant-maid who died shortly after being impregnated by an officer.⁴⁵ But in Emerson’s mention of the “co-active” growth of the embryo from several points he seems to refer to the vitalist theory of epigenesis associated with Caspar Friedrich Wolff and possibly even to the confirmation of the theory in the 1827 discovery of the “germ layer” model of embryo growth by Karl Ernst von Baer.⁴⁶ Previously theories of spontaneous generation and preformation—variants of which had been in circulation from the time of Pythagoras through the eighteenth century—had claimed that the embryo forms either out of a

absolute (self-reliant) isolation and future “membership” of parts due to the silent action of natural laws. Against Bercovitch, a political reading of “membership” might derive from Emerson’s vitalism rather than his individualism. The embryo’s “co-active” growth suggests a non-teleological image of society against the usual perfectionist/conservative connotations of the concept of organicism. I do not have space to pursue this reading here.

⁴⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, vol. VIII, 1841-1843, ed. William Gilman, et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1970) suggests (at 351n7) that Emerson is referring to Home’s paper “On the formation of fat in the intestine of the tadpole, and on the use of the yolk in the formation of the embryo in the egg,” *Philosophical Transactions* (1816), II, 301-311.

⁴⁵ Sir Everard Home, *Lectures on Comparative Anatomy*, vol. 3 (London: Longman, Hurst, 1823), Lecture 10, “On Generation” 285-310, (see esp. 288-295 for the episode of Home’s discovery of the fertilized ovum, in which Home self-dramatizingly writes, “I cried out—‘We have got it.’” (290)). In *Lectures*, vol. 5 (1828), 317-324, Home discourses “On Changes the Ovum of the Frog Undergoes” but does not touch on Emerson’s concept of “co-active growth,” which sounds much more like Wollffian epigenesis.

⁴⁶ The discovery of the “germ layer” proved that organ development in the embryo occurred simultaneously in three layers of tissue: what would later be called endoderm, mesoderm and ectoderm.

nonliving medium like earth or by the mere enlargement of something already in existence (a homunculus or “little person” transferred via the sperm). William Harvey’s doctrine of 1651 *ex ova omne vivum* (“every living thing from an egg”) definitively rejected spontaneous generation and preformationism. Around 1760, Wolff’s epigenesis asserted that organisms generate differentiated parts out of undifferentiated, unperformed embryo cells by the action of a *vis essentialis* or “essential force.” Perhaps the central obsession of Romantic science, literature and philosophy was what Emerson calls the “miracle of life” or the nature of generation and formation (*Bildung*). The preoccupying question was: how, in the absence of divine creation, could living beings have emerged in the first place? Without a divine intelligence, how could collections of parts come together as living organisms greater than the sum of their parts?⁴⁷ How was the wonder of self-generating (or autopoietic) life even thinkable in secular terms?⁴⁸

What is essential is that Emerson, like the epigenesists, rejects the determinist theory of preformation and is awed that a single organism could form by independent

⁴⁷ For a crucial source for Romantic thought on the question of the relation of parts and wholes and self-generation/autopoiesis, see Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* §65; and for the influence of the *Critique of Judgment* on subsequent German idealist thinking on generation see Eckart Förster, *The Twenty-Five Years of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012). Coleridge’s idea of “polarity” or antagonism between parts and wholes as the driving force of the perfectionism of forms is also a key source. “Polarity” is a key concept for Emerson, perhaps via Coleridge’s *Aids to Reflection*. Emerson speaks of man as a “stupendous antagonism, a dragging together of the poles of the universe” in “Fate” (953). On Coleridge and Emerson, see Laura Dassow Walls, *Emerson’s Life in Science: The Culture of Truth* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 133-134.

⁴⁸ Emerson refers throughout his writings to a whole climate of speculation and variety of models of the life force meant to explain generation: Blumenbach and Kant on the *Bildungstrieb*, Goethe’s metamorphosis of plants, Lorenz Oken’s archetype or protoplasm out of which all life is formed, Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie*, which was inspired by John Brown’s “excitability” theory of life against Haller’s “irritability” theory, among others. For background on the climate of the life sciences circa 1800 see Robert Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*.

nodes of generation, what he calls “co-active growth.” But while Emerson, like his contemporaries, posits a “cause” or life force, his radical suggestion is that “life has no memory” and thus “knows not its tendency.” This non-teleological conception of growth is the opposite of the scientific determinism Emerson mocks earlier in the essay that would claim the ability to predict an individual’s future “history” from its embryo. What matters to him is that life somehow progresses on multiple fronts in a state of dissociation from itself, in a constant present tense. Life’s most natural state—what makes it so miraculous—is its persistence without knowing itself, its cause “as yet far from being conscious.” Somehow, despite its unconsciousness of its own tendency, Emerson imagines a future “membership” of the parts: “they will one day be *members*, and obey one will.”

But it is crucial to note that this conception of membership as obedience to the “one will” or immanent cause is *not* teleological in the way in which Kant in the *Critique of Judgment*—the origin point for Romantic nature philosophy—describes organisms as “natural ends,” unthinkable as products of blind mechanism and so necessitating at least a heuristic notion of teleology. I argue in what follows that Emerson’s radical originality lies in his rejection of both teleology *and* mechanism.⁴⁹ He claims that there are no ends

⁴⁹ Although, as Michel Chaouli observes, Kant’s teleology is a “teleology without theology, a *natural* teleology”—which may be another way of describing Emerson’s project, though I argue that Emerson, more radically than Kant, leaves behind a notion of teleology. Michel Chaouli, *Thinking with Kant’s Critique of Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 216. Chaouli also describes Kantian autopoiesis or self-organization as “a description of the organized body without recourse to a formative drive (or force or power), without recourse even to the idea of an end.” (224) Whether or not Kant does in fact do this, I think it provides a good gloss of Emerson’s embryo. I discuss Kant’s ideas on teleology and purpose in chapter 4.

Emerson also anticipates Henri Bergson’s idea of creative evolution: for Vladimir Jankélévitch, Bergson’s *élan vital* “only designates a certain direction [*allure*] of evolution, always harmonious, never predestined. In this way, the vital thrust is determined just enough

in nature: “we can point nowhere to anything final; but tendency appears on all hands: planet, system, constellation, total nature is growing like a field of maize in July; is becoming somewhat else; is in rapid metamorphosis.” (“Method of Nature” 121) He is concerned above all *not* with life as an achieved unity of ends, as a creation or what Spinoza called *natura naturata*, but with Spinoza’s “*natura naturans*, the quick cause,” an underlying unity of process or tendency without end, for Emerson the incessant production of the new. (“Nature” 546)

Two of Emerson’s intellectual affinities of the later 1840s—J. W. von Goethe and Lorenz Oken—will help to clarify his earlier intuition in “Experience” of a mode of causality neither mechanistic nor teleological. Emerson had long admired Goethe as his model of the empirical natural scientist, referring to him in in *Representative Men* as a “philosopher of this multiplicity; hundred-handed, Argus-eyed, able and happy to cope with this rolling miscellany of facts and sciences, and, by his own versatility, to dispose of them with ease” who demonstrated “the last lesson of modern science, that the highest simplicity of structure is produced, not by few elements, but by the highest complexity.” (751, 761) And he was moved by Goethe’s conception of morphology: “the leading idea of modern botany...that every part of the plant is only a transformed leaf to meet a new condition; and by varying the conditions, a leaf may be converted into any other organ, and any other organ into a leaf. In like manner, in osteology, he assumed that one

not to progress randomly, without cause and without direction.” Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Henri Bergson* [originally published 1931, revised 1959], ed. Alexandre Lefebvre and Nils F. Schott (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 112.

vertebra of the spine might be considered the unity of the skeleton: the head was only the uppermost vertebra transformed.” (753)

Emerson’s high esteem for Goethe was only qualified by his sense that Goethe’s worldliness—“this man was entirely at home and happy in his century and the world”—and his ultimate “aim of culture” kept him from the highest intellectual pursuit. “The idea of absolute, eternal truth, without reference to my own enlargement by it, is higher [than culture]. The surrender to the torrent of poetic inspiration is higher.” (760) Here Emerson demonstrates his resistance to the Goethean idea of self-culture or *Bildung* as the perfection of man, with which his own conception of self-reliance is so often equated. “If man himself be considered as the end” of nature, Emerson writes, “and it be assumed that the final cause of the world is to make holy or wise or beautiful men, we see that it has not succeeded.” (“Method of Nature” 120) Emerson’s anti-perfectionism was radical.

In the work of Lorenz Oken, a German speculative physiologist and founder with Schelling of post-Kantian *Naturphilosophie*, Emerson found a conception of anti-perfectionist metamorphosis that harmonized with his own. In 1849 Emerson read and made extensive notes on the hundred-page commentary on Oken in the German émigré philosopher John Bernhard Stallo’s *General Principles of the Philosophy of Nature* (1848), which also discussed Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. Oken’s own *Elements of Physiophilosophy* had been translated in England in 1847. The metamorphic principle of osteology that Emerson attributes to Goethe was in fact originally an observation of Oken’s that, as Robert Richards argues, Goethe unintentionally stole and popularized.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Robert Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, 501.

Oken's basic principle was that parts of an organism generate all the others through transformations of a basic archetype or "vesicle." Oken wrote:

A vesicle becomes calcified, and that is a vertebra. A vesicle becomes elongated into a tube, becomes articulated, calcified, and you have a spine. The tube produces (according to laws) dead-end side branches, they become calcified, and you have the skeletal trunk. This skeleton is repeated at both poles, each pole repeating itself in the other, and you have head and pelvis. The skeleton is only a fully grown, articulated, repetitive vertebra, and the vertebra is the preformed germ [Keim] of the skeleton. The entire human being is only a vertebra.⁵¹

In 1849, Bronson Alcott read Oken's *Elements of Physiophilosophy* and wrote in his journal of an "illumination" of the universe as "one vast spinal column" after which, as René Wellek writes, "all his following speculations on Genesis and the meaning of nature seem to be full of Oken's ideas and terminology."⁵² In the same year, Emerson was inspired by Oken's cosmic vision of the transformations of vertebrae. In a journal entry inspired by his reading of Stallo on Oken, Emerson called these transformations "rhymes":

The iterations or rhymes of nature are already an idea or principle of science, & a guide. The sun & star reflect themselves all over the world in the form of flowers & fruits & in the human head & the doctrine of series which takes up again the few functions & modes & repeats them with new & wondrous result on a higher plane. What rhymes are these which Oken or Agassiz show, in making the head only a new man on the shoulders of the old, the spine doubled over & putting out once more its hands & feet, the upper jaw being the hands, the lower jaw the feet; & the teeth being fingers & toes respectively. This too leads on the anatomist to the anatomy of the Understanding, which is the material body of the mind, whilst Reason is its soul; and the law of Generation is constant, & repeats on the higher plane of intellect every fact in the animal...

Then, as I have written before, Astronomy is not yet astronomy, until it is applied to human life; & all our things are to be thus exalted or echoed & reechoed in finer & higher rhymes.⁵³

⁵¹ Quoted in Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, 495.

⁵² René Wellek, "The Minor Transcendentalists and German Philosophy" [1943], in *Confrontations*, 167.

⁵³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals*, vol. XI [1849], (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 153.

Emerson extracted an expressionist, Spinozistic conception of life from Oken's *Naturphilosophie*, via Stallo's evocative exposition and quotations. He valued the wild image of nature as a series of homologies extending from the most basic organisms to the highest ideas of consciousness.⁵⁴ In it he found a Goethean morphology extended beyond natural organisms into a conception of a living or "vibrant" universe. In his journal he noted Oken's pantheistic observations in Stallo that "the whole bird is a respiratory organ" and "the bird is an animal of song in full organization: in it nature attains to a complete hearing & speaking." He also liked Stallo's wonderful (and Emersonian) description of matter as "an uninterrupted flight from itself, a never-terminating whirl of evanescence." One thinks of Emerson's *natura naturans* in the 1844 "Nature," from which "all forms flee as the driven snows." (546) And he noted Oken's deeply anti-Christian, proto-evolutionary insight that "animals are but foetal forms of man."⁵⁵ Late in life, in "Poetry and Imagination" (1872), Emerson would refer to

The electric word pronounced by John Hunter a hundred years ago,—arrested and progressive development,—indicating the way upward from the invisible protoplasm to the highest organisms,—gave the poetic key to Natural Science,—of which the theories of Geoffroy St. Hilaire, of Oken, of Goethe, of Agassiz, and Owen, and Darwin, in zoology and botany, are the fruits,—a hint whose power is not yet exhausted, showing unity and perfect order in physics.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ This is close to what William James valued in Gustav Fechner, as I discuss in chapter 2.

⁵⁵ Emerson's quotations from Oken and Stallo are in Emerson, *Journals*, vol. XI [1849], 200.

⁵⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Poetry and Imagination," in *Letters and Social Aims* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Co., 1876), 12. Emerson was shown John Hunter's Hunterian Museum in London by its curator Richard Owen in 1848. (In 1833 he had visited William Hunter's Hunterian Museum in Glasgow.)

Hunter's "electric word" was his galvanizing concept of an evolutionary force in nature from "protoplasm" (Oken's vesicle) to the most complex organisms. For Emerson, this was a "poetic" concept of the physical world as a single interrelated system.

Emerson's essay "Fate" was composed during the time of his first reading of Stallo on Oken and contains an important mention of Oken's primordial vesicle. The vesicle is here a synecdoche of life's "miraculous capability" set against limiting "circumstance" or nature: "a vesicle in new circumstances, a vesicle lodged in darkness, Oken thought, became animal; in light, a plant. Lodged in the parent animal, it suffers changes, which end in unsheathing miraculous capability in the unaltered vesicle, and it unlocks itself to fish, bird, or quadruped, head and foot, eye and claw." (949) Here the latent "miraculous capability" of the vesicle is "unsheathed" and "unlocked" into a multiplicity of functions based on its context.⁵⁷

To return to "Experience," the embryo's ontology, the unconscious "co-active" tendency of "total nature" which it represents, provides the model for human life. "So it is with us," Emerson writes: our own growth happens in a state of self-dissociation, the parts of our being—conflicting moods he calls skepticism and religiousness—only rarely in communication. "Our moods do not believe in each other," he writes in "Circles," referring to our unsettling (and sometimes exhilarating) incoherence to ourselves. (406) To be skeptical is to be "without unity" because one's attention is divided by competing options without a clear sense of what is more or less valuable, to be sliding in the illusory

⁵⁷ In "Fate," against the vesicle's unlimited vitality, "nature" stands as a limiting force. As in the early sections of "Experience," in "Fate" there is a paradoxical dualism in which, despite Emerson's monist vitalism ("once we thought, positive power was all") life and nature are bizarrely not identical but opposed to each other ("now we learn, that negative power, or circumstance, is half"). (949) There is, again, a perverse split within life.

world of surfaces. By religious Emerson does not mean institutional Christianity but rather what William James calls “religious experience”: moments of illumination that Emerson calls in “The Over-Soul” reverence or ravishment. (392)⁵⁸ To “bear with these distractions” is to be able to tolerate our incoherence to ourselves as a condition of growth, without imagining ourselves to be prisoners of temperament or of the variability of our moods. Emerson’s image of life—the embryo with no memory and no knowledge of its own tendency, unconscious of its cause—now looks surprisingly similar to the opening image of “Experience,” in which, finding ourselves in the present, we have forgotten our origin and have no connection to a future. But now the earlier image of our lethargy and painful dissociation from life—of the presence of death in life—has been transformed into “the miracle of life.” Not to know one’s origin or future, to persist in an ongoing present, is simply what it is to be alive.

The crucial difference between the two images of life is that in the second one Emerson introduces a language of religious feeling, of hope, of “bearing with” life’s incoherence, and derives this attitude from what life just is *in itself*. Emerson counsels us to learn how to live from what life is in itself. The embryo represents what we are in our most primordial and rapid state of growth; the closest we ever come to the source of life. If we can tolerate our “distractions” and the “coetaneous growth of the parts” of our lives, and with “attention and hope” imagine their membership in a single ongoing tendency, “life is hereby melted into an expectation or a religion.” Life is “melted” out of the

⁵⁸ Sharon Cameron’s “The Way of Life By Abandonment” details states of ecstasy, abandonment, and ravishment in Emerson that are related to what he means by the religious. I argue, however, that the deeper sense of the religious for Emerson is a faith or patience that describes life’s continuance *between* shocks of ecstasy, as opposed to Cameron’s idea of his ecstatic impersonality.

solidity of fixed moments into a continuous view of the prospective. Rather than a series of endings like the Stoic “mid-world” vision which would value the present moment by “finding the journey’s end in every step of the road,” here life as ongoing process becomes an object of faith. (479)

How do we gain access to this faith in life as ongoing? In an astonishing passage Emerson details an experience of illumination in the midst of everyday life. He gives the examples of conversation “with a profound mind” or of solitary thinking or reading (perhaps we could add writing) in which one gains inspiring hints in which “I am at first apprised of my vicinity to a new and excellent region of life.” In persisting in these experiences a new “region of thought” increasingly reveals itself through “flashes of light” and “sudden discoveries of its profound beauty and repose.” Here “every insight...is felt as initial, and promises a sequel.” It is a process of increasingly deepening insight. Finally Emerson experiences a climactic vision that is an opening onto life itself:

I clap my hands in infantine joy and amazement, before the first opening to me of this august magnificence, old with the love and homage of innumerable ages, young with the life of life, the sunbright Mecca of the desert. And what a future it opens! I feel a new heart beating with the love of the new beauty. I am ready to die out of nature, and be born again into this new yet unapproachable America I have found in the West. (484-485)

What I think this climactic moment of “Experience” represents is an experience of rebirth into life through an everyday experience of receptivity.⁵⁹ In releasing himself into his ordinary activities of conversing, reading and thinking Emerson attains not the

⁵⁹ See “Intellect” in which Emerson puts forward a theory of thinking as largely unconscious. “Our thinking is a pious reception. Our truth of thought is therefore vitiated as much by too violent direction given by our will, as by too great negligence. We do not determine what we will think. We only open our senses, clear away, as we can, all obstruction from the fact, and suffer the intellect to see. We have little control over our thoughts.” (418-419) See Branka Arsić, “Brain Walks” in *On Leaving* on the basic impersonality of Emersonian thinking.

Romantic “egotistical sublime” with its privileging of human powers of mind but rather a reunion with the “life of life” by which I take him to mean life’s innermost essence, what it is without us.⁶⁰ As if he has become the developing embryo that represents “the miracle of life” Emerson claps his hands “in infantine joy and amazement”; he feels “a new heart beating” and is ready to “die out of nature and be born again.” This new birth into life is an alternative to the isolated subjectivity that represents life turned against itself. His readiness to “die out of nature” (by which I think he means be born *into* nature) is a death that would quicken rather than suppress life, a desire for an ecstatic impersonality that would return the isolated individual to life. We arrive at such vision through absorption in the everyday, wherever we find ourselves.

And yet what, for Emerson, is life in itself? He has called it the “secret cause” that drives the growth of the embryo, and has represented an experience of visionary union with life. But can we get any nearer to its essence? The “baffled intellect” searches for a way of capturing “this unbounded substance...which refuses to be named.” Cycling through a series of “emphatic symbol[s]” by which ancient thinkers attempted to represent life—“Thales by water, Anaximenes by air, Anaxagoras by (*Novç*) thought, Zoroaster by fire, Jesus and the moderns by love” and Mencius by “vast-flowing

⁶⁰ On the romantic sublime see Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1976); Cynthia Chase, “Introduction,” in Chase, ed., *Romanticism* (New York: Longman, 1993). The phrase “egotistical sublime” is Keats’s, in reference to Wordsworth. In a letter to Richard Woodhouse (Oct. 27, 1818), Keats says that against the “wordsworthian [sic] or egotistical sublime” his sort of poet “has no identity” and is pressed upon to the point of “annihilation” by the world of fixed objects and persons. John Keats, *The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 418-419. Emerson’s experiences of transport (as well as Thoreau’s, Melville’s, Dickinson’s, and Whitman’s) are in this sense Keatsean and anti-Wordsworthian (though without Keats’s Coleridgean reification of the “not-me”) in that they do not return one to the self but are in fact de-personalizing. To become a “transparent eyeball” in Emerson—to take the *locus classicus* of Emersonian vision—is to become “nothing” and to come into “occult relation” with the vegetable (10-11).

vigor”—Emerson rejects a determinate symbol for life or object of faith and says rather that what matters is “not what we believe concerning the immortality of the soul, or the like, but *the universal impulse to believe*, that is the material circumstance, and is the principal fact in the history of the globe” (486). The religious, then, does not describe the content of belief but simply the fact of belief, or what Emerson calls the “impulse” to believe.

Like instinct or involuntary perception, impulse (or pulse) is a key term in Emerson’s lexicon for vital force, the unwilld action of life through bodies. Earlier in “Experience” Emerson had written against our fantasies of control: “Nature hates calculators; her methods are saltatory and *impulsive*. Man lives by *pulses*; our organic movements are such.” (483, italics mine) And in “Circles,” he writes of the action of life breaking the constraints of cultural forms: “the heart refuses to be imprisoned; in its first and narrowest *pulses*, it already tends outward with a vast force, and to immense and innumerable expansions.” (404-405, italics mine)

Impulse is also a predicate in “Nature” (*Essays 2*) of the dynamism of nature, the “quick cause, before which all forms flee as the driven snows,” the *natura naturans* of “exaggeration” and “excess.”⁶¹ As the “quick cause,” impulse is pulse, the movement of blood that simply *is* aliveness. Impulse is a natural force, like the gravity by which planets orbit around the sun: “given the planet, it is still necessary to add the impulse,”

⁶¹ Emerson writes in “Nature” (*Essays 2*): “Exaggeration is in the course of things. Nature sends no creature, no man into the world, without adding a small excess of his proper quality...without this violence of direction, which men and women have, without spice of bigot and fanatic, no excitement, no efficiency. We aim above the mark, to hit the mark. Every act hath some falsehood of exaggeration in it.” (549) This is also reminiscent of Thoreau’s praise at the end of *Walden* of “extravagance” and the desire to “speak somewhere without bounds” in a language that would somehow exceed the “inadequacy of the residual statement.”

nature's "little violence of direction" that moves life forward. (549) Drawing on the new electromagnetism of Michael Faraday,⁶² a frequent reference in Emerson's work, impulse is also figured throughout "Nature" in terms of the galvanizing force of electricity: "Without electricity the air would rot." (553)⁶³ In general it is a force of mobility and dispersal whose counterforce is "Rest or Identity." (554)

So "the universal impulse to believe," which Emerson calls "the *material* circumstance, and...the principal fact in the history of the globe"—the earth itself—Emerson suggests an impulse akin to his understanding of electricity or gravitation. This is not a willed stance of belief but is the "material" force that impels us in everything we do. There is a logical circularity here: if impulse is a predicate of life, then the impulse to believe in life is in fact *the operation of life itself*. Life is both the subject and object of belief. Life might be said to believe in itself, and not exclusively through persons, suggesting a kind of sentience in nature, a panpsychism. Continuing self-generation is a manifestation of self-belief. This "belief" is the same life-impulse that causes dissociated co-active growth of multiple parts of an organism. What Emerson calls the "miracle of life," then, just *is* the physical manifestation of life's belief in its own persistence. I want

⁶² Mark Noble argues that Emerson enthusiastically used Faraday's paradigm of electromagnetism as a "technology" underwriting his impersonal, materialist account of the person, but that this impersonality also allowed him to bypass the fact of personal suffering—a critique Sharon Cameron had powerfully made in her account of Emerson's impersonality as lacking an adequate account of the person who is "ravished" by the impersonal. By contrast with Cameron and Noble, Branka Arsić argues that for Emerson personhood is always already impersonal. Noble, *American Poetic Materialism*, 81-109; Cameron, "The Way of Life By Abandonment"; Arsić, *On Leaving*.

⁶³ This suggests that air is flesh, in keeping with a vitalist materialism of the day. Robert Hunt, whose *The Poetry of Science* (1848) was read by Thoreau, writes that dust "quickens with yet undiscovered energies; it moves with life: dust is stirred by the mysterious excitement of vital force; and blood and bone, nerve and muscle, are the results." Quoted in Branka Arsić, *Bird Relics: Grief and Vitalism in Thoreau*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 118-119.

to suggest, then, that the “universal impulse to believe” is the closest Emerson comes in “Experience” to a definition of life.⁶⁴

The human attitude of belief, which Emerson calls throughout his works the moral sentiment or the religious, thus describes our very aliveness, the impulse of life within us. It is the force that defeats stasis and death. To be alive for Emerson is to have a basic physiological attachment to further life—call it belief or faith—that allows us to renounce knowing the future: like the embryo of multiple origin, it is the ability to endure one’s self-incoherence without turning against the life process.

An affirmative faith in life deriving from life’s own attitude toward itself is a necessary component of spontaneous action, of the emergence of the impersonal within us, which Emerson’s writings seek to encourage. Let me cite a few examples of this encouragement: in “Circles” Emerson writes of our “insatiable desire...to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our propriety, to lose our sempiternal memory, and to do something without knowing how or why.” (414) In “Spiritual Laws,” Emerson writes: “a

⁶⁴ With his central idea of “Self-Reliance,” too, I’d argue that what Emerson ultimately means is life’s reliance on itself: like belief, self-reliance turns out to be an ontological principle before it is an ethical one. Indeed, halfway through that essay he doubles back on his human-centered argument and writes: “Nature suffers nothing to remain in her kingdoms which cannot help itself. The genesis and maturation of a planet, its poise and orbit, the bended tree recovering itself from the strong wind, the vital resources of every animal and vegetable, are demonstrations of the self-sufficing, and therefore self-relying soul.” (272) In “Nature” (*Essays 2*), Emerson writes, “all over the wide fields of earth grows the Prunella or self-heal,” a rapidly growing herb often used medicinally, whose name also suggests nature’s capacity for self-recovery. (554) So self-reliance refers to what life is in itself, its capacity of self-sufficiency or “self-heal.” Self-reliance understood as a human power of will—most commonly thought to be the topic of the essay—is thus only a behavioral manifestation of the essay’s deeper topic, which is life’s capacity for unceasing regeneration out of itself without an external cause. (Emerson’s God is simply his divinization of life’s own principle of self-generation; there is no divine plan or telos external to it. Life itself—he frequently uses the synonymous term God—is Emerson’s object of worship. I think recognizing Emerson’s faith as a material force arising from his vitalism solves the problem of “religiousness” that so vexes George Kateb in *Emerson and Self-Reliance*, esp. 61-95.)

believing love will relieve us of a vast load of care.” (309) In “The Over-Soul” Emerson urges us to “forego all low curiosity, and, accepting the tide of being which floats us into the secret of nature, work and live, work and live, and all unawares the advancing soul has built and forged for itself a new condition...” (394) In “Self-Reliance,” self-trust or submission to one’s nature will allow the authentic consistency of one’s actions to express itself over time: Emerson gives the examples of an “Alexandrian stanza” read forward or backward which spells the same thing, and the “voyage of the best ship [which] is a zigzag line of a hundred tacks” which, seen from a distance, “straightens to the average tendency.” (266) Throughout his writings Emerson urges us to renounce explanation, to allow our words and acts to speak for themselves. This is perhaps the central teaching of “Spiritual Laws”: “The thing uttered in words is not therefore affirmed. It must affirm itself, or no forms of logic or of oath can give it evidence. The sentence must also contain its own apology for being spoken.” (316) To explain would be to insist that the initial act or statement is not self-sufficient, could somehow be rectified, made whole, by an act of will. It is an attempt to live life over again; a hatred of life’s onwardness.

Belief would renounce our efforts to possess life, our attempts to settle and achieve what Freud called the organic quiescence of death.⁶⁵ In “The Method of Nature” or in “Circles,” the ecstatic “abandonment” of genius is that it overflows like nature, “the

⁶⁵ This is an interesting contrast to Thoreau’s (tongue-in-cheek) effort to wrestle life into a corner early in *Walden*. Although by contrast Thoreau also desires to be rended by the “cimiter” of fact. Thoreau’s relationship to life in *Walden* has a sadomasochistic element (perhaps related to the anxious or “wretched” affect many of the book’s readers (from Emerson to Stanley Cavell and Walter Benn Michaels) have noted or, following Sharon Cameron’s *Writing Nature: Thoreau’s Journal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), to Thoreau’s agony at having to falsify his sense of his Journal’s authenticity by making the private public).

smoothness of the pitch of the cataract.” (“Method” 119) But in most people such quickness is rare: in our inhibited state, “growth comes by shocks”; “we thrive by casualties.” (302, 483) The impulse to believe is how life holds itself together in the intervals between shocks of growth. Amidst the overwhelming incoherence of life, belief is the reparative force that imagines life as a single process in the face of the sundering of objects from each other. It is the faith that life’s contingencies are necessary, not arbitrary, and this *feeling* of necessity, and acquiescence to it, is what makes living possible.

3. Aesthetics: “A New Picture of Life”

Near the climax of “Experience,” Emerson gives an intimation of a new form of thought that may provide us with the “affirmative principle” we had seemed to lack at the essay’s beginning:

In liberated moments, we know that a new picture of life and duty is already possible; the elements already exist in many minds around you, of a doctrine of life which shall transcend any written record we have. The new statement will comprise the skepticisms, as well as the faiths of society, and out of unbeliefs a creed shall be formed. For, skepticisms are not gratuitous or lawless, but are limitations of the affirmative statement, and the new philosophy must take them in, and make affirmations outside of them, just as much as it must include the oldest beliefs. (486-487)

What is this new form of thought—picture, doctrine, statement, creed, and philosophy, are his terms for it—that Emerson imagines, that would embrace skepticism and faith in a wider affirmation beyond “any written record we have”?

I want to argue (against Emerson's modesty) that an Emersonian essay, especially "Experience" *itself*, constitutes an approximation of such a form of thought. "Experience" proposes the "universal impulse to believe" as life's essential faith in itself, which is pictured in the miraculous developing embryo and extends into an ethics of "bearing with" the incoherence of our lives as a faith in the ongoing tendency of life within us. But the essay goes further. The power of "Experience" derives from the fact that it enacts on the level of form, in its material textual unfolding, its central ontological and ethical principle of faith in the face of self-dissociation. The principle of faith at the heart of the growth of the organism could inform our own way of life; and, powerfully, "Experience" is not simply the assertion of this principle but Emerson's own *living* of his principle of faith in life. An essay is—since at least Montaigne—the genre of writing that most directly emerges out of a life; it is a fragment, an "attempt"; it is the genre that locates us, wherever "we find ourselves"—its force derives from its provisionality and partiality, its immanence to life.⁶⁶ Emerson admiringly writes of Montaigne's essays: "Cut these words, and they would bleed; they are vascular and alive." (700) But Emerson—dramatically in "Experience," but also elsewhere—goes further than Montaigne in radicalizing the essay's relation to life. The great innovation of the Emersonian essay is that it is not merely a record of life but is formally and materially *of* life, is itself a living thing.

⁶⁶ See Theodor W. Adorno's exemplification of the essay's basic provisionality and fragmentariness in his "The Essay as Form," in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991). It is unfortunate that Adorno never engaged seriously with Emerson.

The “coetaneous growth of the parts” of the living organism as the figure of life’s faith in itself, as persistence without memory, is thus the essay’s aesthetic principle. At the start of the essay’s coda Emerson recounts where we have been:

Illusion, Temperament, Succession, Surface, Surprise, Reality, Subjectiveness,—these are threads on the loom of time, these are the lords of life. I dare not assume to give their order, but I name them as I find them in my way. I know better than to claim any completeness for my picture. I am a fragment, and this is a fragment of me. (490-491)

Each of these topics loosely corresponds to one of the essay’s sections. Each section is a fragment of the essay; the essay itself is a fragment of Emerson, himself a fragment—but of what? The answer is clearly life itself. This fragmentariness is a source of pain early in the essay: to the child who asks his mother why he has lost interest in his bedtime story Emerson ruefully replies, “Because thou wert born to a whole, and this story is a particular.” (477) But the essay has transformed the question of the relation of parts to wholes—the unrecoverable lack in our being, call it the Fall of Man, which produces unending melancholy—to an awareness of the immanence of parts to an ongoing tendency without end. The “glue” that holds the parts together is the faith that the whole contributes something to life, is itself a living thing. Perhaps each section of “Experience” can be thought of as a “member,” like the parts of the developing embryo, as a participant in a constellation, a perspective meant to create a series of resonances rather than a final synthesis. Certainly Emerson’s process of building up an essay, by grouping fragments of text from his journals in sections interspersed with new writing, is analogous to a simultaneous growth of multiple origin, and demonstrates an acceptance of life as process.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ On Emerson’s process of composition from journals, see Paul Grimstad, *Experience and Experimental Writing*.

When Emerson writes, “I am a fragment, and this is a fragment of me” I think he means it literally. Emerson has been received as a great master of tropes, as a proto-Derridean thinker who delights in “the accidenty and fugacity of the symbol” and the originator of what Harold Bloom called “strong misreading” as a tactic of originality.⁶⁸ (“The Poet” 456) But this is itself a misreading of Emerson’s essential criterion for powerful language (whether his own writing, that of the writers he admires, or delivered oratory): that it be a living medium, literally a vehicle of life. When in the “Divinity School Address” he accuses institutional Christianity of having mistaken Jesus’s rhetoric of miracles for its truth—“But the word Miracle, as pronounced by Christian churches, gives a false impression; it is Monster. It is not one with the blowing clover and the falling rain”—he is sounding his characteristic note in rejecting mere rhetoric, or language unmoored from its objects, for a language that is alive. The great image in the same essay of the preacher who was “merely spectral” in contrast to the “real” snowstorm falling outside, because he failed in his obligation to “convert life into truth” is to the same point. What Emerson wants in language is life, not a play of signifiers.

It could be said that by a “conversion” of life into truth Emerson is describing the action of metaphor as producing the *effect* of aliveness by means of the energy of

⁶⁸ For a celebration of Emerson’s energy of troping and “linguistic skepticism” see Richard Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature* (New York: Random House, 1987). A similar though anti-pragmatist understanding of Emersonian “linguistic skepticism” is Stanley Cavell’s, programmatically in “What’s the Use of Calling Emerson a Pragmatist?” in *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes*. See Paul Grimstad’s introduction to *Experience and Experimental Writing* on the underlying similarity (and assimilability, asserts Grimstad) of these conceptions of Emerson. Harold Bloom reads Emerson as a writer of a “daemonic” energy which is essentially a linguistic phenomenon akin to that of Poirier and Cavell. These powerful readings all ignore Emerson’s vitalist *ontology*. They are “textualist” readings (in Richard Rorty’s phrase), attributing a kind of linguistic skepticism to Emerson in the manner of the young Nietzsche of “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense,” a text crucial to postmodernism. Whereas I see Emerson as concerned with the truly living force that is immanent to writing: writing as *alive* not metaphorically but literally.

linguistic ingenuity. Certainly Emerson is a lover of metaphor and denounces literalism as the fetishizing of received usages. But I argue that what Emerson values in metaphorical language is, perhaps paradoxically, the literal presence of life, the action of a living person in the act of making meaning. In “Art” he values works for being “signs of power...tokens of the everlasting effort to produce” rather than for their achieved form, the actual words or images of which they are composed. (437) What the spectral preacher lacks are not better words, per se, but words that convey his aliveness. “Through every clause and part of speech of a right book, I meet the eyes of the most determined of men: his force and terror inundate every word: the commas and dashes are alive.” (“Goethe” 757)⁶⁹

In “The Poet” Emerson imagines a new poetry that would be not a representation but a literal expression of life. Against the long history of poetic forms as *a priori* containers for a poet’s content he proposes a radical new formal principle: “it is not metres, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem,—a thought so passionate and alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has an architecture of its own, and

⁶⁹ I argue that Emerson’s aesthetics avoids the “ontological bad faith” that Paul de Man in “The Rhetoric of Temporality”—a classic instance of deconstructive skepticism which might stand in for Theory generally—attributes to Coleridgean and New Critical organic form. Emerson does not perpetrate the naturalistic fallacy that sign and referent could be transparently continuous. In fact he is less concerned with the question of signification and more with the fact that a text emerges out of a life, is literally a product of a life, and is in this sense ontologically continuous with it. In a Deleuzian sense, text and life are immanent to each other. A text is not symbolically but literally alive for Emerson. What matters to Emerson is the text’s materiality: it is a “token” or emblem of production. In this way he is in fact de Manian in the manner of “Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant.” What de Man calls “history” there—the “materiality of the signifier” voided of any signifying function—is akin to what Emerson calls “life” in writing. Paul de Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983); “Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant,” in *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

adorns nature with a new thing.” (450) The strong poem is self-generating like life itself; it is a literal addition to life, a new organism equivalent to a plant or animal.

The essay famously calls poets “liberating gods,” heroic namers of the world, who revitalize perception. But like all of Emerson’s figures of great men—almost exclusively writers and thinkers—their heroism consists in the extent of their ability to cancel their mere individuality. The great man is greatest “when he can abolish himself,” he writes in “Uses of Great Men.” (625) Poets are nothing in themselves but are rather efficient vehicles for nature’s ecstatic flourishing. The poet’s “expression is not art, but a second nature, grown out of the first, as a leaf out of a tree. What we call nature, is a certain self-regulated motion, or change; and nature does all things by her own hands, and does not leave another to baptize her, but baptizes herself.” (457) To speak of the poet’s “expression” as “not art, but a second nature” rejects the idea of personal expressiveness and uses the term expression in Spinoza’s sense of substance (God or Nature) expressing itself through life forms. This Spinozist conception of expressionism was influential to the German *Naturphilosophie* of Schelling and Oken that Emerson absorbed via Stallo in 1849. In a journal entry composed during that reading, Emerson quotes Stallo: “Whatever exists, exists only in virtue of the life of which it is the expression” and “The configurations of nature are more than a symbol, they are the gesticular expression of nature’s inner life.”⁷⁰ For Emerson, the true poet is merely nature’s vehicle; perhaps his unique capacity is the great extent to which he can acquiesce to nature so that it can express itself through him. The poet, like every “intellectual man” realizes he is

capable of a new energy (as of an intellect doubled on itself), by abandonment to the nature of things; that, beside his privacy of power as an individual man, there

⁷⁰ Emerson, *Journals*, vol. XI (1849), 200.

is a great public power, on which he can draw, by unlocking, at all risks, his human doors, and suffering the ethereal tides to roll and circulate through him...the poet knows that he speaks adequately, then, only when he speaks somewhat wildly, or, 'with the flower of the mind'; not with the intellect, used as an organ, but with the intellect released from all service, and suffered to take its direction from its celestial life. (459)

The poet has a wildness—wildness, the very refusal of conceptual adequacy, turns out to be the only “adequate” means of conveying nature—born by suffering nature to flow through him “at all risks.” The risk would seem to be the annihilation of the person, a passive openness that could destroy any formal integrity of the self and create total dissociation or dispersion like the image in “The Poet” of the profusion of spores that are nature’s way of insuring its survival. (457)

“Experience,” positioned directly after “The Poet” in *Essays, Second Series*, perhaps as a counterpoint to its exuberance, imagines a natural writing emerging from a subtler form of abandonment to the nature of things. Unlike “The Method of Nature,” “Circles,” or “The Poet,” which seem to *perform* their conception of writing as the immediate expression of nature—in “Method” the speech of genius is breathlessly described as “like a river...sheds wisdom like perfume...is itself a mutation of the thing it describes. It is sun and moon and wave and fire in music”—“Experience” seems mainly to lack such a sense of enactive form. (129) The basically unitary structure of those essays, rather than the discontinuous or successive structure of “Experience,” gives them the effect of a parallelism with the unitary force of life—pictured most vividly in Emerson’s figure of endlessly widening circles, which the sentences and paragraphs of “Circles” enact. The power of “Experience” is in the *lack* of an immediate correlation between its writing and the life it describes. It embodies a living writing that is premised less on immediate inspiration—figured as a paratactic accumulation of sentences that

both describe and enact the pulses of nature-as-intuition—than on slow and manifold growth, on a losing and finding and losing again of life. It is crucial to note that after the climactic discovery of life as the “universal impulse to believe,” which I have been calling life’s faith in itself, Emerson turns to perhaps his darkest account of isolated subjectivity. He asks despairingly: “How long before our masquerade will end its noise of tamborines, laughter, and shouting, and we shall find it was a solitary performance?” (489) The problem of subjectivity has not been solved. The essay does not end triumphantly; consistent with all of its images of life, its form is resolutely anti-teleological. The principle of life, once intimated, does not create a lasting illumination that would falsify this very conception of life as sheer faith in persistence in the absence of illumination.

If the ambiguous coda of “Experience” leaves us with any final “message” it is that one should renounce the very need for a message, “that hankering after an overt or practical effect” which “seems to me an apostasy.” (491) The anxious need for an “overt or practical effect”—a resolution to the problems the essay raises, or suggestions for conduct—is an “apostasy” in the sense that it demonstrates a lack of faith. “Let who will ask, where is the fruit? I find a private fruit sufficient. This is a fruit,—that I should not ask for a rash effect from meditations, counsels, and the hiving of truths.” (491) In this reference to a fruit Emerson offers yet another image of his conception of life as anti-teleological. Against the common perception of a fruit as the triumphant end of a seed’s (an embryo’s) development—the outcome or payoff, a ripeness that represents the end of its life—Emerson contrasts his “private fruit” which is not a visible effect but rather precisely the ability to persist without needing a “rash effect” from his “hiving of truths”

(hiving in the sense of collecting or accumulating perspectives as “Experience” could be said to do). This “private fruit” is the conception of the fruit as simultaneously an end and a beginning, a dispersal of seeds that will create subsequent fruit, further provisional insights. The “private fruit” is the growth of an inward ability to abjure finality, to renounce the need for a completed organism or completed self, which is equivalent to death; it is a faith in the persistence of life that breaks the boundaries of individual life forms, and moves the self beyond itself.

“Experience” finally provides an alternative image of Emerson’s vitalist conception of the impersonality of human life in the long intervals in which growth does *not* come “by shocks,” when we do not “thrive by casualties.” It is an image of thriving not by ecstasy but by patience. In contrast to the anarchic exuberance equated with life in an essay like “Circles” that rages against the rigidity of “old age,” “Experience” proposes the ability to wait, to be and not always do. “All I know is reception; I am and I have: but I do not get, and when I have fancied I had gotten anything, I found I did not.” (491) Against the failed clutching at objects early in the essay that represents “the most unhandsome part of our condition” Emerson now renounces “manipular attempts to realize the world of thought.” (492)⁷¹ This is perhaps also a dismissal of his earlier self of “Nature” in which his Orphic Poet proclaims that one must “Build, therefore, your own world” by means of nature’s dissolvability or pliability to the mind. (48) (“I am not the novice I was fourteen, nor yet seven years ago,” he now writes.) Instead of action what

⁷¹ Stanley Cavell has noted Emerson’s pun on hands and linked the essay’s image of clutching with Heidegger’s concept of grasping in *What is Called Thinking?*: both figures “emblemize their interpretation of Western conceptualizing as a kind of sublimized violence.” Stanley Cavell, “Aversive Thinking: Emersonian Representations in Heidegger and Nietzsche” in *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes*, 147.

matters are the moments of insight that allow for what Emerson calls self-recovery. In these moments of “sanity and revelations” we are given a faith that “the true romance which the world exists to realize, will be the transformation of genius into practical power,” as the essay concludes. (492) It is an image not of triumphant self-realization but rather of life as a process of transformation from the latent into the manifest, a continual bringing into being, which is the essay’s central topic.

CHAPTER TWO

“CONCRETE IMAGINATION”: WILLIAM JAMES’S POST-CRITICAL THINKING

You take utterances of mine written at different dates, for different audiences belonging to different universes of discourse, and string them together as the abstract elements of a total philosophy which you then show to be inwardly incoherent. This is splendid philology, but is it live criticism of anyone's *Weltanschauung*? Your use of the method only strengthens the impression I have got from reading criticisms of my "pragmatic" account of "truth," that the whole Ph.D. industry of building up an author's meaning out of separate texts leads nowhere, unless you have first grasped his center of vision, by an act of imagination. That, it seems to me, you lack in my case.

—William James, comment on a Ph.D. thesis on his work (1900)¹

My aim in this chapter is to give an account of what I call William James’s vitalism.

This may seem at first an incongruous designation for James’s thought, suggesting a “monistic idealism” (2:649-667) opposed to his espoused pragmatism and pluralism, indeed anathema to the drift of his life’s work: he hated philosophy’s “vicious abstractionism” (2:951; 2:657) that would reduce the “the teeming and dramatic richness of the concrete world” (1:509) into conceptual unities, and he described his radical empiricism as “a turbid, muddled, gothic sort of an affair, without a sweeping outline and

¹ *The Letters of William James*, ed. Henry James, vol. 2 (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920). [May 26, 1900] See his essay “The Ph.D. Octopus” (1903) against the fetishizing of the Ph.D. degree by American universities as the *sine qua non* of academic respectability: “to interfere with the free development of talent, to obstruct the natural play of supply and demand in the teaching profession, to foster academic snobbery by the *prestige* of certain privileged institutions, to transfer accredited value from essential manhood to an outward badge, to blight hopes and promote invidious sentiments, to divert the attention of aspiring youth from direct dealings with truth to the passing of examinations,—such consequences, if they exist, ought surely to be regarded as drawbacks to the system.” Duly noted. William James, *Writings*, 2 vols. (New York: Library of America, 1987-1992), 2:1114. Hereafter cited in the body of the text.

with little pictorial nobility” (2:650), a “mosaic philosophy”² in which “the pieces [cling] together by their edges, the transitions experienced between them forming their cement” without grounding in a unifying substance or essence. (2:1180) And yet, as I want to show, *life* is the conceptual through-line that connects his miscellaneous investigations. While it necessarily resists distinct conceptual formulation,³ the quest for vitality more adequately conveys the spirit of James’s undertaking than the disciplines (psychology, ethics, metaphysics, and so on) within and across which he worked. It also allows for a merging of the opposing conceptual personae in his work: the heroic subject of bootstrapping self-mastery and the dispersive, “relaxed,” non-willful self (1:840); the tough and the tender-minded (2:605); the easy-going and the strenuous mood (1:615); the healthy-minded and the sick-souled (2:152); the desirers of philosophical “intimacy” and “foreignness,” (2:640) “atonement” and “opacity” (1:524)—all of which jostle for priority in his thinking.

Reading James as a philosopher of life brings disparate strands of his thinking into a new configuration: rather than viewing his career as a series of attempts to solve pre-established technical problems, I attempt to follow James’s direction that “a philosophy is

² I want to display his remarkable and precious emphasis on how things—somehow, against all odds—hang together; a fragile cohesion/coherence against the radical dispersal of everything as in the materialist vision of atoms in the void. Cf. Emerson’s chain of moods like glass beads on the iron string of temperament, in “Experience,” for another image of *a posteriori* integration (473); but for Emerson, this is an “irresistible dictation,” a form of Fate.

³ Note James’s praise in “The Stream of Consciousness” in *Principles of Psychology* of a conceptual “reinstatement of the vague” not opposed to but enabling of precision: “It is, the reader will see, the reinstatement of the vague and inarticulate to its proper place in our mental life which I am so anxious to press on the attention.” James, *Writings*, vol. 1, 164. Keeping concepts provisional and flexible allows them to maintain intimacy with changing phenomena. See Richard Poirier, “The Reinstatement of the Vague,” in *Poetry and Pragmatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

the expression of a man's intimate character" and philosophical systems, "under all the technical verbiage in which the ingenious intellect of man envelops them, are just so many visions, modes of feeling the whole push, and seeing the whole drift of life, forced on one by one's total character and experience, and on the whole *preferred*—there is no other truthful word—as one's best working attitude." (2:639)⁴ In what follows, I attempt a Jamesian reading of James: I hope to convey his sense of the "drift of life," to satisfy his demand, as quoted in my epigraph, that a reader "grasp" the author's "center of vision, by an act of imagination." Here imagination is not mere fancy (its colloquial, positivist sense) but rather the act of thinking through which alone what is not immediately available to the senses (such as an author's *Weltanschauung* or "center of vision") could be *accurately* characterized.⁵ Inspired, then, by James's own imaginative readings of philosophers like Henri Bergson and Gustav Fechner, I hope to accurately portray, through my own act of imagination, the center of James's vision as a philosophy of life.

In section 1 I give an account of James's inheritance of Emerson's thought, the nature of which has been a major question for American intellectual history.⁶ I ignore the

⁴ Cf. also *Pragmatism*, in which James accuses the discipline of philosophy of the bad faith of denying the influence of temperament, as if acknowledging it would discredit one's argument instead of (as James believes) enlarging its human truthfulness: "The history of philosophy is to a great extent that of a certain clash of human temperaments... Of whatever temperament a professional philosopher is, he tries, when philosophizing, to sink the fact of his temperament." (2:488)

⁵ See Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, Ch. XIII, for the classic Romantic distinction between imagination and fancy, which seems now to have become conflated into the latter. I follow Coleridge's Kantian understanding of imagination as the means of access to any truth beyond sheer givenness. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. W. J. Bate and James Engell, Bollingen series (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 304.

⁶ The question of the relation between the thought of Emerson and James is a subset of the frequently asked question of whether Emerson was a pragmatist—whether Emersonianism

question of the (dis)continuity between transcendentalism and pragmatism because those categories caricature the specificity of the actual positions of the thinkers said to belong to them; and because I argue that a shared *vitalism*—rather than a transcendentalism, pragmatism, or mixture thereof—links the thought of Emerson and James. While I have learned from all of the critics I mention, I argue that the problematic of epistemology

(or transcendentalism) and pragmatism (identified with James and/or Dewey) are philosophically continuous. But this just begs the question of what one means by “Emerson” and by “pragmatism,” for the defining feature(s) of each term are open to interpretation, if not impossible to determine. On the one hand, there is by now a tradition (starting with the 1990s “revival of pragmatism” inspired by Richard Rorty, intended as a liberal-progressivist overcoming of the cultural politics of post-structuralism and multiculturalist identitarianism) of reading Emerson as inaugurating or anticipating aspects of pragmatism (Poirier, West, Posnock, Richardson, Grimstad); whereas Stanley Cavell resisted “calling Emerson a pragmatist,” arguing for a total difference between what he calls Emerson’s “perfectionism,” the particular tone or “sound” of his philosophy, and any form of pragmatism (defined as Deweyan instrumentalism, which insists on “the primacy of practice”). And yet the debate was incoherent, as Cavell’s main opponent, Richard Poirier, argued for a literary lineage of “Emersonian pragmatism,” transmitted by James to Stevens, Frost, and Stein and characterized as a particular “sound,” a poetic attitude of “linguistic skepticism” completely removed from the Deweyan instrumentalism Cavell equates with pragmatism. By identifying pragmatism with Dewey and James, respectively, Cavell and Poirier argue at cross-purposes, each advocating for an Emersonian modernism attentive to the problem of skepticism and its literary implications; the disagreement ends up amounting to whether or not this perspective should be called “pragmatist”; and they would probably agree that Dewey writes boring prose! Paul Grimstad reconstitutes the debate on more substantive grounds, uniting Emerson, James, and Dewey (and Cavell and Poirier) around a shared epistemology of “composition.” Gregg Crane argues that the seeming discontinuity between transcendentalist “idealism” and pragmatist “realism” (or metaphysics vs. anti-metaphysics) obscures James’s inheritance of Emerson’s commitment to “intuition.” For the collection inaugurating the “revival of pragmatism” see *The Revival of Pragmatism*, ed. Morris Dickstein (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998). See also Richard Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); Ross Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity: Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Joan Richardson, *A Natural History of Pragmatism: The Fact of Feeling from Jonathan Edwards to Gertrude Stein* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Paul Grimstad, *Experience and Experimental Writing: Literary Pragmatism from Emerson to the Jameses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), esp. 1-16; Stanley Cavell, “What’s the Use of Calling Emerson a Pragmatist?” in *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); Gregg Crane, “Intuition: The Unseen Thread Connecting Emerson and James,” *Modern Intellectual History* 10.1 (2013): 57-86.

within which they all work—involving questions of the nature of experience and representation, of how the mind and/or language accesses or connects with reality (e.g., Poirier’s “linguistic skepticism,” Grimstad’s “composition,” Crane’s “intuition”)—is better understood as an ontological problematic. For example, in Emerson and James, intuition should be understood not primarily as a form of thinking but as one of the ways, however crucial, in which life manifests itself in us. My argument is that the deep connection between Emerson and James—beyond epistemology, beyond notions of transcendentalism or pragmatism—is their foundational commitment to the concept of life, understood as real and as neither separable from nor reducible to matter. Emerson continually addresses the nature of becoming, and centrally what it means to “become what one is” (in Nietzsche’s Emerson-inspired phrase); and I argue that in the chapter on the will in *Principles of Psychology* (1890) James becomes himself through an influx or transubstantiation of Emerson’s words into his own text. The ground of the connection between the writers here is *not* based on a “materiality of the signifier” argument,⁷ which would allow for a commonality between all beings grounded in shared substance—rather, in James, life is non-identical to matter but never extrinsic to it, immanent to but not reducible to matter. And yet, I’ll argue, the relationship James establishes between himself and Emerson is *real*—not simply one of intellectual influence—because becoming oneself for both Emerson and James just *is*, paradoxically, permeability to what is not oneself. It is the solicitation and preservation of otherness within the self, *as*

⁷ Walter Benn Michaels in *The Shape of the Signifier* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004) unpacks this argument and predicts its current dominance with remarkable prescience. For Michaels, what looks like a rejection of postmodernism (the replacement of the empty signifier by the material signifier, of a problematic of language for one of affect) ends up being entirely continuous with postmodernism.

the self.⁸ In terms of my larger argument about the relation between form and life, this relation is the “internal difference,” in Emily Dickinson’s phrase, which creates rather than dissolves form—a moment of grace in which the contingent and the necessary, freedom and fate, become indistinguishable.

From this moment of biographical and theoretical self-realization, I turn to examples from across James’s work in order to show that an elusive, non-reductive vitalism is the foundation of his thinking. In section 2, I argue that in the essays of *The Will to Believe* (1896) and *Talks to Teachers and to Students* (1899) against the melancholic rationalism and positivism of his era and his own temptation toward anti-intellectualist abandonment, James formulates a vital post-critical philosophy around a concept of faith understood as the “inalienable right to run risks,” the “strenuous mood” toward uncertainty rather than the disavowal of it. In section 3, I read James’s essays on Henri Bergson and especially Gustav Fechner in *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909) as exemplifying forms of writing—especially Fechner’s analogies linking empirical observation with the cosmic—that would expand the domain of conceptuality *without* renouncing it entirely. Whether James is discussing the psychology of moral action or the value of metaphysical pluralism, he is combatting *deadness*: forms of knowledge and ways of being that inhibit or suppress vitality, the supreme value that links his thought and life and thereby makes his writing a self-legitimizing philosophy of life (in that it also represents James’s form of life, his way of living). His central question is: what would a *living thinking* look like—a thinking that did justice to our lives as we actually live them as opposed to the sterile idealizations of academic discourse—that could evade

⁸ In Nietzschean terms becoming oneself requires self-overcoming; in Adornian terms, it is the presence of nonidentity within identity, nonidentity as the essence of identity.

the twin perils of intellectualism and nonsense? I argue that James's career represents an effort to realize that ideal.

In what follows, I have two polemical purposes, each of which requires the other: 1) to demonstrate and thereby advocate for what James calls a *live criticism*, an untimely mode of reading, inspired by James and against the new anti-hermeneutic positivisms (versions of what James calls “splendid philology”), that would value the singular imaginative *event* of criticism, the non-reproducible interaction between the sensibilities of author and critic as a stimulus toward the ideal of an identity between critical imagination and rightness of judgment, or founding and finding;⁹ and 2) to give shape to a concept of life that, against the current ontological turn, would not be a simultaneously reductive and spiritualistic materialism (for which life is inherent in all matter, organic or inorganic, “living” or “dead”)—and yet also not “just” a metaphor.¹⁰ James's vitalism is a realism—“life” refers to a real thing in the world, it is not simply an interpretation of reality—and yet it is *not* reducible to matter or attributable to spirit. While living is what some matter suffers, life isn't defined by its inhering in matter; nor is life a spiritual substance external to and vitalizing of matter. James's universe *is* materialist in that he

⁹ In short: I am advocating for a full-blooded return to hermeneutics, and thus to the hermeneutic circle and its dialectical overcoming through any act of interpretation worthy of the name. Heidegger writes: “even to ‘feel’ that it [the hermeneutic circle] is an inevitable imperfection [of human knowing], is to misunderstand understanding from the ground up... What is decisive is not to get out of the circle, but to get in it in the right way.” Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, quoted in Linda Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 331n23. Zerilli writes that for Heidegger, and following him Gadamer, the hermeneutic circle is not an impediment to but rather “the very condition of all understanding and critical thinking.” (331n23)

¹⁰ Part of the project of this dissertation is to resist the common conception of metaphor's unreality, the dualism of a “figuration” held to be opposed to “reality.” I aim to outline a paradoxical or dialectical “realism of metaphor” in which neither term is subsumed into the other.

rejects any notion of immaterial spirit; but life for him is not merely a synonym or predicate of matter. By assembling a Jamesian mosaic of life, I hope to offer a Jamesian non-reductive vitalism that would present a “live” challenge to both contemporary post-critical/affective/ontological thinking and the rationalist critique of that discourse.¹¹

1. Will as Willingness to Live: James’s Transubstantiation of Emerson

Two quotations will open onto the nature of James’s inheritance of Emerson’s thought. The first is from James’s address at Emerson’s centenary (1903):

This is Emerson’s revelation:—The point of any pen can be an epitome of reality; the commonest person’s act, if genuinely actuated, can lay hold on eternity. This vision is the head-spring of all his outpourings. (2:1125)

The second is from James’s chapter on “Will” in *Principles of Psychology* (1890):

The deepest question that is ever asked admits of no reply but the dumb turning of the will and the tightening of our heart-strings as we say, “Yes, I will even have it so!” ... The world thus finds in the heroic man its worthy match and mate; and the effort which he is able to put forth to hold himself erect and keep his heart unshaken is the direct measure of his worth and function in the game of human life. He can *stand* this Universe. He can still find a zest in it, not by ‘ostrich-like forgetfulness,’ but by pure inward willingness to take it with those deterrent objects there. And hereby he makes himself one of the masters and the lords of life. (1:425-426)

¹¹ For the former: see, for example, Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). For the latter: Walter Benn Michaels has made the most forceful critique of the ontological/affective/materialist turn. His argument in *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* draws heavily on Michael Fried’s account of minimalism as the negation of art in “Art and Objecthood” (published in 1967, hence Michaels’s subtitle). Reduced to its bare outlines, Michaels’s argument is: ontological turn=appeal to experience and subject position=neutralization of ideological conflict=total triumph of neoliberalism. His journal *nonsite.org* is dedicated to the ongoing application of this argument. See also Ruth Leys, *The Ascent of Affect: Genealogy and Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

In the first quotation, James finds at the core of Emerson's thinking a central hope of his own life's work: the power of human action to change the course of the universe, thereby "lay[ing] hold on eternity." In the second quotation, James pursues his Emersonian theme of action to its source in the will. Here, James has shifted from a hundred-page technical account of the mechanics of the will into the optative mood of an Emerson essay. The will, finally, represents a "Yes!" to life, a "pure inward willingness" to accept its "dreadful objects" and "dark abysses" head-on. This is perhaps the rhetorical climax of *Principles*, one of the moments, characteristic of James's thrilling style, in which he shifts from discussion of empirical findings into expansive reflection on their consequences for the improvement of human life. In the first version of *Principles*, the forty-eight-year-old James's first book, this section is hidden two chapters from the end of that thirteen-hundred-page text. But in his abridgement two years later as *Psychology: Briefer Course*, as if realizing its centrality to the work's vision, he used "Will" as his final chapter and the section I've quoted as the entire work's conclusion.

But there is a more concrete linkage of James's writing in "Will" to Emerson. How significant is it that at the climax of his first book, delayed for so many years—in a passage he considered to be the final statement of that work, and otherwise free of references to other writers—he would silently allude not once but twice, in consecutive sentences, to passages of Emerson's? Both "ostrich-like forgetfulness" and "lords of life"—descriptors of James's two opposed ways of confronting life, the evasive and the resolute, respectively—are phrases of Emerson's, and their provenance is revealing. They come from the two works by Emerson—the poem "Threnody" and the contemporaneous

essay “Experience” which I discussed in chapter 1—in which Emerson struggles with the meaning of his son Waldo’s death.

Before going further I’ll provide some context for James’s two Emerson references. In “Threnody” we witness Emerson undergoing a crisis of faith. The poem begins with the grieving Emerson cursing nature for his son’s death: he despairingly suggests that “the world, and not the infant failed,” having been unable to sustain Waldo’s genius, which had “brought the old order into doubt.” In the midst of his grief he wishes for an “ostrich-like forgetfulness,” alluding to the fable of the ostrich that, hiding its head in the sand, imagines itself to be hidden from view. Like the ostrich exposed to the world in its self-delusion, but with the self-awareness the ostrich lacks, Emerson guiltily confesses to his longing for obliviousness. In response to Emerson’s lament, “the deep Heart” answers:

Life is life which generates,
And many-seeming life is one,—
Wilt thou transfix and make it none,
Its onward stream too starkly pent
In figure, bone, and lineament?

The “deep Heart” accuses Emerson of “transfixing” his son’s life, of trying to keep it “starkly pent” within—reducing it to or equating it with—the material form of his son’s body, resisting the “onward stream” of life that will transform the dead son into more life. The “deep heart” that answers Emerson is the voice of Nature, which, as it explains to Emerson, is contiguous with his own heart: “Throb thine with nature's throbbing breast.” The “deep Heart” is thus another figure for Emerson’s “aboriginal self,” the impersonal force of life that pulses through us. In “Threnody” nature’s coincidence with Emerson is literalized—made manifest on the ontological level of the poem-as-object—by the fact

that Emerson is the empirical author of nature's voice (he is the author of both "speaker" and "nature"), and thus a psychological reading of the poem would characterize it as a dialogue between two parts of Emerson's self. At the same time, in keeping with my account of Emerson's ontology in chapter 1, the poem can be understood as a dialogue internal to nature: its two voices represent nature expressing *itself* through the technology of the human-made poem. An "ostrich-like forgetfulness" would attempt to sequester itself from the reality of death and the linked recognition that "many-seeming life is one": that the dead Waldo, the living Emerson, and "Threnody" itself are part of a continually transforming, yet single, plane of life.

James's second Emerson reference, the "lords of life," invokes the central topic of the essay "Experience." The epigraph poem to "Experience" is a surreal vision in which the speaker witnesses a procession of giant divinities, the lords of life:

Use and Surprise,
Surface and Dream,
Succession swift, and spectral Wrong,
Temperament without a tongue,
And the inventor of the game
Omnipresent without name. (469)

These allegorical figures seem to represent forces that dwarf the "little man" who walks between their legs "with puzzled look." But as in "Threnody," "dearest nature" comes to his rescue: "'Darling, never mind! / Tomorrow they will wear another face, / The founder thou! these are thy race!'" If the little man is now the founder of the race, superior even to "the inventor of the game," the epigraph poem suggests a conventional account of Emersonian self-reliance as a divinization of man. But "Experience" itself powerfully undermines that account. In its coda the lords of life reappear as a recounting of the sections of the essay we have just read: "Illusion, Temperament, Succession, Surface,

Surprise, Reality, Subjectiveness,—these are threads on the loom of time, these are the lords of life. I dare not assume to give their order, but I name them as I find them in my way.” This does not sound like the claim of a divine “founder” but rather of a “finder” (to find the lords of life “in my way” suggests the double sense of “along the way” of life and “blocking me,” an obstacle or impediment or simply inarguable fact).¹² In either sense, finding is a non-heroic act, opposed to our conventional sense of founding as act of will: either it is a kind of witnessing, a brute registering of life (“I dare not assume to give their order, but I name them as I find them”) or a more participatory sense of naming as a response to the inescapability of something found “in my way.” Naming what one finds in one’s way can be understood as a new kind of founding: giving words to the world, or drawing a picture (Emerson had earlier in “Experience” written that “a new picture of life and duty is already possible,” an affirmative “doctrine of life that will transcend any written record we have”—alluding there to a radical kind of living writing that I’ve argued “Experience” itself represents).¹³ Perhaps the “founder” of the epigraph poem and the Emerson of the coda who names the lords of life “as I find them in my way” are linked iterations of a self; finding, then, would be a higher-order form of founding. The identification between finder and founder also suggests the transmutation, over the course

¹² “Experience” famously begins, “Where do we find ourselves?” and Stanley Cavell’s essay “Finding as Founding: Taking Steps in Emerson’s ‘Experience’” in *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003) has influenced my thinking about the shifting relation the essay stages between notions of finding and founding. Cavell reads “Experience” as a kind of dramatic performance of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, a journey through skepticism to a settlement or rapprochement with the world in which finding (the world seen as other than the self) and founding (the naming or making of the world) are “found” to be a mutually imbricated process in which we can place our epistemological trust.

¹³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 487. Subsequent references to Emerson’s essays are to this edition.

of the essay, of the little man (Waldo and/or Emerson himself) into the Emerson of the end of the essay, a writing of the dead Waldo and Emerson's earlier self into Emerson's new self through the essay's self-generating aesthetics of life (which applies as well to the ontology of "Threnody"). "Experience" is the simultaneous exploration and, crucially, enactment—I have argued, the literal *living*—of the birth of a new self, "the great and crescive self" or "miracle of life."

In James's allusions to Emerson at the height of *Principles of Psychology*, at the climax of his testament of faith in the human will, is contained a reading of Emerson as a believer in the power of the act that links the core of his thought to Emerson's. His occulted incorporations of Emerson's text into his own, at such a moment, counts as a passionate acknowledgment of Emerson's influence. But there is a deeper connection than this. For James, the two quotations juxtapose two stances (the evasive and the resolute, respectively) in relation to the question—"the deepest we are ever asked," says James—of whether life can be affirmed in the face of its inassimilable tragedies. And it is crucial for James that the event in Emerson's life that occasions this question is Waldo's death.

Emerson was a correspondent of James's father, Henry James, Sr., and a family hero.¹⁴ He was made godfather to first-born William, and apparently blessed him in the

¹⁴ James, Sr., both idolized Emerson and obsessively argued with what he took to be Emerson's aggrandizement of the self; he believed, as a self-professed Puritan, that the fantasy of independent "selfhood" was the very principle of evil. He was perhaps too close to Emerson to realize that Emerson was an equally fierce critic of identity as he was; only Emerson's thinking was dialectical in positing an individualism in fact *dependent* on a dissolving of identity. See the letters between James Sr. and Emerson in Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, vol. 1 (Boston: Little Brown, 1935). The relationship played out in these letters is a suggestive backdrop for my discussion in this chapter. Conceptions of identity are both argued over and transacted *in the letters themselves*; especially James's desire for Emerson to be self-consistent—i.e., to agree with *him*, James. A

cradle as a two-month old baby on March 3, 1842. This was just over a month after Waldo's sudden death of scarlet fever at age five on January 27. (William had been born on January 11, two weeks before Waldo's death.) This legendary moment in American intellectual history is exactly contemporary with the composition of "Threnody" and "Experience."

In those works, Emerson struggles with the meaning of Waldo's death and comes to see his dead son as no longer "caducous" (as he puts it in "Experience") but rather as integral with the stream of life. I want to argue that the passage in *Principles of Psychology* with which I began, beyond a mere tribute to Emerson, is an act of *transubstantiation*: James not only acknowledges Emerson's impact on his thinking but incorporates Emerson's words into the body of his own text. "Will" addresses James's major subject and is also a work of theorization as self-therapy. And so "Will"—as in Will James—must also be seen as an autobiographical signature. "What is the will?" for James was literally the question: "What am I?" And the declaration "Yes, I *will* even have it so!" is at once an affirmation of life and of James's capacity to affirm life.¹⁵ James's exploration of the mystery of the will and his faith in the efficacy of human action are inseparable from his self-creation.

consistent theme is his wish to get through to "the invisible Emerson...the profounder Emerson" (41).

¹⁵ This moment is akin to Plotinus's idea of "life as immediate self-contemplation" (discussed in Branka Arsić, *Bird Relics: Grief and Vitalism in Thoreau* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 311-312) and Spinoza on acquiescence or beatitude (*acquiescentia in se ipso*), a reference point for James (see "The Gospel of Relaxation" and "The Psychology of Belief"). Kant, in the *Critique of Judgment* and the *Opus Postumum*, says that we have access to life only from within, through the experience of auto-affection, feeling ourselves. See Michel Chaouli, *Thinking with Kant's Critique of Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 261-267. I discuss this Kantian notion in chapter 4.

The close proximity of Waldo's death and William's birth provided an origin story for James's sense of himself as Emerson's reincarnated son, his true heir. At the climax of his first book, long-delayed by his own trial of the will, he pays tribute to the recently-deceased Emerson by melding their words together, thereby enacting the congruence of their thinking on the central topic of both thinkers' work. As if acknowledging the transubstantiation of Emerson that his prose has just manifested, James's text continues from the quoted passage in a strongly Emersonian idiom:

But just as our courage is so often a reflex of another's courage, so our faith is apt to be a faith in someone else's faith. We draw new life from the heroic example. The prophet has drunk more deeply than anyone of the cup of bitterness, but his countenance is so unshaken and he speaks such mighty words of cheer that his will becomes our will, and our life is kindled at his own. (1:426)

As if paraphrasing Emerson's "Self-Reliance" or "Uses of Great Men," James writes that the "heroic example" does not inhibit our vitality but that we "draw new life" from him. The great man is radiant, light- and life-giving. Emerson may be the very prophet James has in mind (in the "Centenary Address" he calls him a "seer"), the author of such works as "Threnody" and "Experience." James is here acknowledging how Emerson's actual "words of cheer" have become part of his own text and life, how "his will becomes our will, and our life is kindled at his own": James's will, his very being, has been ignited by Emerson. In the manner of Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," a frequent reference for James, his text aims to transmit to its readers the vitality it has inherited from Emerson.¹⁶

¹⁶ While I admire Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence" model for its extremity and its (now untimely) insistence on Oedipal rage—which seems *a fortiori* true of the lives of great (and would-be great) artists—Bloom's agonistic Emersonianism discounts another Emersonian story of the *genius* of great writers as deriving precisely from the fact that they are empowering rather than crippling: it is the very nature of their genius to allow us to recognize in their works not them but ourselves. Bloom knows this, but he can't imagine influence

But James's use of the two Emerson quotations seems also to undercut the agreement with Emerson's conception of life's impersonality that it stages. For James's encouragement to become a "lord of life," to master the contingencies we suffer, seems to contradict Emerson's thinking at its boldest, which amounts to a devastating critique of the heroic will. Emerson, like his disciple Nietzsche, was a lover of contingency: to "build altars to the beautiful necessity" (Emerson) or to cultivate "amor fati" (Nietzsche) is to affirm life as a whole by a *repudiation* of the will, by coming to experience one's continuity with life, not by a fantasy of invulnerability.¹⁷ For example, in "Self-Reliance" Emerson coyly transvalues the Christian virtues of obedience and faith: "Who has more obedience than I masters me, though he should not raise a finger." (272) And: "To our involuntary perceptions a perfect faith is due." In "Circles" he writes: "The one thing which we seek with insatiable desire is to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our propriety, to lose our sempiternal memory, and to do something without knowing how or why." (414) Acting with "propriety" means behaving in conformity with one's self, defined as one's property; "proprius" means property, "one's own," one's proper self.¹⁸

happening in this way. I argue that Emerson's thought enabled James to be enablingly influenced by Emerson. On Emerson's conception of genius as impersonal rather than a possession of individuals, see Richard Poirier, "The Question of Genius," in *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (New York: Random House, 1987).

¹⁷ This is Hannah Arendt's account of the Nietzschean will in *The Life of the Mind, Vol. 2: Willing* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978). Although it is an open question whether to will what is necessary, Nietzsche's formula, counts as a repudiation of the will or as its revaluation.

¹⁸ Emerson's troping on propriety is influenced, I'd argue, by Rousseau, whose contribution to the Western understanding of the self was to imagine, against Locke, a self divested of property—an undoing of the self of "amour-propre" (a self-love derived from what one is or possesses at the expense of others) for an authentic individuality that would merge into a general will. Rousseau's critique of the self of property leads directly to Marx—and to Thoreau's discussion of alienation in *Walden*. Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origins of*

To be stripped of propriety is to experience a loss of the self, an unforeseen rupturing of our connection to what the social world has allotted us—what we properly are.

Emerson's idea is radical because it rejects the central project of philosophy, its (proprietary) effort to determine each thing's identity, what is proper to it.¹⁹ Emerson's originality is to locate the principle of life in abandonment, in "Spontaneity or Instinct" ("Self-Reliance" 269) the "pulses" of surprise ("Experience" 483), coincident with the pulsing of blood within us. In our finest moments we "find ourselves" (in the language of "Experience") doing "something without knowing how or why." It is our self-estranging, *unwilled* actions that are most ourselves ("and there I found myself, more truly and more strange," writes Wallace Stevens at his most Emersonian). "What am I? What has my will done to make me what I am? Nothing." ("Intellect" 418)²⁰

And yet for James, it would seem, will is everything. It makes us what we are. Strength of will is what finally differentiates people from one another. In *Principles* he writes that the greatest difference between people "is the sense of the amount of effort which we can put forth... [It] seems to belong to an altogether different realm, as if it were the substantive thing which we *are*." (1:425) But what is this will that seems to be at the very core of our being? Ultimately, it is a capacity of *attention*: like imagination, will

Inequality, esp. note 6, and *The Social Contract* in *The Basic Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Donald A. Cress, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2011). See also David Bromwich, "Rousseau and the Self without Property" in *The Social Contract and First and Second Discourses*, ed. Susan Dunn (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

¹⁹ The opposite of propriety is *hubris*: self-surpassing, excess, ecstasy; and dialectically related to dispossession, impoverishment. Cf. Deleuze on Nietzsche's linkage of hubris to the eternal return, cited in Arsić, *Bird Relics*, 127.

²⁰ On Emerson's radical conception of thinking as involuntary see Branka Arsić, "Brain Walks," in *On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

is the capacity to keep a mental representation present to the mind *as if it were real* when the occasioning object is not present. Paradoxically, we can experience this will, aligned with our very life, as life-denying: it seems to relentlessly “work and work until [it has] frozen the very vital spark from out of all our mood... There is something so icy in this cold-water bath, something which seems so hostile to the movement of our life... that it is no wonder that to most men the steadying influence seems, for the time being, a very minister of death.” (418-419) “The strong-willed man, however, is the man who hears the still small voice unflinchingly, and who, when the death-bringing consideration comes, looks at its face, consents to its presence, clings to it, affirms it, and holds it fast, in spite of the host of exciting mental images which rise in revolt against it and would expel it from the mind.” (419) He concludes: “*To sustain a representation, to think*, is, in short, the only moral act.” (421)²¹

Strength of will turns out to be the capacity to think, an act of meditation by which an idea is kept in the mind until with its vividness it “fills the mind.” (420) Thinking, then, is not a volitional act but rather a mental readiness. Now the Emerson who denies the power of will and the James who defines will as attention seem remarkably aligned. In “Intellect” Emerson writes: “We do not determine what we will think. We only open our senses, clear away, as we can, all obstruction from the fact, and suffer the intellect to see.” (419) To think, for Emerson, is to “suffer the intellect to see”; for James, likewise, it is to allow a thought “to fill the mind.”

²¹ Cf. Hannah Arendt on thinking as the essential moral act in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963; New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 287ff; *The Life of the Mind* (1971; New York: Harcourt, 1977), 3-6.

How does James understand the *activity* of allowing the right thought to possess the mind? This is the paradox familiar to new practitioners of meditation: how can I allow my thoughts to happen freely when “allowing” seems itself to be an act of will? As in meditation, for James the answer is practice, or what Emerson in *The Conduct of Life* calls “drill.” James wants to make our useful actions habitual such that they are no longer deliberate choices but rather automatic. “The great thing...in all education, is to *make our nervous system our ally instead of our enemy*,” he writes in “Habit.” (1:146) Character is malleable. For all of James’s talk of strenuous effort, the automatism of habit is the real motor of the will. His conception of character formation is thus non-psychological: he wants to sever action as much as possible from instances of deliberation and root it in physiology. And this extends not only to useful physical actions but also to moral exertion. Morality isn’t a guide to conduct, a series of *sententiae* about what one ought to do, but rather a faculty that can be strengthened such that it becomes bound with our way of life: James exhorts us to “be systematically ascetic or heroic in little unnecessary points, do every day or two something for no other reason than that you would rather not do it.” (150) This is an “insurance” or “tax” that will serve us when we face crisis or moral difficulty. Thus “the physiological study of mental conditions is...the most powerful ally of hortatory ethics.” (150)

But for James there is something more fundamental than habit as the strengthening of moral attention. At the conclusion of “Will,” James writes:

“*Will you or won’t you have it so?*” is the most probing question we are ever asked; we are asked it every hour of the day, and about the largest as well as the smallest, the most theoretical as well as the most practical, things. We answer by *consents or non-consents* and not by words. What wonder that these dumb responses should seem our deepest organs of communication with the nature of things!” (426)

James remains, here at the conclusion of *Principles of Psychology*, agnostic on the question of the reality of free will. What matters for him is the feeling of agency, which is at its root a “dumb turning of the will,” a physiological impulse by which the organism affirms things as they are, not with resignation but with “zest.” Rather than a mark of human distinctiveness, the will ends up being an ingrained vitality, a *willingness* to live under just these conditions, there being no other. This is not a quietism but rather a basic *consent to life* that James believes to be necessary for life’s continuation in any form. At the root of his humanist ethics of the will is a conception of life as that which, in turning towards life, affirms itself.²² It is through life’s “dumb” self-affirmation that we as humans may make our sole “underived and original contribution” to the universe. Through human beings, life seems simultaneously to affirm and surpass itself, flowering into the capacity for creative action. The “seems” is crucial: James does not assert the truth of free will but rather displaces it with what he will call the will to believe.

²² James’s and Emerson’s account of will might be glossed by Heidegger’s idea of *Gelassenheit*, letting-be, a state between activity and passivity which he adopted from Meister Eckhart. Cf. also Angus Fletcher’s account in *A New Theory for American Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004) of the “middle voice” of Whitman’s poetry, between active and passive, which I discuss further in chapter 4; and Giorgio Agamben’s related philology of “use” in *The Use of Bodies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016). All are related to a conception of life as auto-affection, feeling oneself to be alive, versions of which can be found in Spinoza, Kant, Schelling, among others. Cf. also Emerson’s “when you have life in yourself, it is not by any known or accustomed way,” in “Self-Reliance,” 271.

2. Beyond Critique: “The Inalienable Right to Run Risks”

I’ve argued that the chapter on “Will” in *Principles of Psychology*, the first major statement of James’s life work, represents his self-realization as an act of transubstantiation: he becomes himself, paradoxically, through an acknowledgment of his permeability to an immanent otherness (Emerson—specifically the grieving Emerson of 1842, the year of Waldo’s death and James’s birth) understood as not destructive but rather enabling of his own creative force. It is an origin story, a moment in which his theoretical and biographical affirmations of life crystallize in what I am calling his vitalism.

I’ll turn now to some theoretical manifestations of this perspective. James’s wide-ranging investigations—across psychology, religion, ethics, metaphysics—assume a vitalist coherence, I’ll argue, when we realize that their common enemy is *deadness* understood not as a mere metaphor (for the dull, inert, unexciting)²³ but as indissociable

²³ And yet notice how these adjectives themselves are metaphors of that which is un-living or non-vital, suggesting an inescapable root metaphor that not only structures experience—represents a way of seeing—but conveys the *truth* of the experience of dullness, inertness, “depression” (an experience of increased pressure, the “weight” of care, the “gravity” of life—and diminished “excitability” or vividness (another life-metaphor) of sensation and cognition demonstrable on the level of the neurotransmitter). Cf. James 1:835; 1035. James represents the best of psychology: an ideal fusion of scientist and artist, devoted to the great mystery: how the material body can give rise to the infinite richness of experience. We cannot think without basic metaphors such as living vs. dead; and my argument (to which I think James would subscribe) is that, rather than seeing metaphors as merely “cultural” and thus contingent constructions of the human mind, tracing the metamorphoses of basic metaphors allows us our closest access to truths about human life. I agree with Kenneth Burke, who in *Attitudes Toward History* (1937; 3rd ed. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984) describes metaphors that compose world-pictures as ways of coping with or adapting to reality, which in turn transform reality—words we need to speak in order to live—language as a form of secular prayer. One might go further and speculate on the connection between figures as turnings, tropings and basic structures of life, down to the double helix of DNA which gives rise, for example, to the spiral heliotropism of a vine.

from the functioning of the human organism. What forms does this deadness take, and what antidote does James offer?

“The history of philosophy is to a great extent that of a certain clash of human temperaments,” James writes in *Pragmatism*, and the same could be said of his own writings, from *Principles of Psychology* to *A Pluralistic Universe*, which stage the conflict of embodied orientations toward the world as they battle for dominance, often within the life of the individual, and are rationalized into ideas of morality, religion, and metaphysics. (2:488) In *Principles of Psychology* the underlying question is: against the pathologies that obstruct the will and inhibit action, what is conducive to health, understood as the free-flowing interaction between body and mind—the experience of freedom? *Principles of Psychology* is at its heart a moral psychology: sickness is a diseased will; health is the ability to act freely, thereby realizing our personhood—but as James discovers, the continent will of the free person turns out to be precisely a *willingness*, an acquiescence to life, to what is not oneself.²⁴ As I’ve discussed, this theorization is an autobiographical project for James: the overcoming of his paralysis of will and realization of his freedom and individuality through a transubstantiation of Emerson. And yet beyond autobiography, which involves recounting of a past, James’s

²⁴ “Je est un autre,” as Rimbaud put it. See Ross Posnock, “I’m Not There,” *Daedalus* 143.1 (Winter 2014), 85-95, for many great examples of the ecstasy of self-abandonment in modern thought. And see Posnock’s elaboration of these ideas in *Renunciation: Acts of Abandonment by Writers, Artists, and Philosophers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016). My point is: the self just *is* that which can abandon itself. To say that I am another, or I’m not there, is still to say I, to give shape to a self as other or elsewhere. I emphasize the continuity or even identity between will and willingness/acquiescence: that self-forgetting is the very hallmark of subjectivity, not its undoing. Identity just *as* non-identity, not a subsumption of it. Adorno writes: “The utopia of cognition would be the ability to unlock the non-conceptual domain with conceptual means—without reducing the one to the other.” And note his ambition “to use the strength of the subject to break through the deception of constitutive subjectivity.” Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (1973; New York: Continuum, 1981), xx.

theory *is* his life: his construction of a theory of freedom is precisely what enables his freedom, is itself the very living out of the freedom it describes.²⁵ This is the core of what I call his vitalism: his writing is not only representational (not just “about” its topic) but is also the expression of conatus, will to live, the inner *need* of the organism to persevere in its being, to convert deadness into life.²⁶

In the essays collected in *The Will to Believe* (1896) and *Talks to Teachers and to Students* (1899) the clash of temperaments has shifted from a battle internal to the individual’s trial of the will to a portrayal of two opposed characters. The first characterization amounts to a diagnosis of the modern intellectual.²⁷ For James, the scientific/positivist erosion of grounds of meaning and value has resulted in a particular pathology of intellectuals: “paralysis of their native capacity for faith and timorous *abulia* [avolition] in the religious field... brought about by the notion, carefully instilled, that

²⁵ And thus James evades Paul De Man’s critique of autobiography as an inevitable falsification of life. I have never understood the force of this point—how it is anything more than a truism, stated as dire hyperbole. Or simply a fallacy, its pseudo-rigor equating “real life” with something like “the facts of the case” as if the latter could ever count as an adequate account of a life. De Man, “Autobiography as De-facement” [1979] in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984). One proleptic repudiation of this literalism is Freud’s theory of the reality of fantasy, after he gives up the seduction theory. I am writing about a *living writing*—not automatic or organic writing or the current fad of “auto-fiction,” but rather writing as a way of life, including all of its constructedness, falsifications, distortions, etc.—everything Nietzsche says is essential to interpretation and to life (will to power) understood just *as* constant re-interpretation of the given. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo* (1967; New York: Vintage, 1989), 151. As Emerson puts it, “Man is a selecting principle.”

²⁶ Cf. Kenneth Burke on James needing to name things a certain way in order to live. *Attitudes Toward History*, 7.

²⁷ Critics including Ross Posnock and Robert Richardson have characterized James’s work as social theory, a response to the conditions of modernity. Another lineage in the background of James’s diagnosis is the popular German philosophy of pessimism of the late nineteenth century, following Schopenhauer. See Frederick Beiser, *Weltschmerz: Pessimism in German Philosophy 1860-1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

there is something called scientific evidence by waiting upon which they shall escape all danger of shipwreck in regard to truth.” (“Preface” to *The Will to Believe* 1:449) In the “supercilious” presence of moral skeptics, “the hot young moralist always feels strangely ill at ease. The appearance of knowingness is on their side, of *naiveté* and gullibility on his.” (“The Will to Believe” 1:473)²⁸ These attitudes—positivism and anti-idealist knowingness—at first look like the tough-minded antithesis of tender-minded sentimentality or mysticism. But James shows how they are actually palliative measures against the terror of uncertainty. When they fail, the abyss opens: “speculative melancholy” sets in, an insatiable “craving for further explanation, the ontological wonder-sickness” for which “the non-existence of this world is just as possible as its existence.” (“The Sentiment of Rationality” 1:510-511) And thus the “nightmare or suicidal view of life”—the terror seething beneath the supposedly irreligious perspective of modern science—represents “the sick shudder of the frustrated religious demand.” (“Is Life Worth Living?” 1:485-486, 495, 488) The disease of the intellectual resembles James’s account of the melancholic, who suffers from a diminution of mental vitality in the form of paralyzing rumination and a sense of the world’s unreality: “the usual varied flow of his thoughts has ceased. His associative processes, to use the technical phrase, are inhibited; and his ideas stand stock-still, shut up to their one monotonous function of reiterating inwardly the fact of the man’s desperate estate.” (“Gospel of Relaxation” 1:835) “All sense of reality is fled from life. They are sheathed in india-rubber, nothing

²⁸ Walter Benn Michaels in *The Shape of the Signifier* (74ff) characterizes Richard Rorty’s critique of the posture of cynical “knowingness” in his *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 126ff, as an affectivist critique of knowledge itself. Michaels is wrong: “knowingness” for Rorty, and before him, James, is not simply a feeling but rather the posture or attitude corresponding to a belief that everything is sewn up in advance, a self-protective measure against the unknown.

penetrates to the quick or draws blood, as it were. [...] ‘I see, I hear!’ such patients say, ‘but the objects do not reach me, it is as if there were a wall between me and the outer world!’” (“Psychology of Belief” 1:1035)

Against his diagnosis of the morbidity of modern intellectualism are images of its opposite—idylls of repose, the absence of thought, the exhilaration of being alive, often drawn from the spiritual autobiographies of favorite writers. There is a fiercely anti-intellectualist current in his work, a desperate, romantic longing to escape the ordeal of the modern mind. Often the exemplar of this freedom is Whitman, of whom James writes, “the mere joy of living is so immense in [his] veins that it abolishes the possibility of any other kind of feeling.” (1:480) He quotes Whitman at his most rhapsodic: “To breathe the air, how delicious! / To speak—to walk—to seize something by the hand!... / To be this incredible God I am! / O amazement of things—even the least particle!” (1:481) Against the intellectual’s compulsive need for further explanation, he delights in Whitman’s sense of “the sufficiency of the present moment, of its absoluteness, this absence of all need to explain it, account for it, or justify it,” a state in which “being vouches for itself.” (505) Recommending to students the value of the New Thought and “moral relaxation” against the American attitude of tensed self-concern, James refers to Spinoza’s “blessed internal peace and confidence, that *acquiescentia in se ipso*...that wells up from every part of the body of a muscularly well-trained human being, and soaks the indwelling soul of him with satisfaction” (1:829). He makes a case for the value of whatever gives an individual life “the zest, the tingle, the excitement, of reality.” (1:844) As examples of this private exultation in life itself, he quotes Wordsworth’s *Prelude*: “To every natural form, rock, fruit or flower, / Even the loose stones that cover

the high-way, / I gave a moral life: I saw them feel” (1:849); he describes Whitman in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” as “rapt with satisfied attention...to the mere spectacle of the world’s presence” (854); he cites the visionary satisfaction of Tolstoy’s Pierre in *War and Peace*, and Emerson “crossing a bare common...glad to the brink of fear.” (856, 848)²⁹

There is a desire in James to recklessly overthrow rationality *tout court* for the pure experience of being. He shares with many romantics and moderns, those following in the wake of Kant’s inauguration of critical philosophy, the sense that the mind has lost the world, has become enclosed in the airless room of intellect. This experience reaches its most desperate pitch in his last published book, *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909) in which, in the middle of a lecture, he seems to renounce language entirely: “The return to life can’t come about by talking. It is an *act*; to make you return to life, I must set an example for your imitation, I must deafen you to talk... I must leave life to teach the lesson.” (2:763) And yet in a less desperate mood, life for James isn’t the antithesis of the idle chatter of intellectualism, the undoing of our ensnarement in language in favor of pure being or mindless activity that “vouches for itself.” His goal, instead, is to *think* with the vitality he sees embodied in the life of a Whitman, Wordsworth or Spinoza. What does it take to make thinking—which has become morbid, involuted, narrow, indeed

²⁹ James also appears to be thinking, in this context, of the opening of “The Over-Soul”: “There is a difference between one and another hour of life, in their authority and subsequent effect. Our faith comes in moments; our vice is habitual. Yet there is a depth in those brief moments which constrains us to ascribe more reality to them than to all other experiences.” (385) “The Over-Soul” and “Spiritual Laws” are the two essays of Emerson’s to which James alludes most frequently, though judging from his marginal annotations to Emerson, in the Houghton Library’s James collection, he carefully read most of Emerson’s work, including during the writing of the Centenary Address. The major topic of these two essays is intuition/passivity/the involuntary, which makes Gregg Crane’s linkage of Emerson and James around the topic of intuition in his “Intuition: The Unseen Thread” particularly apt.

pathological in modernity—vital? How can thought express the life in us instead of inhibiting it, endlessly turning it back on itself?

James's answer in *The Will to Believe* essays is a radically *anti-religious* conception of faith. Instead of a release from the pain of life's uncertainty, faith is the courting of uncertainty, the delight in it; it is an assertion of thought's "inalienable right to run risks" that for him is identical to our vitality. (1:538) It is a thinking that would not attempt to deny or sequester uncertainty, to confine thought to a narrow sphere of self-consistency with no relation to our actual experience of life, but would instead open it further onto the unknown. For thinking to have any worth it must constantly venture beyond the safety of established concepts and slick performance of disciplinary protocols more interested in approval—showing that one is "in the know"—than in the expansion of what it is possible to know. Faith is the awareness of the limits of the known, and a willingness to risk error and failure in entering the territory of the unknown. It is the conversion of skeptical paralysis into possibility, into an existential attitude of "maybe": "So far as man stands for anything, and is productive or originative at all, his entire vital function may be said to have to deal with maybes... It is only by risking our persons from one hour to another that we live at all. And often enough our faith beforehand in an uncertified result *is the only thing that makes the result come true.*" (1:500) In the sphere of morality, James advocates the "strenuous mood" understood as the acknowledgment that "the *highest* ethical life—however few may be called to bear its burdens—consists at all times in the breaking of rules which have grown too narrow for the actual case. There is but one unconditional commandment, which is that we should seek incessantly, with fear and trembling, so to vote and to act as to bring about the very largest total universe

of good which we can see... Every real dilemma is in literal strictness a unique situation; and the exact combination of ideals realized and ideals disappointed which each decision creates is always a universe without a precedent, and for which no adequate previous rule exists.” (1:612, 613-614) Faith here describes the effort to live morally in the absence of definitive rules and absolute certainties: we must make judgments on the fly, bringing to bear whatever vital resources we have on whatever we find “in our way.” The ideal is a rationality aware of but not inhibited by the abyss of contingency. It can bear this world. Nihilism is too easy, because it assumes a solution to the problem of the world’s meaning (namely its meaninglessness)—it is a safeguard against the greater fear that the world’s meaning is unknown because it is unfinished, in the making.

James describes his project in *The Will to Believe* essays as a defense of “the legitimacy of religious faith” (1:449) but I am arguing that his conception of faith as “the inalienable right to run risks” constitutes an overturning of religion that, even now, is essentially scandalous. For he shows that the modern scientific consciousness—what, in related arguments, Nietzsche calls “the will to truth” and Dewey calls “the quest for certainty”—is not an escape from religiosity but its most advanced and hidden manifestation, based on the central commandment, “thou shalt not believe without coercive sensible evidence.” (1:498)³⁰ Against this dogmatic and proscriptive positivist attitude of pseudo-objectivity, James argues that we should honestly acknowledge our *interestedness*, our investment in the truths we quest after—which as Nietzsche also says,

³⁰ See Friedrich Nietzsche, “What is the Ascetic Ideal?” in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, 151ff; John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (1929; New York: Putnam, 1960).

is the unasked question that haunts modern science.³¹ The great fear is that to confess our prior interest would be to admit that the facts we impartially discover are actually fictions we have created: the skeptical vertigo created by the paradox of the hermeneutic circle. But James writes: “is it not sheer dogmatic folly to say that our inner interests can have no real connection with the forces that the hidden world may contain?... Take science itself! Without an imperious inner demand on our part for ideal logical and mathematical harmonies, we should never have attained to proving that such harmonies lie hidden between all the chinks and interstices of the crude natural world.” The laws of science have been “first sought after, often with sweat and blood, to gratify an inner need.” (1:498) Faith, on James’s definition, is an acknowledgment of our interestedness in truth, our desire for it, without which its pursuit would be impossible. Desire creates the possibility of realization and is in turn sustained by it. James is making a case for a rationality honest enough to recognize its infusion with desire and also vitalized by that recognition: the pursuit of truth as a vital practice, not dissociable from the rest of our being. An ideal of impartiality, in aspiring toward its ideal, should include the recognition that we are *partial* to the ideal of impartiality. It cannot be dissociated from human desire; to adapt an insight of Stanley Cavell’s, there is no desire more characteristic of the human than to transcend or escape the human—to disavow the humanness of the human. This acknowledgment is not “anything goes” complacency but true rigor. If we really want the truth, our account cannot banish part of it, namely *that* we want it.

³¹ Cf. Ross Posnock’s characterization in “I’m Not There” of Michael Polanyi’s *Personal Knowledge* as a “post-critical” philosophy of the “tacit dimension” of knowing against the pseudo-objectivity of positivism.

The will to believe is a vital rationality: it is the experimental attitude toward scientific and philosophical pursuit of truth, moral deliberation, and living itself. Instead of trying to escape uncertainty in the deathly enclosure of intellect, it opens intellect onto the unmasterable flux of life *without repudiating the integrity of intellect*. A passage from *Moby-Dick* can help gloss James's image of thought: like the storm-tossed ship trying to resist the fatal shore, "all deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore." The wildest winds of heaven and earth—for James, the temptations of religion and its double, supposedly disinterested science—attempt to wreck the ship of thinking which can only stay afloat—maintain its integrity and independence—on the open sea, the hazardous yet buoyant element of life.

3. "Concrete Imagination"

In the Hibbert Lectures collected as *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909), James is at his most restless and uninhibited, frustrated with the academic professionalism that seems bent on denying life wherever it finds it. Philosophers handle metaphysical questions "as if through a heavy woolen curtain, the veil of previous philosophers' opinions," destroying all "spontaneity and freshness of conception" and losing "connection with the open air of human nature." (2:636-637) James's enemy continues to be the seemingly inescapable scholastic attitude—absolutism, intellectualism, here "monistic idealism"—terrified of the "open air" of life, shunning direct contact with the particulars of

experience that constantly defy neat distinctions and the law of non-contradiction.

James's radical empiricism or "pluralistic pantheism"—"a turbid, muddled, gothic sort of an affair" (2:650)—is really an anti-philosophy in that it attempts to think "excess" or the "more" of nature ("Nature is but a name for excess; every point in her opens out and runs into the more" [2:760]) and the category of the "some," the excluded middle, rather than the all or nothing which for philosophy are "the only categories inwardly consistent and therefore pertinent to reality." (2:666) James mocks the very idea that reality could be held to be "inwardly consistent" even if this entails lapsing into his own incoherence; for what would it mean to put forward a philosophical program based on the repudiation of self-consistency? Philosophy would become "mere" poetry, and only if we understand poetry (as most philosophers do) as un-self-accounting, basically unintelligent. What kind of philosophy is this?

I want to argue that it is a philosophy of *exemplification*: the creation of a character on the stage of the lecture hall and the page. It brings James's own personal frustration with philosophy, and more broadly with the whole climate of academic thought, to the fore, it makes it its real subject: it is a sacrificial act (however restrained and reasonable) of "cracking up," "putting off our proud maturity of mind and becoming again as foolish little children in the eyes of reason," a willingness to be perceived as naïve, unserious, dimwitted if that is the only way to reject the philistinism and deadness of academic respectability. (2:755) In its most dramatic moment, cited above, which must have been astonishing to witness, James's repudiation of intellect reaches fever pitch:

I am tiring myself and you, I know, by vainly seeking to describe by concepts and words what I say at the same time exceeds either conceptualization or verbalization. As long as one continues *talking*, intellectualism remains in undisturbed possession of the field. The return to life can't come about by talking.

It is an *act*; to make you return to life, I must set an example for your imitation, I must deafen you to talk, or to the importance of talk, by showing, as Bergson does, that the concepts we talk with are made for purposes of *practice* and not for purposes of insight. Or I must *point*, point to the mere *that* of life, and you by inner sympathy must fill out the *what* for yourselves [...] I say no more: I must leave life to teach the lesson. (2:762-763)

But the irony that James will keep talking here is essential to his gesture's meaning rather than a rueful acknowledgment of its quixotism. Because the force of *A Pluralistic Universe* lies not only in its thrilling gesture towards abandonment but in its suggestion and exemplification of ways of going on from the dead end of sterile academicism.

Henri Bergson and Gustav Fechner, each the subject of a passionately appreciative essay, are the heroes of *A Pluralistic Universe*. Bergson, partly through James's advocacy, was extraordinarily influential and even became popular in mainstream culture (apparently one of his lectures at Columbia caused a traffic jam on Broadway), but Fechner, though respected for his psychophysics of the 1860s, had been largely mocked for the cosmological writings he pursued on the side—and it was precisely for these writings that James celebrated him. Fechner was one of the figures—including New Thought writers and “mind cure” practitioners, spirit mediums, religious mystics, and especially Benjamin Blood, who advocated for the spiritual revelations produced by laughing gas—dismissed by the academy as quacks whom James, with astonishing free-mindedness and risk to his professional reputation, took seriously for the unconventional insights they provided. (James truly embodied his doctrine of risk-taking and pursuit of the whole truth, wherever it was to be found.) While Bergson and Fechner represented for James an antidote to narrowly conceptual thinking—as did his collection of esoteric writers and literary heroes like Emerson, Whitman and Tolstoy—what he particularly valued was their way of doing something still recognizably philosophical.

They didn't repudiate philosophy entirely—they didn't merely “point” or “leave life to teach the lesson”—but rather created forms of writing that would express the beyond of conceptuality *through* concepts, not in spite of them.

James loved Bergson's writing for its vitality even if, as he delightedly admitted, he didn't fully understand it. Against the conceptual demarcations of intellectualism Bergson conveys the inside of life, “the living, moving, active thickness of the real...not things made but things in the making. Once made they are dead...” (2:750-751). He expresses the “undivided life” of reality, the way it “buds and burgeons, changes and creates.” (751) His writing “is like the breath of the morning and the song of birds. It tells of reality itself, instead of merely reiterating what dusty-minded professors have written about what other previous professors have thought. Nothing in Bergson is shop-worn or at second hand.” (752) James is inviting the auditor/reader into his own experience of Bergson's text. The fact that he is appreciative and enthusiastic, the fact that is moved by Bergson, *matters*. The affect that Bergson's writing produces is essential to its force and meaning, and James wants to transmit that affect, the feeling of a thinking that expresses the feeling of experience. The adequacy of a thinker's concept is to be judged partly based on the affect the concept produces: does it feel adequate to the phenomena it is meant to generalize—or would another concept inspire a greater intuition of rightness? Intuitive rightness is not only a cognitive phenomenon; to disavow the role of affect, however successfully minimized or wished-away, is to falsify the truth and to disavow part of our humanness. (The real question is: What exactly is it that you are denying when you deny the role of affect in judgment?) For James, Bergson's writing gets the feeling of experience right—its vitality can't be separated from, or reduced to, its

conceptual adequacy—and a crucial part of the persuasive evidence for James’s claim is the testimony of his own experience of Bergson.

It is in Fechner that James finds an image of thought that, I want to suggest, is particularly relevant to the question of post-critique. Fechner’s “daylight view of the world” is an unabashed panpsychism—“the whole universe in its different spans and wavelengths, exclusions and envelopments, is everywhere alive and conscious” (697)—and James’s celebration of it has consigned the essay to the marginal status of the esoteric or “weird” James. While panpsychism is now a tenable philosophical position, in James’s time it seemed a romantic mysticism completely at odds with the reigning materialism.³² But the validity of the belief is not James’s main interest. Rather, what compels him is Fechner’s method: his ways of “vivifying” the daylight view by his use of *analogy*. Fechner posits a series of analogies from the simplest forms of life to the most complex, an earth-consciousness without a brain, consciousness understood as a *function* or medium by which a being maintains itself and interacts with its environment. The earth, James writes paraphrasing Fechner, “has no proper muscles or limbs of her own, and the only objects external to her are the other stars. To these her whole mass reacts by most exquisite alterations in its total gait, and by still more exquisite vibratory responses in its substance. Her ocean reflects the lights of heaven as in a mighty mirror, her atmosphere refracts them like a monstrous lens, the clouds and snow-fields combine them into white, the woods and flowers disperse them into colors. Polarization, interference, absorption,

³² As a result of the cognitive science revolution, panpsychism is now seen as thoroughly consistent with materialism. James may prefigure this intersection—but that is not my focus here.

awaken sensibilities in matter of which our senses are too coarse to take any note.” (702-703)

We can go beyond wordless wonder by analogizing aspects of the world (including the world itself) to aspects of our own experience, because our experience is not to be understood as the *translation* of an underlying inaccessible ontological dimension but as itself *real*. It does away with the idea of a fallacy of anthropomorphism, which suggests that we falsely project our narrowly human experience onto the rest of nature, which is *unlike* us or unrelated to us. And yet if we also posit (as we do) an underlying likeness or continuity between ourselves and the rest of nature, why make the assumption that our experience (part of our natural being) is utterly dissimilar from or nontransferable to other aspects of nature? Fechner’s is an empiricist imagination: experience that is understood as real can then be projected outwards as a way of understanding other aspects of reality. This projection only counts as an anthropomorphic distortion if we make the prior assumption that our experience is necessarily a distortion of reality. But if, for example, beauty is our connection to reality, if it really exists in nature, as Kant believed—if the beauty of a face is not the viewer’s projection onto it but is something real, something that inheres in it, and if we take such an experience of the beauty of a face as the foundation of the kinds of worldly knowing to which we have access (what else do we know with a greater feeling of certainty?), then Fechner’s analogy is not outrageous: if one could see the earth from space, he suggests, “every quality of landscape that has a name would then be visible in her at once—all that is delicate or graceful, all that is quiet, or wild, or romantic, or desolate, or cheerful, or luxuriant, or fresh. *That landscape is her face*—a peopled landscape, too, for men’s eyes

would appear in it like diamonds among the dew-drops.” (703-704, italics mine) The temptation here is to scoff at James’s wide-eyed sappiness, to call it bad poetry. But to do so is to miss what he sees in Fechner and what his paraphrases enact: they dignify as real, basic experiences of qualities of landscape such as delicacy, grace, quietness, wildness, romance, desolation, cheerfulness, luxuriance, freshness—James’s Fechner suggests that we should resist the reflexive skeptical nominalist attitude that says these are only “subjective” interpretations of reality and in fact *trust them*, as ontological states and as adequate descriptions of reality. In other words, “wildness” or “freshness” refer to *real* qualities of nature which we can recognize and identify with to the extent that we are also nature. James is finally a realist rather than a nominalist: a realist of metaphor.

By the same logic, for Fechner, all life feels, even plants: “with nothing to do but to drink the light and air with their leaves, to let their cells proliferate, to feel their rootlets draw the sap, is it conceivable that they should not consciously suffer if water, light, and air are suddenly withdrawn? or that when the flowering and fertilization which are the culmination of their life take place, they should not feel their own existence more intensely and enjoy something like what we call pleasure in ourselves? (705) And this leads finally to Fechner’s idea of human immortality: “Fechner likens our individual persons on the earth unto so many sense-organs of the earth’s soul... When one of us dies, it is as if an eye of the world were closed, for all *perceptive* contributions from that particular quarter cease. But the memories and conceptual relations that have spun themselves round the perceptions of that person remain in the larger earth-life as distinct as ever, and form new relations and grow and develop throughout all the future” (707)

In Fechner, James finds a vitalism of thought. “The power of the man is due altogether to the profuseness of his concrete imagination... to the sincerity with which his pages glow, and finally to the impression he gives of a man who doesn’t live at second-hand, but who *sees*.” (700) “Where there is no vision the people perish. Few professorial philosophers have any vision. Fechner had vision, and that is why one can read him over and over again, and each time bring away a fresh sense of reality.” (705) Experimental science is not opposed to wonder but productive of it. Rather than secluding us from the world in the cloister of the mind, imagination is the vital force that links us to the world. The power of analogical thinking is to create the links between mind and world that return mind to world. This thinking is never certifiable, never free of risk—and therefore vital. It is the method of a “mosaic philosophy,” an enlarged rationality pieced together out of the flux of life and thought, at once a mark of our humanness and that which restores our identity with the rest of nature.

CHAPTER THREE

“THE NOVEL IS A LIVING THING”: MANNERISM AND IMMORTALITY IN *THE WINGS OF THE DOVE*

“Who shall say over what fields of experience, past and current, and what immensities of perception and yearning, it shall *not* spread the protection of its wings?”

—Henry James, on the desire for immortality, “Is There a Life After Death?” (1910)

“It is art that *makes* life.”

—Henry James to H. G. Wells (1915)

In the most famous scene in *The Wings of the Dove*, the American heiress Milly Theale, who is ill and perhaps dying, stands in front of a Bronzino portrait¹ that is said to resemble her:

Once more things melted together—the beauty and the history and the facility and the splendid midsummer glow: it was a sort of magnificent maximum, the pink dawn of an apotheosis coming so curiously soon. What in fact befell was that, as she afterwards made out, it was Lord Mark who said nothing in particular—it was she who said all. She couldn’t help that—it came; and the reason it came was that she found herself, for the first moment, looking at the mysterious portrait through tears. Perhaps it was her tears that made it just then so strange and fair—as wonderful as he had said: the face of a young woman, all splendidly drawn, down to the hands, and splendidly dressed; a face almost livid in hue, yet handsome in sadness and crowned with a mass of hair, rolled back and high, that must, before fading with time, have had a family resemblance to her own. The lady in question, at all events, with her slightly Michael-angel-esque squareness, her eyes of other days, her full lips, her long neck, her recorded jewels, her brocaded and wasted reds, was a very great personage—only unaccompanied by a joy. And she was dead, dead, dead. Milly recognized her exactly in words that had nothing to do with her. “I shall never be better than this.”²

¹ The Bronzino portrait of Lucrezia Panciatichi which James has in mind, and which I discuss in detail in this chapter, can be found here: <https://www.virtualuffizi.com/portrait-of-lucrezia-panciatichi.html>.

² Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove* [1902], ed. J. Donald Crowley and Richard A. Hocks, Norton Critical Editions (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003), 139. Citations refer to this edition.

This is one of the most memorable, exquisite, moving scenes in all of James. But what, exactly, is happening here? What kind of recognition is this? What does Milly mean? The scene is described as an “apotheosis,” a “magnificent maximum” of Milly Theale’s life, and perhaps of *The Wings of the Dove* itself, and it involves something like Milly’s awareness of death, perhaps of the imminence of her own death. And yet one is left with a feeling of irresolution, of uncanniness: a definitional uncanniness, in Freud’s sense, in that a likeness is being drawn between Milly and the Bronzino portrait, between the living girl in the novel and the dead girl in the painting described by the novel. (Suspend, for a moment, the question of what it means for something to be “living” or “dead” in this novel—I’ll come back to this.) But there is a further uncanniness on the level of the scene’s affect. It begins with beauty, splendor, magnificence; but it impalpably shades into joylessness, death, and finally Milly’s enigmatic remark: “I shall never be better than this.” By way of explanation of this line James writes: “Milly recognized her exactly in words that had nothing to do with her.” But what is the meaning of Milly’s “exact recognition” of the portrait’s figure if it is spoken in words that have “nothing to do” with her? What would constitute such a recognition? And what, exactly, *is* Milly recognizing or referring to with her deictic “this”? Are these tears of grief or of joy? Is Milly’s recognition tragic or transcendent?

In this chapter I address Henry James’s understanding of the concept of life. What, for James, does it mean for something to be living—whether a person or a work of art? When he writes, for example, in “The Art of Fiction” that “a novel is a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism,” or that “the only classification of the

novel that I can understand is into that which has life and that which has it not,” is he speaking metaphorically?³ What, exactly, is the life that James seeks in art?

After a brief sketch of the meanings of “life” in James’s oeuvre I will turn to a reading of *The Wings of the Dove* in which, I’ll argue, the problematic takes on its most dramatic and original form. My argument, in brief, is that *The Wings of the Dove* is James’s extremest effort to create a work of art that would actually be a living thing. How this is not an organic-form metaphor, not a consequence of a belief in vitalism (“everything is alive”), and not nonsense but in fact extraordinarily meaningful, is what I set out to explain in this chapter.

1. “Life” in James: Experience, Intensity, Renunciation

What is this elusive quality “life” that James keeps turning to throughout his career? What is the meaning of the ardent desire or injunction to “live” in his work?

“Life” in James is often closely related to or exchangeable with “experience.” There are two main senses of experience that, in their close interrelation, constitute the thematic core of his work.⁴ On the level of plot, Jamesian experience emerges through the “international theme,” the encounter between American innocence and European experience with the American (often the American Girl—Daisy Miller, Isabel Archer,

³ Henry James, *Major Stories and Essays* (New York: Library of America: 1999), 582, 583.

⁴ Cf. Walter Benjamin’s distinction between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* in his essay “Experience,” in *Selected Writings, Vol. 1*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

Milly Theale, Maggie Verver—but there are also Christopher Newman and Lambert Strether) as protagonist. The international theme is the frame or generic device that James continually uses as he deepens his investigation of the moral consciousness. The stock plot of the confrontation between American and European mores provides the backdrop for questions of knowledge and perception, good and evil. The rich American Girl, product of the young country, becomes ensnared in the sordid sophistications of the Old World. The classic James plot—from *Daisy Miller* to *The Portrait of a Lady* to *The Wings of the Dove*, from *The American* to *The Ambassadors* and *The Golden Bowl*—is a version of the *Bildungsroman*, the novel of the destruction of innocence by experience, with the ambivalent compensations of knowledge.⁵

The other sense of life-as-experience central to James is that of perceptual experience: the degree of intensity or vivacity of one's impressions. In "The Art of Fiction," James speaks of the novelist's experience as "an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative... it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations."⁶ He encouraged the would-be novelist "to try

⁵ And yet it is important to note that innocence and experience are not stable or static categories in James; they often shade into each other. One way of understanding his career is that the novels increasingly complicate one's sense of who the "innocent" or "experienced" (as in guilty? knowing? compromised?) characters are and how greater power can be mobilized by so-called innocence (as in Maisie, Milly and Maggie) than by knowingness or domination.

⁶ James, *Major Stories and Essays*, 580. In this he is very close to his brother William. Their shared goal was maximum receptivity to the impression of the world upon one's consciousness. William late in life called his desideratum "pure experience": he valued Henri Bergson's ability to convey "raw un verbalized life" and "reality itself." William James, *Writings*, vol. 2 (New York: Library of America, 1987), 755, 752. His later philosophy yearns to escape the conceptual rigidity of philosophical sentences in favor of "the pulse of

to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost,” who could “[catch] the very note and trick, the strange irregular rhythm of life.”⁷ The faint hints and strange irregular rhythms of life impress themselves on the tissue of consciousness, which at the same time actively catches them, draws them into itself; it is an image of agency not as impulsive willing but as heightened receptivity.⁸

These senses of experience—as life experience and as perceptual intensity—are inseparable in James’s novels, because the quest for experience is enabled and represented by moments of transformative perception. His famous recognition scenes, in which consciousness is flooded by sensation, are what enact the transition from innocence to experience. And when “life” is the desired quantity in James, what is desired is an experiential intensity that would put one in closer contact with “real life” as opposed to the domesticated, sheltered or mediated. At the start of *The Portrait of a Lady*, Isabel Archer is “impatient to live” and hoping to gain “a general impression of life,” and she rejects Lord Warburton because she thinks his wealth would separate her “from life. From the usual chances and dangers, from what most people know and suffer.”⁹ In *The Ambassadors*, Strether tells Little Bilham, “live all you can; it’s a mistake not to. It doesn’t so much matter what you do in particular, so long as you have your life. If you

inner life” found in immediate experience—to become a mere pointing, a provocation away from itself towards life, a “return to life.” (760, 762) The renunciatory or self-cancelling desire is James’s inheritance of the deepest stratum or core of Emersonianism. See Ross Posnock, *Renunciation: Acts of Abandonment by Writers, Artists, and Philosophers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

⁷ James, *Major Stories and Essays*, 581, 586.

⁸ James here is very close to the Emerson of “Intellect”: “We only open our senses, clear away, as we can, all obstruction from the fact, and suffer the intellect to see.” Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), 419.

⁹ Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, ed. Robert D. Bamberg, Norton Critical Editions (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), 56, 119.

haven't had that what *have* you had?"¹⁰ What Isabel and Strether desire—along with James—is life understood as the suffering or undergoing of experience; they quest after the unconditioned, that elusive thing, life itself. James's novels are quest narratives in search of life. The search for the meaning of aliveness is what James inherits from Emerson—it is the mark of his Americanness, his late transcendentalism, rooted, like Emerson's, in the finitude—but also mutability—of the human form.¹¹

But does James find life? What form would it take? Is the desire for life realized or thwarted in James's novels? This is the perennial question for James criticism, and it hinges upon how we're meant to understand his ambiguous endings. Are his novels—which often culminate in forms of deflection or non-consummation—stories of failure, defeat, the unrealizability of desire; or an obscure flourishing? At stake here is the question of the meaning of what Strether calls “hav[ing] your life.” What would it look like to satisfy, or frustrate, the hunger for life that drives James's novels?

Each major critical school has given its reading of the Jamesian renunciation plot, in accordance with its own premises and desiderata, but these readings can be divided into two main camps. The traditional account of James, whether New Critical, psychoanalytic, or deconstructive, stresses James's “negative imagination”: his tragic refusal of life in favor of art.¹² Usually what is meant by life is consummated

¹⁰ Henry James, *The Ambassadors*, ed. S. P. Rosenbaum, Norton Critical Editions (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), 132.

¹¹ For a classic reading of James as characteristically “American” or Emersonian in his (and his characters') quests for freedom and the unmediated, see Richard Chase, *The American Novel and its Tradition* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1957).

¹² See, for example, Sallie Sears, *The Negative Imagination: Form and Perspective in the Novels of Henry James* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968); Laurence Holland, *The Expense of Vision: Essays on the Craft of Henry James* (1964; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982); Philip M. Weinstein, *Henry James and the Requirements of the*

heterosexual love—and his refusal to end his plots in romance-style reconciliation, or the ambiguous light in which he portrays heterosexuality (e.g., Chad—Marie; Merton—Kate; Amerigo—Maggie in the last three great novels) are taken as a repudiation of the sensuous pleasures of reality for the escapist consolations of the aesthetic. The assumption in play in this critical story, with varying degrees of explicitness, is that James was a celibate or repressed homosexual whose frustrations were sublimated into his art.¹³ Even when they don't explicitly pathologize James, they impose upon him a Schopenhauerian division between the real world of suffering and “a world elsewhere” of aesthetic fantasy into which his writing provided an escape.¹⁴

Imagination (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971); Leo Bersani, “The Jamesian Lie” in *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976). Note that the “redemptive aesthetic” argument, in which art redeems the failures of real life, is the flipside of the “negative imagination” argument: both seek a world elsewhere, whether that project is characterized positively or negatively, and are thus modes of escape from something called “reality” into something called “art.”

¹³ Compare James with Thomas Mann, for whom the Schopenhauerian schema explicitly served as a means of sublimating his homosexuality. Mann celebrates Schopenhauer as a “pessimistic humanist” whose triumph over the body and instinct (over life itself!) is laudable. Schopenhauer put forward an ideal of sainthood that welcomed death because it dissolved the illusory principle of individuation that separates us from the world. For Mann this was a heroic asceticism—and ultimately a dignifying of the human. Mann’s celebration of life-denial is linked to his renunciation of his shameful gay sexuality. Thomas Mann, “Schopenhauer” [1937] in *Essays* (New York: Vintage, 1957). The structure of *The Magic Mountain* (“up here” vs. “down there”) plays complexly on the two-worlds motif.

¹⁴ For Leslie Fiedler in *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Criterion Books, 1960), the classic impulse of American writers to escape on the open road of the new continent was caused by a failed overcoming of the Oedipus complex: they couldn't grow up; they were perverse, masturbatory, gynophobic, homoerotic. Richard Poirier shows in *A World Elsewhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966) that such hetero-moralism fails to grasp their invention of the subversive freedom of style itself: an aesthetic rapture only subordinated to “grownup sex” by the bourgeois, prurient, homosexually-panicked midcentury sub-Freudian mind. Both critics, however, maintain the two-worlds life/art split.—Note also William James’s account in *Pragmatism* of the rationalist/intellectualist desire for “refinement”: these philosophies “exquisitely satisfy that craving for a refined object of contemplation which is so powerful an appetite of the mind.” James, *Writings*, vol. 2, 496.

Highly compatible with this two-worlds biographical allegory is what Richard Rorty called the textualist¹⁵ premise of literary criticism, whether New Critical or poststructuralist (and this applies *a fortiori* to James criticism): texts, as linguistic objects, are self-referential worlds unto themselves; it is naïve to imagine that they transparently represent an “external” reality “out there.” They are (just) collections of tropes, linguistic constructs—therefore “unreal.” As Rorty suggested, this critical dogma is an “inverse Platonism” because it implies that there is a real world that texts *fail* to represent, which holds out the possibility of an accurate representation of the real world through a language purified of figuration. (So for Rorty a Paul de Man and a Bertrand Russell end up saying the same thing; they’re equally metaphysicians in the dark.) All of these approaches, whether biographical or textualist, share the dualist premise of appearance vs. reality in which there is something called “art” that is the pale shadow of something called “life.”¹⁶

Neo-pragmatist and queer readings of James beginning in the 1990s have been an important corrective to both the hetero-moralism and the dualist metaphysics of the “negative imagination” model.¹⁷ They attribute to James a far more interesting form of

¹⁵ Richard Rorty, “Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism,” *Monist* 64:2 (April 1981), 155-174.

¹⁶ De Man’s later “materialist” turn in which he finds in the materiality of the text a language devoid of signification—which he calls “history,” or say, the real—is revealing of the craving for reality which his earlier asceticism had denied him. For a discussion see Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 109ff.

¹⁷ See, for example, Ross Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity: Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Michael Moon, *A Small Boy and Others: Imitation and Initiation in American Culture from Henry James to Andy Warhol* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990). Posnock in *The Trial of Curiosity* made a strong case against the traditional reading of James as an

eroticism than that of a stifled homosexuality chastened by art; instead they reveal a James for whom eroticism suffuses all areas of life, especially the aesthetic imagination—which is seen not as an escape from the sexual “real” but a creative embodiment of erotic life. In line with the powerful influence of Foucault on literary studies and the concurrent critique of “aesthetic ideology,” the Jamesian aesthetic was de-sublimated, brought back to the world of desire and suffering, and the renunciation plot was re-envisioned not as a tragic failure or escape from life but as enabling new forms of pleasure in which the aesthetic and erotic are not separable.

In this version of the renunciation plot, the experience of missing out, giving up, or not having turns out to be *itself* a paradoxical form of fulfillment. Strether’s aim is exemplary: “to have gotten nothing for myself out of the whole thing.” This, to invoke Wallace Stevens, is a “nothing that is.” Strether’s “nothing” only refers to what can be counted in the instrumental economies of money and sex; what he *does* “get” is the aesthetic pleasure of life itself.¹⁸ Rather than a puritanical defense against sexuality, Strether’s “nothing” is the (imaginative *and* somatic) pleasure of the non-instrumental aesthetic life. And Catherine Sloper, in the last sentence of *Washington Square*, after her

aesthetic idealist. For example, he observes Strether’s “traumatophilia”—his desire to have things “go to smash.” Posnock argues for the James brothers’ shared commitment to immersive non-conceptual experience; he sees them as Frankfurt School social theorists *avant la lettre*, exemplary moderns who broke free of the “genteel tradition.” In his *Renunciation* Posnock portrays modernist renunciation as a Jamesian “return to life” rather than a Schopenhauerian escape into art.

¹⁸ Strether specifically, and Jamesian experience in general—despite its relation to the dramatic recognition scene—might be helpfully glossed by Anne-Lise François’s notion of a literature of “uncounted experience” featuring an aesthetic or emotional register of “nonappropriative contentment,” which she finds in Lafayette, Austen, Wordsworth, Dickinson, and Hardy. Anne-Lise François, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), xvii.

final rejection of her suitor Morris Townsend, turns to her needlepoint “for life, as it were.” This could simply mean “for the rest of her life”—a life sentence, as it’s clear she’ll never marry—the “as it were” being a coy Jamesian acknowledgement that his symbol (her turning to her needlepoint) is just that, a symbol of her fate. (“As it were” here meaning “so to speak.”) A more interesting approach would read “for life, as it were” as not a renunciatory self-imposed life sentence (out of sexual panic) but rather an affirmation of life—a movement away from the deathliness or life-denial of what would have been a failed marriage to Townsend, towards the vitality of artistic making: Catherine at her needlepoint as an image of the artist at work.¹⁹

2. Minny Temple’s “Taste for Life as Life”

If the central, even obsessive, preoccupation of James’s fiction is the relation between art and life, the critical trend in James studies has been away from a dualist “art vs. life” metaphysics—with art or textuality as the fantasy escape from the frustrated longings of “real life”—toward a de-sublimated relation between art and life. In what follows I participate in this general critical tendency, but I radicalize the claim: I argue that *The Wings of the Dove* represents a work in which art and life are not merely

¹⁹ In the New York edition preface to *Roderick Hudson*, James figures his younger self as “a young embroiderer of the canvas of life” and uses needlepoint as an image of the moral stakes of the artistic will. Henry James, *The Art of the Novel* (New York: Scribner, 1934), 5-6.

continuous but so intimately linked as to be *identical*: two ways of describing the same thing.

It is well known that the classic James protagonist, the young American heiress—and most directly Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove*—was strongly inspired by Minny Temple, a cousin of the Jameses on their father's Albany side and a member of their summer circle in Newport, who would die of tuberculosis in 1870, aged twenty-four. James himself acknowledged her as the inspiration for *The Wings of the Dove*, but he described it in merely thematic terms. “The idea, reduced to its essence,” James writes in the Preface to the New York edition, “is that of a young person conscious of a great capacity for life, but early stricken and doomed, condemned to die under short respite, while also enamoured of the world.” (3) This *donnée* would then produce the entanglements of the novel's plot. I want to suggest that the presence of Minny Temple in Milly Theale is more profound than merely anecdotal or thematic influence—what James calls the “putting of people into books.”²⁰ I take James's statement of 1915 to his skeptical disciple H. G. Wells—“it is art that *makes* life”—as representative of his lifelong view, and I try to take him at his word. As I will show, in *The Wings of the Dove* James creates a novel that would be a kind of *ontological technology*: a means of preserving Minny Temple's life.

Writing in *Notes of a Son and Brother* forty-four years after her death, James introduces Minny Temple as

a young and shining apparition, a creature who owed to the charm of her every aspect (her aspects were so many!) and the originality, vivacity, audacity,

²⁰ Henry James, *Autobiography*, ed. Frederick W. Dupee (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 522.

generosity, of her spirit, an indescribable grace and weight—if one might impute weight to a being so imponderable in common scales. [...] She was to remain for us the very figure and image of a felt interest in life, an interest as magnanimously far-spread, or as familiarly and exquisitely fixed, as her splendid shifting sensibility, moral, personal, nervous, and having at once such noble flights and such touchingly discouraged drops, such graces of indifference and inconsequence, might at any moment determine. She was really to remain, for our appreciation, the supreme case of a taste for life as life, as personal living; of an endlessly active and yet somehow a careless, an illusionless, a sublimely forewarned curiosity about it... (282-283)

James concludes *Notes*, his last completed volume of autobiography, mainly an appreciation of his father and brother, with forty pages in which he quotes at length from Minny's letters to John Chipman Gray, a friend and contemporary of theirs, interwoven with James's own narrative of her death.²¹ James doesn't use Minny as an occasion to display his own powers of description, his virtues of curiosity or good taste in people, or the pathos of his nostalgia for the lost world of his youth: perhaps half of the forty pages devoted to Minny are unabridged excerpts from her own letters. This first, and now last, Jamesian image of the American Girl speaks in her own voice. Often James will limit himself to a few contextualizing remarks or just bare appreciation. He has become an editor, a transmitter of Minny's dynamism. His presentation mimetically demonstrates the curiosity about character that he found unique about Minny.

²¹ The letters to Gray which James used for *Notes of a Son and Brother* are at Houghton Library and scans are available online. See Temple, Mary. 23 letters to John Chipman Gray, 1869-1870. William James papers, MS Am 1092.12. Houghton Library, Harvard College Library. The correspondence between William and Minny seems to have been strategically redacted by the James family, but Robert Richardson in *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006) speculates on the deep spiritual (and perhaps romantic) intimacy between them. William's wife Alice thought that William might have married Milly had she not died, that she (Alice) had in a sense "stolen" William from her; and Henry suggests that his portrait of Milly in *Notes*, written after William's death, was done for William: "it on *his* behalf I especially speak." James, *Autobiography*, 544.

What comes across is Minny's unmatched influence on his and William's lives. The precocious maturity of thought, the gallows wit ("either sound lungs are a very dangerous thing to have, or there is a foul conspiracy on foot to oppress me" (513)), the ferocious passion, the courageous questioning after the nature of death in her early twenties—are stunning. She has an Emersonian faith in intuition despite our self-incoherence ("let us fearlessly trust in our *whole* nature [instead of] willfully blunting our intellectual perception because it happens to run against some cherished wish of our heart" (537)); a passionate desire for selflessness (536); a refusal to simplify what William James called the "unclassifiable residuum" of experience ("Let us never give up one element of the problem for the sake of coming to a comfortable solution of it in this world" (537)).

Minny's essence, which links together all of these qualities, is her *vitality*. While she was the "heroine" of the James brothers' youth, in that "everything that took place around her took place as if primarily in relation to her and in her interest," what was particularly defining of her was her interest in *other* people's vitality. She berates Gray for his failure to be authentically himself: "The trouble is...that to me you have no distinct personality," she writes, mocking him for his posturing, encouraging the real person to respond to her letter. (526) James writes:

She liked nothing in the world so much as to see others fairly exhibited; not as they might best please her by being, but as they might most fully reveal themselves, their stuff and their truth: which was the only thing that, after any first flutter for the superficial air or grace in an acquaintance, could in the least fix her attention. She had beyond any equally young creature I have known a sense for verity of character and play of life in others, for their acting out of their force or their weakness, whatever either might be, at no matter what cost to herself; and it was this instinct that made her care so for life in general... No one felt more the charm of the actual—only the actual comprised for her kinds of reality (those to

which her letters perhaps most of all testify), that she saw treated round her for the most part either as irrelevant or as unpleasant. (509)

Minnie's precocious, writerly "sense for verity of character and play of life in others... was [the] instinct that made her care so for life in general." Her psychological acuteness—her insight into people's "play of life," their individual way of being alive—was what attached her to life "in general." Her sharpness of insight and characterization gave her a joy in life as a whole. She had a "taste for life" rooted in her physical, sensible, "nervous" being, and felt more than anyone else "the charm of the actual": not the charms of high society Newport but of the "irrelevant" and "unpleasant" realities obscured by its genteel surface.

The Wings of the Dove is the novel in which James most explicitly and powerfully deals with the meaning of Minnie Temple's death through the similarly named character Milly Theale. This novel represents the Jamesian experience plot invaded by the ultimate reality principle: the imminence of death. In the Preface to *Wings* James alludes to Minnie when he remarks on the novel's "very old—if I shouldn't perhaps rather say a very young—motive... I can scarce remember the time when the situation on which this long-drawn fiction mainly rests was not *vividly present* to me." (3, my italics) At the end of *Notes of a Son and Brother* he writes that Minnie's death "appeared so of the essence of tragedy that I was in the far-off aftertime to seek to lay the ghost by wrapping it, a particular occasion aiding, in the beauty and dignity of art." (544) In *The Wings of the Dove* James lays to rest the ghost that had haunted him for forty years. Paradoxically, he does this by creating an art of "beauty and dignity" that would make Minnie Temple live. She lives as art, if we understand art in its full Jamesian sense not as a representation of

life but as that which, in a more fundamental sense, *makes* life. What are the forms of this magic art that can overcome death and make life?

3. Versions of Mannerism

Let me return now to Milly's recognition scene with the Bronzino. For my argument, that scene—and Milly's enigmatic remark "I shall never be better than this"—emblemizes the status of life in *The Wings of the Dove*. Crucial to my account of the scene is the fact that the Bronzino is a mannerist painting. Mannerism has been understood as a style that dramatized the conflict between art and life, taking the naturalism of Renaissance forms to its breaking point and flirting with a self-conscious artifice—a break with naturalistic depiction—that represented a crisis in the history of art. I'll discuss some different accounts of the aesthetic crisis of mannerism in order to clarify its relation to James's art.

In his foundational book, *The Expense of Vision*, Laurence Holland emphasized the importance of mannerism for James. He loved the paintings of mannerists such as Veronese, Bronzino, and most of all Tintoretto; in *The Wings of the Dove*, in addition to the Bronzino portrait, two of Veronese's large feast scenes are invoked as descriptive references.²² Drawing on Arnold Hauser's *The Social History of Art*, Holland suggests that James's writing after 1897 was itself strongly mannerist. Hauser writes that in the

²² Henry James, *Italian Hours* [1909], ed. John Auchard (1992; repr. New York: Penguin, 1995), esp. 52-57.

self-conscious belatedness of its invocation of Renaissance forms, mannerism was “the first modern style” whose chaotic mixture of realism and idealism, mystical spiritualism and pantheistic naturalism signifies “the shattering of all the criteria of reality and the result of the often desperate attempt to bring the spirituality of the Middle Ages into harmony with the realism of the Renaissance.” High Renaissance forms no longer carried conviction, and the Baroque had not yet emerged: “tradition is here nothing but a bulwark against the all too violently approaching storms of the unfamiliar, an element which is felt to be a principle of life but also of destruction... [Mannerism’s] imitation of classical models is an escape from the threatening chaos” and “the subjective overstraining of its forms is the expression of the fear that form might fail in the struggle with life and art fade into soulless beauty.”²³

For Holland, James’s mannerism is analogous to Renaissance mannerism’s agon with the unmatched achievements of the High Renaissance.²⁴ In James’s case it was a manifestation of his late style, a radically extended realism shading into an incipient modernism.²⁵ Drawing on Hauser’s account of mannerism, Holland suggests that Milly’s “I shall never be better than this” conveys not only a recognition of her own death but

²³ Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, 4 vols. (New York: Vintage, 1957-58), 2:100-102.

²⁴ Holland argues for the interplay of expressionism and mannerism in late James, expressionism understood as “the interaction of the medium with the raw materials and elemental experience engaged in the creative process”—a kind of unconscious or instinctual force contained by, or impelling, mannerist form. Holland, *The Expense of Vision*, 78. While I find this dualism helpful, I’ll argue that the tendencies Holland calls expressionist are in fact intrinsic to Jamesian mannerism itself.

²⁵ I follow Theodor Adorno’s and Edward Said’s accounts of “late style” in characterizing James’s “major phase” as one of extremity, difficulty, the unreconciled—and also suggesting the lateness of his realism, the nineteenth-century novel taken to its generic limit. See Theodor W. Adorno, “Late Style in Beethoven,” in Adorno, *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 564-567, and Edward Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (New York: Vintage, 2006).

also “a sense in which any work of art, no matter how brilliant, is dead, all art being lifeless in a way which the gestures, postures, and high finish of mannerist painting display in a particular and extreme version: no blood flows through a painting or novel and no breath breathes there; one can smear greasy oil upon a yielding canvas, but no womb will conceive new life.”²⁶ For Holland, Milly’s curiously non-referential recognition, then, can be understood as a self-reflexive comment, on James’s part, about the deathliness or unreality—the essential *falseness*—of art: art, by its very nature, can never be life.²⁷ It is “dead, dead, dead.” The gorgeous mannerist portrait becomes the figure of all art, even (or especially) James’s own; and what more ironic and poignant way to convey this truth than to have it spoken by the heroine of James’s own mannerist portrait of a lady, struggling to live yet doomed: both within the novel’s plot, and ontologically, because she can never overcome the fact that she is a fictional character, not “really” alive. In Holland’s account, the image of Milly’s doom emblemizes the tragic dynamic at the core of James’s fiction: the cost or “expense” of art is life itself; the

²⁶ Holland, *The Expense of Vision*, 303.

²⁷ Contained in Holland’s choice of metaphor seems to be an implication about James’s sexuality as masturbatory or tragically homosexual: the painter’s smeared “greasy oil” as wasted or “expended” seed; the canvas (the masturbatory image, or the male sexual object) as barren. Holland’s extraordinary readings of Jamesian art as tragic can be made to align with the assumption that homosexuality is tragic because not generative of life. Note also the resonances between “expense of vision” and Shakespeare’s “The expense of spirit in a waste of shame / Is lust in action” (Sonnet 129)—which is about the unrealizability of desire. Holland exemplifies the reading of James as tragic renunciant, who sacrificed his life at the altar of art. Ross Posnock’s *The Trial of Curiosity* was a strong rebuke to this ultimately moralistic reading of James as ascetic high priest of art, as were queer studies approaches to James. These were aided by the poststructuralist effort to subvert the New Criticism’s emphasis on the hallmark of great art as the quantum of tension a work could master or make sense of: i.e., its complexity or ambiguity as opposed to non-coherence. In Holland, we can see an “apotheosis” of the New Critical/structuralist approach, in which form is strained almost to the breaking point (we might call this Holland’s own crisis-driven critical mannerism) due to the complexity of the materials Holland’s powerful readings must contain and make self-coherent.

completion of aesthetic form involves the sacrifice of the life of characters and artist, and James's novels are compulsive repetitions of this theme, spectacular failures in their increasingly elaborate efforts to escape its inevitability.

But from Hauser's account of mannerism to Holland's reading of James (exemplified by the Bronzino scene) there is a slippage that is crucial for my argument: for Hauser the stylistic extravagances of the mannerists were a response to their "fear that form might fail in the struggle with life" whereas for Holland's James "any work of art...is [necessarily] dead." Where Hauser describes Renaissance mannerism as a *tension* between life and form, Holland argues that for James form necessarily *demand*s the symbolic sacrifice of life.

Contained within Holland's reading of James is the kind of deflationary tautological literalism that has defined the modern practice of literary analysis and that might be exemplified by Paul de Man. (I've discussed this tendency above.) Art is not real; it is only (at best) referential or mimetic. Its own reality is of the secondary nature of a facsimile. This critical stance obsessively re-discovers what it already knows: that words are, after all, just words.²⁸ Holland's reading of the Bronzino scene is right insofar as what is dramatized there—through the device of the mannerist painting—is the mannerist concern with the relation between art and life. But for Holland James's quest for a living art drives the stylistic exertions of his mannerism and yet it is *a priori* doomed to fail: his mannerism is a record of the tragic-heroic effort to transcend art and

²⁸ On the Platonism of Theory, see the pragmatist Richard Rorty, *Philosophical Papers, Vol. 2: Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991) and the Rortyan Mark Edmundson's *Literature against Philosophy, Plato to Derrida: A Defense of Poetry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

become life and its necessary, foredoomed failure:²⁹ the relation of his art to life is that of a corpse with its deformed, distorted features.

I argue that there is a different way of conceiving of Jamesian mannerism. James, in my account, did not share the common-sense (idealist) assumption that art is not life, essentially barren and unreal. Rather, James *actually* believed that the greatest art was at least as real as life itself. In what follows I try to take this position seriously. This requires a certain suspension of our habitual linguistic skepticism, the dualist two-worlds (appearance/reality; subjective/objective; mind/world; this world/afterlife; art/life) presuppositions of the mainstream of literary criticism following Kant's declaration of critical common sense. I'll argue that James demands a radical ontological reorientation.

Branka Arsić, drawing on Michel de Certeau, has recently given an account of Emerson's writing as operating by a mannerist logic differently defined from that of the textualist Holland, in which "manner" is understood as a force of impersonal life or energy, "the moment when form breaks under the pressure of the nonfigural."³⁰ It is the

²⁹ Allen Grossman has in a series of powerful essays (see *The Long Schoolroom: Lessons in the Bitter Logic of the Poetic Principle* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997)) expressed this thesis as the "bitter logic of the poetic principle," and Ben Lerner has sought to continue it in his recent essay *The Hatred of Poetry* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016). It is a version of Theory's basic impulse of demystification or disenchantment of the given, revelation of what is behind surface, the dispelling of illusion. What interests me in this account is its profoundly melancholic disposition: compulsive repetition to arrive at a foregone conclusion; the endless re-cognition that things cannot be otherwise, that our desires (for wholeness, for reality, for finality) can never be satisfied. There is a kind of masochistic rhythm involved here: impossible ambition undercut by hard truth. ("You are setting yourself up for failure," says the life coach. "Perhaps what you 'really' want is to fail," says the analyst.) I argue that it is possible to conceive of the creation and criticism of great art otherwise: as achievements of, additions to, life rather than failures to become life. It is an account, influenced by Nietzsche and Stevens, of the imagination as reality; of an art that can mend nature; Emerson's "true romance which the world exists to realize."

³⁰ Branka Arsić, *On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 304.

basic textual mechanism of Emerson's ethos of what Arsić calls leave-taking, enacting a constant transformation of the given through "guerilla-like tactics" of "disidentification" of all identities and forms.³¹ I think this mischaracterizes the more dialectical character of both Emersonian and Jamesian mannerism: it is rather a difficult negotiation between form and life, form at a point of crisis. The high-wire act of James's novel is to maintain the fragile integrity of complex form precisely *in order for there to be life*: to make art live by means of form. In Arsić's account, as in much contemporary criticism, there is an equation of form with constraint, something pre-given, conventional, limiting, disciplinary, institutional; "hedging in of the life," in Emerson's phrase. There is certainly an antinomian urge toward the breaking of form in Emerson, a desire for excess and abandonment. My intervention is to argue that for these writers form serves, not to contain life, but *as* its very being—a form that is never external to but always immanent to or contiguous with life. Form is a *description* or *aspect-view* of life. Emerson's "Experience" experiments with the form of discontinuity, the *form* of fragmentariness (it is crucial that a fragment is itself a form, and implies a whole (even if unspecifiable) rather than its absence or mere shattering). In *The Wings of the Dove* mannerism embodies an effort to create a form that would be alive, that would preserve or shelter life.³²

Giorgio Agamben, in his essay "What is the Creative Act?" (an elaboration of suggestions by Gilles Deleuze) gives an account of the work of art as based on a potentiality that contains within itself an implied "impotentiality" or power not-to that is

³¹ Ibid., 308.

³² An image of this in *The Wings of the Dove* might be Densher at the end of the novel, the anguished father holding the maimed child (Milly's "memory") in his hands.

preserved *in* the achieved work of art—a kind of restraint, tact, holding-back, or most of all, *grace*—a gleam of what he calls inoperativity, a mastery not based on the dialectic of sovereignty and submission.³³ It is a power that manifests itself as a power not-to that might be compared with Aristotelian or Nietzschean aristocratic magnanimity or forbearance.³⁴ This indefinable holding-back amidst the plenitude of the work Agamben describes as mastery: “mastery is not formal perfection but quite the opposite: it is the preservation of potentiality in the act, the salvation of imperfection in a perfect form. In the painting of a master or on a page of a great writer, the resistance of the potentiality-not-to is marked in the work as the *intimate mannerism* present in every masterpiece.” (42) Agamben also cites a passage of Henri Focillon that Walter Benjamin had quoted in his notes on the character of the dialectical image: Focillon, in *The Life of Forms in Art*, notes as the hallmark of the classical style a “‘light, imperceptible tremble’ in the very immobility of form.” (43) Agamben also cites Dante on “the amphibious character of poetic creation... ‘the artist / who for the habit of art has a hand that trembles.’” (43) And he affirms Ludovico Dolce’s early account of Titian’s *Annunciation*: “color clogs up and, at the same time, is hollowed out in what has for good reason been defined as a crackling magma, where ‘flesh trembles’ and ‘lights fight the shadows.’” (45) Agamben refers to Titian’s painting: “the act of creation, which burnt on the surface of the canvas without, however, being consumed—a perfect metaphor for a potentiality that is in flames without

³³ Giorgio Agamben, *The Fire and the Tale* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017); Gilles Deleuze, “What is the Creative Act?” in *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews, 1975-1995* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2007), 317-329.

³⁴ And here, through the power not-to, Melville’s *Bartleby* hovers as a presence. Cf. Gilles Deleuze, “Bartleby; or, The Formula” in *Essays Critical and Clinical* (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Agamben, “Bartleby, or On Contingency,” in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

running out. For this reason his hand trembles, but this trembling is supreme mastery. What trembles and almost dances in the form is potentiality: *ignis ardens non comburens*.” (46) (Titian had written this motto—“a burning, not a consuming, fire”—in the corner of the painting, in reference to the burning bush.) This trembling, flickering, dancing, *mannerist* potentiality is for Agamben life preserved in and as form: what he calls here and in *The Use of Bodies* form-of-life. It is a potentiality that “does not precede the work, but accompanies it and makes it live... The life that contemplates its own potentiality to act and not to act becomes inoperative in all its operations, lives only its livableness.” (54) This last quotation is an echo of Spinoza’s definition of joy, or beatitude, as *acquiescentia in se ipso*: “a joy born of the fact that man contemplates himself and his potentiality to act.”³⁵ This is the joy of a mastery based not on domination but on the overcoming of domination’s dialectic.

4. Mannerism and Immortality

Agamben’s account of the “intimate mannerism” at the heart of a masterpiece like Titian’s *Annunciation*, a potentiality that “accompanies [the work] and makes it live,” a “trembling” of potentiality that burns in the work but never consumes it—this helps to vivify my reading of the Bronzino scene in *The Wings of the Dove*.³⁶ I want to suggest

³⁵ Spinoza, *Ethics*, IV.52 Dem. William James also loved this concept of Spinoza’s. See James, “The Gospel of Relaxation,” in *Writings* 1:829.

³⁶ It is worth noting that James saw the *Annunciation* in Venice and its memory perhaps contributed to his imagined Venice of *The Wings*.

that James's scene is *itself* mannerist in Agamben's sense: rather than the tragic unreality of art (Holland) or vitality's liberation from form (de Certeau/Arsić) what the scene stages and embodies is the flickering or vibration of life within the achieved form of the work of art: the mutual interdependence of form and life.

Giorgio Vasari, in his *Lives of the Artists*, had described the Bronzino portrait of Lucrezia Panciatichi as "so natural that it seem[s] truly alive, and nothing is wanting in [it] save breath."³⁷ Even in Vasari what is registered is the painting's fundamental uncanniness: somehow "truly alive" yet lacking the very thing that would make it so. The painting is at once lifelike and deathly: how can we understand this constitutive ambiguity? On the one hand there are vital elements: the fact that it is a portrait, which assumes a referential relation to the once-living Lucrezia; something about the oddity of the look of "this" specific person,³⁸ the penetrating intensity of *her* gaze, the magnificent high contrast of her skin tone and the ruffles of her dress, as if spot lit against the dark background. But these elements are inseparable from the painting's mannerism: the weirdly elongated neck and hands, the brilliant radiance of the woman's face somehow also reading as a deathly paleness, the stiffness of the body's posture, the enigmatic intensity of the gaze shading into the merely expressionless or generic. The tension between the singular/individuated and generic/stylized, between life-elements and death-elements, are central to the painting's force. It bends and distorts naturalistic formal

³⁷ Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, vol. 10 (of 10): Bronzino to Vasari, trans. Gaston du C. De Vere. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/33203/33203-h/33203-h.htm>

³⁸ Mannerism is often discussed as a style concerned with particularity, having abandoned Renaissance humanism's pretensions to universality. Cf., for example, Mario Praz, *Mnemosyne: The Parallel between Literature and the Visual Arts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970).

conventions without fully dismantling them; it upholds them while inwardly resisting them. Its heightened artificiality suggests the inability of naturalism to do justice to the human life it would claim to seamlessly represent. I read this dynamic as life resisting its capture by form; the painting is mannered because life isn't fully containable, it exceeds formal conventions—but unlike Balzac's "unknown masterpiece" this doesn't result in incoherent formlessness, the failure of art (or its replacement by life), but rather in an art of mannerism, a quality of something withheld or left unsaid, a kind of grace—within the achieved form of the work. (Agamben: "the preservation of potentiality in the act, the salvation of imperfection in a perfect form. In the painting of a master or on a page of a great writer, the resistance of the potentiality-not-to is marked in the work as the *intimate mannerism* present in every masterpiece." (42)) And so the painting's anti-naturalistic gestures, the heightened "deathly" artifice that seem to willfully refuse verisimilitude—are in fact the very forms its vitality takes. Its vital mannerism lies in its quality of being unreconciled, the vibrating or flickering of force preserved through form.

We are now in a position to grasp the full meaning of Milly's remark, "I shall never be better than this," which James says constitutes an exact recognition of the portrait's subject (Lucrezia) "in words that had nothing to do with her." Since "this" does not refer to the painting or its subject, it can only refer to Milly's own status, something like: "I shall never be better than I am now." And yet James tells us that Milly's remark is not merely self-referential but also *exactly recognizes* Lucrezia. The only way to understand this is to see the recognition as occurring not for Milly herself but for the

reader, for whom, at James's direction, Milly's self-referential remark in some way enables an exact recognition of the painting before Milly.³⁹

What is the nature of this exact recognition—not, James is very clear in saying, an impressionistic analogy or vague likeness? “I shall never be better than I am now” must thus express the exact meaning of the painting. Through James's free indirect discourse we have just entered into Milly's encounter with the painting, following the ambivalent response it registers in her—a mixture of magnificence, wonder, joylessness, death—experienced through the blurriness of tears. The fact that this experience immediately gives rise to her self-reflexive remark suggests that the remark can be at least partially glossed by the recorded experience. What Milly has experienced, if not fully cognized, is the ambivalent relation between life and death expressed through the mannerist painting in front of her and which has elicited the ambivalent emotion marked by her tears. “I shall never be better than this” thus marks a recognition (if not one Milly herself could put into words) of the co-presence of life and death: the deep truth expressed through the painting, and the truth of her own status, not as a dying girl but as any human being. She transcends the pathos of her particular status and realizes that to be alive is to be dying; one can “never be better” than that. This recognition is neither “happy” nor “sad”: it is ontological. Milly's tears are of ontological exhilaration, a sublime intensity of direct access to a truth beyond emotion that the painting has produced, not discursively but immediately. It is crucial that it is the mannerism of this painting—its trembling co-

³⁹ This is an example of the late Jamesian portrayal of consciousness as dissociated from individual characters, as somehow occurring between them or around them rather than *in* them: consciousness as impersonal. (And this is related to William's late account of transpersonal consciousness in “Does Consciousness Exist?” and “Final Impressions of a Psychical Researcher” in *Writings*, vol. 2.) Sharon Cameron illuminated this dimension of Henry James in *Thinking in Henry James* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

presence of life and death, preserved through its form—that has provoked Milly’s immediate insight into her own condition (an insight that counts, though Milly does not intend it this way, as an exact comprehension of the painting’s meaning).

James has Milly recognize that through art the deepest truth of human existence—the interdependence of life and death (one cannot have one without the other)—can be accessed.⁴⁰ What makes great art live is its singular ability to reveal or provide access to this truth. Through its simultaneous finitude and immortality, it reveals (or un-conceals, to use a Heideggerian term) the truth that to live is to die. James’s belief in this revelatory function of art was the motivating principle of his life, and provides the meaning of the Bronzino scene, a microcosm of the project of *The Wings of the Dove*. On my reading, *The Wings of the Dove* is James’s effort to produce an immortal work of art: it is his way of immortalizing Minny Temple, the supreme instance in James’s life of the paradox of a boundless vitality somehow terminated. If the novel can reveal the deep truth of the co-

⁴⁰ It is important to note that, soon after the Bronzino scene, Milly undergoes a further transformative experience in Regent’s Park during which, in the singularity of her dying, she is for once united with humanity; the intense individuation, the sublime aloneness of her particular death is what universalizes her. “Their box, their great common anxiety, what was it, in this grim breathing-space, but the practical question of life? They could live if they would; that is, like herself, they had been told so: she saw them all about her, on seats, digesting the information, recognising it again as something in a slightly different shape familiar enough, the blessed old truth that they would live if they could.” (155) I take James to be saying that art and everyday life (the world we move through) can be equally powerful means of revelation; neither takes ontological priority over the other. Angus Fletcher’s account of Whitman is a helpful gloss of what I take to be James’s stance: “There are two external real worlds, the one we daily walk around in (or drive cars through), and the one the environment-poem has invented. Both would have equal shares of the real—equal shares of Being.” Angus Fletcher, *A New Theory for American Poetry: Democracy, the Environment, and the Future of Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 227.

presence of life and death, it can itself resist death. What would it mean to ask whether James accomplishes this?

5. Ontological Style: Economies of Life and Death in *The Wings of the Dove*

I'll now turn to some formal and structural features in *The Wings of the Dove* in order to show how the mannerist tension between life and death embodied by the Bronzino—its trembling vitality—provides a model for James's novel. I'll argue that what I call Henry James's philosophy of life comes most fully into view in *The Wings of the Dove*. If the three late masterpieces are the apotheosis of his art, *Wings* is the novel in which the innovations of plot and representation of his late style are infused with a philosophical perspective on the nature of life and death. I agree with T. S. Eliot's famous praise of James—"he had a mind so fine no idea could violate it"—and its less-famous clarification in the same essay: "he was the most intelligent man of his generation." James's "ideas" in *The Wings of the Dove* are expressed through, not separable from, the novel's formal structure, the workings of its fictionality: his ideas are not extricable from the novel as a series of propositions. And so in my reading I will be attempting to draw out the novel's way of thinking through its form: what I will call its ontological style.

My reading of *Wings* focuses on structural and symbolic dimensions of the novel: its architecture. I read it in terms of what I call its economies of value. Like all of James's fiction, its plot is transacted against the constant background of money; it is centrally about how value is determined and what kinds of value can be exchanged. This obsession

with exchange—the “material” basis behind the interpersonal interactions that constitute the substance of the novel—manifests in the structural mannerism of the novel, what James calls its “portentiousness,” the quality of melodrama or stylization that pushes the boundaries of psychological realism and moves the novel into the ontological dimension.

5.1: The Value of the Portentious

In the 1909 preface to the novel, James writes that more than any of his other works, *Wings* displays “that play of the portentous which I cherish so as a ‘value’” (15).⁴¹ This is certainly an admission of James’s love of melodrama, which Peter Brooks has described as a “mode of excess” or heightened significance: the later James’s allegiance to Balzacian melodramatic realism over Flaubertian deconstructive modernism, a world saturated in meaning rather than a disenchanting modernity.⁴² More specifically, the novel’s portentousness derives from Milly Theale herself, ambiguously suspended between life and death. She is so vital, so alive, with hardly a trace of illness, and yet may

⁴¹ “Portentious,” aside from its now derogatory resonance of pompous, over-solemn, self-serious, has to do with a portent, an omen or prediction of something to come, usually ominous. Perhaps the word took on its negative connotation because it came to seem a vestige of a superstitious past, the religious world of signs and wonders. Calling something “portentious” in our scientific culture suggests (at least emotional, if not veridical) falseness; a false attribution of meaning; “reading into” (perhaps for self-serving purposes) something that has no inherent meaning. It is a kind of hysteria or hyperbole. We might go so far as to say that calling something portentous is a symptom of *hermeneutophobia*: a fear of what might lie beneath the surface. This is the fear of Surface Reading and associated schools—at least, by my suspicious reading of that project: just the kind of reading they *want* (need?) to disallow. Which of us is (more) paranoid?

⁴² Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976).

be dying. The claim might be made that the novel keeps the status of her health hidden for the purpose of suspense—we keep reading to find out whether she lives or dies: the archetypal structure of suspense. But this would imply that there is an extra-textual “truth” which the narrative conceals; rather, it is essential to the novel’s meaning that it be, in fact, a live question.

One of the many mysteries of *Wings* is the nature of Milly’s illness (if indeed she has one—an open question for much of the novel) and by extension her “status” as a character. Her illness is never named, always evaded; and we are told that Milly “will never smell of medicine” or appear ill, which turns out to be true. (Her death, when it does happen, happens offstage.) One interpretation is that like Minny Temple, Milly has tuberculosis—a disease whose iconography Susan Sontag traces in *Illness as Metaphor*.⁴³ TB was the nineteenth-century romantic disease par excellence; and it was associated with youth, beauty, and sexuality—promiscuity or, alternatively, repression. And so Sontag’s comically inadequate summary of the novel is that Milly has TB and that her doctor prescribes a love affair as treatment.⁴⁴ One could have TB and be, to all appearances, asymptomatic, even increasing in beauty in a final “flush” right before death—as Milly in fact does. But to say that Milly has TB is to ignore the novel’s efforts *not* to tell us what Milly has even in the face of multiple characters (like the reader) wanting to know; its sustained efforts to de-biologize her disease, open it to conflicting interpretations. While Milly’s disease may perhaps obey the start-and-stop temporality of TB, with times of improvement and decline, perhaps due to the influence of climate or emotional state (in the manner of *The Portrait of a Lady*’s consumptive Ralph Touchett),

⁴³ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

Milly's disease in *Wings* is attached not to emotional variability but to the state of her will; it is inseparable from her character, her experience, her uniqueness, her wealth. More than just a disease, it is an existential or symbolic predicament—it is the occasion for characterological and narrative opportunities. The symbolic temporality of TB makes it a perfect device for narrative: tension and release, the basic structure of life and art.⁴⁵

In this symbolic sense in which I am arguing we should understand Milly's disease, what is crucial is its indeterminacy: it is an open question; the verdict has not yet been given. One analogy that will help to characterize this dynamic is Freud's account of the conflict between life and death instincts as *itself* what life is. At the end of *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud defines life as “the struggle between Eros and Death, between the instinct of life and instinct of destruction, as it works itself out in the human species. This struggle is what all life essentially consists of, and the evolution of civilization may therefore be simply described as the struggle for life of the human species.”⁴⁶ In Freud's melodramatic Victorian science—part of the same intellectual climate as *Wings*—life simply *is* the struggle between life and death. Milly's character embodies this existential conflict, which then suffuses other dimensions of the novel: the possibility of Milly's death is the narrative *donnée* that gives rise to the novel's plot and the “plotting” in which the other characters engage; this plotting in both senses is paralleled, mirrored, doubled, by James's own symbolic authorial burden: he must keep

⁴⁵ Cf. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934; New York: Perigee, 1980) on this rhythm, basic to a pragmatist account of art.

⁴⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* [1930], trans. James Strachey (1961; New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 82.

Milly alive—hold her aloft, keep her afloat⁴⁷—long enough to maximize the symbolic/aesthetic value her impending death can generate, all the time circling in on her, dooming her, ready to cut his losses. He gains (the life of) his novel through the (life and) death of Milly, just as Kate Croy and Merton Densher would gain the possibility of a life together through her death.

In the preface James speaks retrospectively of the imaginative germ of the novel: “The idea, reduced to its essence, is that of a young person conscious of a great capacity for life, but early stricken and doomed, condemned to die under short respite, while also enamored of the world; aware moreover of the condemnation and passionately desiring to ‘put in’ before extinction as many of the finer vibrations as possible, and so achieve, however briefly and brokenly, *the sense of having lived*.” (3) In this précis the plot’s end (Milly’s death) is its beginning; but this is a teleology that the novel in its actual unfolding resists, because it requires the possibility that Milly’s will could influence her fate: that she may live by sheer desire to live; that her final “turning [of] her face to the wall” could be prevented if Densher agrees to maintain the lie that he loves her.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ On related metaphors of holding, keeping afloat, managing of life, see John Forrester, “On Holding as Metaphor: Winnicott and the Figure of St. Christopher” in *Thinking in Cases* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2017). Note the final image of Densher’s failure: the “thought” of Milly’s death and sacrifice is metaphorized: “he took it out of its sacred corner and its soft wrappings; he undid them one by one, handling them, handling *it*, as a father, baffled and tender, might handle a maimed child.” (402) Note the mixture of eroticism, the return to a favorite memory-image which he undresses (as in the parallel image of his indulging in post-coital reminiscences in his rooms in Venice (314-316)) but which he (also) handles as a father would a maimed child—suggesting that he has failed in his main duty, to hold or handle, to keep in hand, what is most precious to him.

⁴⁸ The statement “she has turned her face to the wall” is repeated four times, twice by Susan Stringham, and once each by Kate Croy and Merton Densher (334, 336, 361, 362). Milly is reported by her confidante Susan to have resigned herself to a death which might have been staved off, or at least indefinitely delayed, if Lord Mark had not revealed to Milly her beloved Densher’s betrayal: Densher has all along been secretly engaged to Kate. The revelation causes her to give up her will to live, and in fact she dies soon thereafter. The

If the image of the dying heroine is its imaginative germ, the novel's astoundingly complex substance is composed of what James can make of this germ, through the actions of the drama's other players. As he often does in the prefaces, James portrays himself as a kind of capitalist profiting from the generative potential of a narrative *donnée*: like Kate and Densher, James "would have quite honestly to assist" in Milly's disintegration, for the sake of his novel. (4) Like them, he stands to gain—in his case, the novel itself—through her death.

And so the substance of the novel, as James circles out to describing it in the Preface, will be Milly's ambiguous condition, as it effects the characters who circle around *her*. The substance of *Wings* is the "participation (appealed to, entangled and coerced as they find themselves)" of other characters in Milly's drama. Kate, Densher and the rest each find themselves supporting Milly's belief that she need not die "for reasons, for interests and advantages, from motives and points of view, of their own." They stand to gain from maintaining her belief, as they do from her death itself. And yet their participation is coerced; they "find themselves" entangled in her drama: in the unique mixed temporality of the Jamesian prefaces that we might call a staged retrospective prolepsis (in which the achieved novel must be momentarily bracketed "one would see" them "drawn in as by some pool of a Lorelei—see them terrified and tempted and charmed." (5) Later in the Preface, James reconsiders his metaphor: "I have named the Rhine-maiden, but our young friend's existence would create rather, all round her, very much that whirlpool movement of the waters produced by the sinking of a big

statement is put forward by each character with the blunt solemnity of fact, and as much as anything in *The Wings*, is "portentous."

vessel or the failure of a great business;⁴⁹ when we figure to ourselves the strong narrowing eddies, the immense force of suction, the general engulfment that, for any neighboring object, makes immersion inevitable.” (7) So Milly’s “existence” in the novel is represented in the first metaphor as a malign Siren-like principle of feminine doom-temptation or death drive, and in the second metaphor as the engulfing suction of a whirlpool. In the first her existence represents a seduction towards death; in the second, through the enormous force created by its own sinking, it pulls down everything around it.

Milly’s violence (the violent “innocence” she shares with Maggie Verver) is reciprocated by James’s military attack: “preparatively and, as it were, yearningly—given the whole ground—one began, in the event, with the outer ring, approaching the center thus by narrowing circumvallations.” (8) By means of the circumference of his alternating focalizations of consciousness, James is able to progressively engulf (a circumvallation is a circular military fortification used to wall in the enemy) his center, Milly. James here figures his novelistic practice as one of circular military attack, a raid on Milly’s vulnerable defenses—a metaphor of capture by encirclement rather than penetration.⁵⁰ Perhaps then we have two competing centers of engulfment: Milly’s dying, which pulls in and down everything around it, and, like a spiral turbine, propels the novel’s forward motion; and James’s effort to capture or engulf, through the novel, the

⁴⁹ Though compare James’s metaphor of the “failure of a great business” to his friend Howells’s portrayal of just that in *Silas Lapham* in which such a failure precisely does *not* necessitate tragedy. In fact, essential to Howells’s conception of realism is a refusal of such tragic/melodramatic ideas of fate or necessity. The realism of “real life” for Howells is a matter of contingency; it doesn’t obey the Aristotelian imperatives of plot.

⁵⁰ One might make the point that this is a figure of feminine rather than masculine sexuality. Interesting then, to turn back to his earlier figuring of Milly as a whirlpool: how can one encircle a whirlpool? Cf. Emerson’s “Circles” as a topological model.

energy of this inexorable motion and the complications stirred up by it. The second is dependent on, powered by, the first; James writes that he needs to “assist” Milly’s demise; he is complicit in it.

As much as he literally brings about the demise of his heroine, for the sake of the novel—of the “complications,” the novelistic substance, generated by the looming demise—James must also delay her death: he is like Milly whom he describes as “contesting every inch of the road, as catching at every object the grasp of which might make for delay, as clutching these things to the last moment of her strength” (5). If he is identified with those who conspire against her, he is also identified with Milly’s own desire for more life: the novel can’t live without her: it is dependent on her existence, but existence understood as being-towards-death: in order to be a novel the novel must have a dying heroine who doesn’t actually die until the full potential of her dying is realized—as the novel *Wings* itself. So *Wings* represents, structurally, the unfolding of a narrative ambivalence—delaying the exaction of Milly’s death for the purpose of eventually exacting it—once the potential energy created by that looming telos has been maximized. It thus contests itself “at every inch of the road”; like Freud’s conception of life as the contest of Eros and Death, it lives by this contest with itself.

5.2: Everything/Nothing: Mannerism, Melodrama, Tragedy

The extremity of this life or death struggle—the mannerist melodrama at the heart of *Wings*’s realism—gives rise to its singular atmosphere or world. One structuring device of the novel is the frequent repetition of “everything/nothing,” a leitmotif that is a

kind of index or register of the transactions taking place. The words are used by all the characters and have the character of a stock response,⁵¹ of Jamesian vagueness or the “portentiousness” James claims as a value in the Preface. It provides the sense of a shared idiom among characters not intimate with each other—it gives the sense, as Sharon Cameron argued, of the maneuvers of a shared consciousness, as if multiple people could think the same thought, producing the peculiarly claustrophobic late Jamesian atmosphere of being in one mind (perhaps the amalgamation registers, self-reflexively, the ontological fact that James is writing all the consciousnesses he represents—and so their shared idiom is his means of registering of the contrivance of their individuality and in so doing, subsuming them within his own authorial individuality)⁵² like Densher in the

⁵¹ Deleuze in “Bartleby, or the Formula” describes “I would prefer not to” as a mannerist formula—a useful gloss to several of the mantras of *The Wings*: everything/nothing; “she has turned her face to the wall”; Milly’s characterization as a “dove” like the shared symbolism of a golden bowl in that novel—instances of a mannerist aesthetic no longer based on a certain logic of individuated speech and thought. The line associated with Milly—“one would live if one could”—functions similarly.

⁵² Leo Bersani argues that the three main centers of consciousness in *Wings* are each merged with the perspective of the narrator—and thereby denied autonomy—such that they become allegorical functions of a single narratorial consciousness, alienated from the demands of the social world. Bersani, “Narrator as Center in *Wings of the Dove*” (1960). This argument is amplified in Bersani’s “The Jamesian Lie” in *A Future for Astyanax*, in which James’s novels are said to convert the actuality or particularity of persons that constitutes genuine community into James’s artist’s escape from truth or reality; in encounters with the “traumatic real” the novels renounce the world in exchange for their own sublimated aesthetic triumph. Richard Poirier makes a similar argument in *A World Elsewhere*: actuality’s “elsewhere” is achieved through literary style, is “the place of style.”

A student of mine offered a helpful insight: “I don’t identify with any of the characters so much as with the narration itself.” She was suggesting that the “narration” functions as a kind of master-consciousness or person-like agency (a “selecting principle,” to quote Emerson) that takes shape through its choice of what to reveal about the characters, thereby rendering them less “real” or independent—in contrast to a conventional realist narration which seeks to efface itself, to create the effect of its own transparency, act as a window onto reality. (I owe this insight to Mercedes Fissore-O’Leary.) Perhaps James’s modernism consists in his heightening of the felt presence of the “medium”: not a transparent window but a smudged one, necessarily perspectival, ruthlessly selective, prismatic, perhaps even opaque; a canvas (say Cezanne), a mirror—or a wall (the closed door of Palazzo

“crystal pool” of Milly’s ambience. Don’t forget, he seems to be saying, that this is the ambience of my own consciousness.

Everything/nothing also marks the world of the novel as extreme, as all or nothing, rather than a space of potential compromise or muddling through as in Howellsian realism. This “everything/nothing” motif marks this as a melodramatic world: the stakes are always total success or total failure. It also marks it as a tragic world: tragedy is the genre of all/nothing, of a “rotten” perfectionism (in Kenneth Burke’s phrase) that evacuates the possibility of the balanced middle ground, the good enough, the ordinary that doesn’t abide by Theory’s rationalist demand for the exclusion of the middle. (The Platonist drive of Theory is thus analogous to that of Tragedy.)

The first two books of the novel set up the world in which Kate and Densher live as one of extremes—a “realist” world, all-too inflected by the harsh realities of life, but structured by an angular, mannerist feeling of extremity. There are no half-measures, no fudging, no reconciliation. Kate’s history—meant to give credibility to her character’s insatiable force, though James doubts his success—is the story of her family. Her father Lionel Croy has done something “unspeakable”; he has done “everything”—something

Leporelli, after Milly has “turned her face to the wall”). Note that the novel begins with Kate looking at herself in the mirror in her father’s seedy rooms: “She stared into the tarnished glass too hard indeed to be staring at her beauty alone... If she saw more things than her fine face in the dull glass of her father’s lodgings she might have seen that after all she was not herself a fact in the collapse” [of her family]. (22) She sees herself amidst her surroundings, including the tarnished surface, the material “medium” of the mirror itself. Like Lacan’s infant, she realizes her separateness—difference—from the reflection she receives. Much could be said about the novel’s representational scheme in relation to this “originary” moment of mirroring, especially in relation to the kind of seeing associated with portraits of ladies in James. Note that *The Portrait of a Lady* is an apotheosis of realism in that it is just that, a portrait, a representation of its heroine. In *The Wings of the Dove*, we see, as if adding a further layer to the Platonic schema, a portrait of a portrait (of a lady): specifically, Milly’s communion with the Bronzino. In this further degree of self-reflexivity we can register the *Aufhebung* of the roughly speaking “realist” novel (1881) by the “modernist” one (1902).

so sordid as to have effectively banished him from the human community. Kate speaks of the “silence that surrounds him, the silence that, for the world, has washed him out. He doesn’t exist for people.” (58) He is truly Kate’s “cross” to bear—marriage would give her a new name, disburden her of her “Croy.” And yet she “loved [the name Croy] in fact the more tenderly for that bleeding wound.” (23)⁵³ Though Milly is the sacrificial figure of the book’s title, Kate begins by offering herself as a sacrifice to her father; she would bear the burden of Lionel Croy; she’d take care of him, would never marry, would die still attached to his infamous name. She begins the novel as an Antigone or Cordelia figure. The novel’s instigating impetus is in fact Croy’s rejection of Kate’s attempted self-sacrifice: in the economy of this world, this is not an option: filial love counts for nothing. What counts is the power gained from money and status. Sacrifice would *waste* her obvious value. Waste is not an option (though contrast this sense of “making it” with the James family’s emphasis on the “conversion” of waste in James’s *Autobiography*: a very different economy.)⁵⁴ And so Kate is left no option but to go to Aunt Maud, because the other seeming alternative, marrying poor and having beastly children like her sister Mrs. Condrip (the name says it all) would be the epitome of abjection; the dead-end life. Kate is made for a grander stage: as Maud says, she must be seen “high up and in the light.” Kate convinces herself—or at least tries to convince Densher—that through Aunt Maud they can achieve “everything”: they can have both love and the money that could legitimize it. Kate is an interesting figure because she is not what one would call an

⁵³ “Croy” also suggests knowledge, *connaitre: je crois*. Also cry. Laurence Holland suggests crow, *merle* in French, linking her to *Portrait*’s related and remarkable Madame Merle.

⁵⁴ Cf. James, *Autobiography*, 122ff, 301-302.

idealist or an innocent; she is not naïve, she knows how the world works; but her idealism or innocence (connected with the fact that she is capable of love), consists in her belief that she could be clever enough to win what is in fact a zero-sum game: that through perfect strategy and careful manipulation, nobody would get hurt. This conceit is what earns her our (often sorely tested) sympathy.

Her idealism consists in the possibility of having “everything”: her utopian scheme in which each character can be satisfied, “squared,” according to the terms of their different regimes of value: she and Densher can have money and status, which gives them the possibility of love; Milly can have love, or the fantasy of love, which gives her life meaning—“the sense of having lived”—for the remainder of it. Kate believes that her sacrifice of Densher to Milly’s fantasy-use of him is a fair exchange for Milly’s inheritance (Milly has no other heirs whom they’d be usurping). Milly will die a good death; Kate and Densher will live happily as a result of it. This is the formal, aesthetic beauty of Kate’s plan; and Densher comes to see it as reflecting her moral heroism.

But Kate’s utopian logic is flawed because it is inhuman, it sacrifices that which cannot be sacrificed; or rather, her mistake is to assume that Densher, of all people, could rise to its level of inhumanity, its exchange of that which is, by a humanist logic, unexchangeable: one life for another. Kate would have them trade Milly’s life for their life (their thriving); and despite the inevitability of Milly’s death (they didn’t literally cause it—though they might have prevented it, or at least further delayed it, had Densher consented to simply saying the magic words—a lie—to Milly), their making use of her death functions as symbolic murder: they are “invested in” it. And so the tragedy of the novel is that Kate cannot finally “square with” Densher: her love of his humaneness (a

sentimentality that, it turns out, comes too late, only after he has already been a willing though self-deceived party to their plan) can't be assimilated to her utopian inhumanity. And his sentimentality refuses the sacrifice of a person as a fair exchange—so he converts that humanitarian sentimentality into what Kate calls his “love for [Milly's] memory,” not a real love, but a self-regarding attachment to his own already betrayed ideals that nullifies his relationship with Kate.

James does not simply “side with” either Kate or Densher; this is, as he says, a tragedy; there are no winners. Kate, though, has a sublime complexity and capacity to withstand pain, and she refuses to look away from exactly what's going on—so she is the *de facto* heroine. She is the real tragic figure. The genre of the novel is, of course, the province of failed dreamers—and its archetypal plot is the deflating of imagination by reality. The Hawthornian strain in James would give Densher some moral credit: he belatedly comes to realize the (Protestant/Kantian) imperative that persons are not to be treated as objects.⁵⁵ And yet in the belatedness of the insight, his psychic defenses against knowing, Densher has failed in his “moral obligation to be intelligent,” in Lionel Trilling's phrase. His failure may be characterized as a failure of thinking—his

⁵⁵ This is Hawthorne's “unpardonable sin”: see the figure of Chillingworth in *The Scarlet Letter* or the title character in “Ethan Brand.” Sharon Cameron in *The Corporeal Self* (1981; New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) has shown how in his fiction Hawthorne seems both obsessively attracted to and repelled by the conversion of persons into objects, or as she shows, part-objects or synecdoches of themselves. It is the major ambivalence of his fiction. His tales morally condemn such dehumanization while obsessively enacting it. We might call this the eternal struggle between art and the imperatives of morality: the artist's pattern of conflict (transgression/guilt/repentance) internal to his Puritan conscience. James inherits Hawthorne's Puritan conscience; it is even a means of freedom for him. In keeping with Leo Bersani's brilliant reading of *Portrait* in *The Freudian Body* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), we could say that James's destruction of the imperatives of realism at the end of that novel—his refusal to give a reason for Isabel's rejection of Goodwood and return to Osmond—can be read as an act of selflessness, a refusal to “use” people as objects (in this case, it is a disclaiming of psychological insight into James's beloved fictional character and avatar, Isabel, a letting go of her).

ruminations in order to prevent himself from thinking are one of the marvels of the novel. Kate, on the other hand, knows exactly what she is doing—her behavior has the mark of Aristotelian choice, deliberate, fully reflective action—and so her actions are moral, whether or not they are virtuous. Perhaps the tragic ending can be glossed with reference to Isaiah Berlin’s “tragic liberalism” in which competing social values are, finally, irreconcilable; and this may be the “tragic liberalism” of *Wings*, too: that Densher’s all-too-human sentimentality cannot withstand Kate’s sublimely inhuman love, the force that would make their union possible; the force that, in trying to deny the inevitability of tragedy, is precisely what creates tragedy.⁵⁶ Kate’s utopianism—her belief that irreconcilable goods, from different regimes of value, could be made to be equivalent—is her inhumanity; the cost of realization of utopia is so high that it becomes self-undermining. Kate is like the revolutionaries Edmund Burke excoriates in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*—who, in their quest for the universal rights of man, are willing to commit atrocities against the human that betray their purported commitment to human dignity.⁵⁷ The same might be said of Maggie Verver by the end of *The Golden Bowl*: the drive to realize her love, to institute it by sheer force of will, is what destroys the possibility of love: love’s inhumanity, its excess, its refusal of worldly constraint, its drive to the ideal, is precisely what makes its realization impossible. It becomes indistinguishable from destructiveness itself. It is the “romantic,” in James’s technical

⁵⁶ Steven B. Smith, “Isaiah Berlin’s Tragic Liberalism,” in *Modernity and its Discontents* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).

⁵⁷ Like Burke, or again, Hawthorne, a true Burkean. Cf. Hawthorne’s “My Kinsman, Major Molineux.” Burke and Hawthorne are above all critics of violence.

sense: the refusal of the constraints of reality, and in this sense it is aligned with tragedy rather than a redemption from it, as in the classical sense of romance.⁵⁸

“Everything” and “nothing” are like the “pity and dread” echo of Aristotelian tragedy that marks the end of *The Golden Bowl*. As Stanley Cavell has shown, tragedy represents an existential situation at the core of human being: the denial of finitude.⁵⁹ It comes out of a pathological yet all-too-human desire for all or nothing—instead of the seemingly lukewarm “middle range of our being,” Emerson’s provisional solution to the problem of finitude. The human urge for perfection manifests as a voracious destructiveness: it is the pathological flipside of Cavell’s healthy “moral perfectionism” akin to D. W. Winnicott’s idea of the “good enough”—not complacency but an acceptance of imperfection won only by the “rugged battle” with skepticism through which there are no shortcuts. Perfectionism in its pathological form is, rather, the inability to *see* or imagine that such a middle range, in which human finitude could be acknowledged and lived, is *possible*; tragedy is at its heart about blindness (Oedipus, Gloucester, Hamm). For Cavell the ethical life might be described as the overcoming of tragedy; if character is not destiny but can be altered, if change is possible, then tragedy could be transfigured into romance, as in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* or the

⁵⁸ In Maggie, and perhaps in Kate, we have the ambivalence of love and hate, or Eros and/as Thanatos, creation and destruction. It may be argued (and I think persuasively) that in *The Golden Bowl*, Maggie represents the triumph of power not at the expense of love but *as its enabling condition*: love is not the refusal of sovereignty or domination but intimately entwined with it. When Amerigo, embracing Maggie at the novel’s end, tells her, “I see nothing but you,” we are to understand this as her triumph over him—he loves her for the power she has so magnificently exerted over him.

⁵⁹ See, for instance, Cavell’s *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 329ff.

Hollywood “comedy of remarriage.”⁶⁰ “All or nothing” could be converted, through insight or acknowledgment, into *something*, the stuff of ordinary life, *this* world, where we live.

5.3: The Overcoming of Tragedy

I have tried to show that the narrative forms of *The Wings of the Dove* are suffused with the constitutive life/death tension of mannerism, embodied by the Bronzino scene that provides the novel with a moment of “apotheosis, coming so curiously soon”—a clue to its inner workings. But how can the novel achieve the immortality I argue James desires for it (and for Milly/Minny), if it concludes in what appears to be the tragedy of idealism and renunciation: Milly’s death, and the waste of a great fortune, the impossibility of the lovers Kate and Densher making use of the inheritance Milly has beneficently left them in order for them to realize their love? For Laurence Holland, this ending embodies “the tragic waste that James considered life and art to be.” Milly’s gift—her inhuman (because saintly) act of generosity—is a force of love-as-violence that, like the whirlpool of James’s preface, destroys those around it. Human love is tragically unrealizable; the only compensation is the achieved novel, the pitiful solace of art at the expense of life (with Milly’s extravagant wastefulness an image of the Jamesian

⁶⁰ See, respectively, Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987) and *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

artist/solipsist who can create no real life, or love, but only self-regarding fantasy images).

In an 1894 sketch of what would become *Wings*, James wrote, “I seem to get hold of the tail of a pretty idea in making that happiness, that life, that snatched experience the girl longs for, be, *in fact*, some rapturous act of that sort [leaving her inheritance to the beloved young man, who she knows has betrayed her]—some act of generosity, of passionate beneficence, of pure sacrifice, to the man she loves.”⁶¹ I think this is the key to understanding the meaning of Milly’s gift. The gift itself represents the very experience or life that Milly longs for. She has found a way to realize her life in giving herself fully to Densher; it doesn’t matter that he doesn’t want her, or that he has (however passively) deceived her. She has realized her life in her death; and her death makes her live on. Milly can gain life, can annul the miserable finality of her death, through the passionate gift. In his great essay, “Is There a Life After Death?” written in the aftermath of William’s death in 1910, James powerfully reflects on his belief in personal immortality derived from the vast “treasure of consciousness” and its access to an “unlimited vision of being.”⁶² He also speaks of the “luxury” or “magnificent waste” of thought which, he suggests, it is impossible to imagine actually going to waste; it must continue in some form. Like the dinner table conversations of Henry James, Sr. in *Notes of a Son and Brother*—in which the father urges the sons to incessantly “convert” the material of experience, to use everything around them and allow nothing to go to waste—or the Emerson of “Compensation,” nothing is wasted in the universe. This is the strongest

⁶¹ *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 105.

⁶² F. O. Matthiessen, *The James Family* (New York: Knopf, 1947), 610.

evidence that the renunciation hypothesis, with its emphasis on the tragic “expense of vision,” misses the heart of Jamesian belief.

The central question of *The Wings of the Dove* is what it means for someone to be alive. It stages, on multiple levels, the flickering or undecidability between life and death, and it creates a technology for not only formally allegorizing this tension but also embodying it. Milly is the novel’s central site of the indeterminacy of life: will she live or die? This is not simply a mystery that the plot leaves open for suspense (though it is also that) but also a symbolic question: to ask whether Milly is dying is, I argue the novel suggests, the wrong question. Rather: we don’t yet know what “living” or “dying” mean, and the novel’s project is to teach us; it is a redefinition or reorientation of the question, and it does this by means of its form.

Milly’s statement “I shall never be better than this” is a “magnificent maximum” or “apotheosis” because, as I’ve argued, it is a moment of truth in which living and dying no longer accord with their commonsense definitions: they are no longer opposites but rather inseparable, each the condition of the other—and to experience their union in one’s being is to rise to a truth, an ecstasy in which, in Wallace Stevens’s words, we “find ourselves, more truly and more strange.” Such a moment embodies what it means to be alive. It is a moment of transcendence in which we rise above life and identify it with the struggle between Life and Death—and thus, to quote Whitman, “there is really no death.”⁶³

⁶³ The source for these visions in American literature is Emersonian transcendence: “Fear and hope are alike beneath it. There is somewhat low even in hope. In the hour of vision, there is nothing that can be called gratitude, nor properly joy. The soul raised over passion beholds identity and eternal causation, perceives the self-existence of Truth and Right, and calms itself with knowing that all things go well. Vast spaces of nature, the Atlantic Ocean, the

While the melodramatic plot of *Wings* ends tragically (in death and the waste of passion), Milly's gift is a form of immortality. Life, like the mannerist art that is its embodiment, is an unresolvable tension: it refuses to resolve itself into something finite. Milly's undying gift is forever in excess of what could be received; it is her gift of life to herself, to her own imagination, and it allows her, in dying, to live on.

So the ending of *Wings* is tragic, but on a deeper level it registers the persistence of life. Kate's final cry, "We shall never again be as we were!" harkens back to Milly's "I shall never be better than this" and in effect gives the final word to Milly, who lives on through Kate's words. If Milly's statement is ontological, to "never be better" is also to never be worse: to live is to live; it is to be at once living and dying, alive and dead—it is to live the co-presence of life and death within oneself. Through her encounter with a mannerist art that refuses death, Milly (the spirit of James's beloved Minny Temple) discovers that to die is live on—through her gift—and through the ontological form of *The Wings of the Dove*.

South Sea, — long intervals of time, years, centuries, — are of no account. This which I think and feel underlay every former state of life and circumstances, as it does underlie my present, and what is called life, and what is called death." Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Essays and Lectures*, 271.

CHAPTER FOUR

“LIKE THE SUN FALLING AROUND A HELPLESS THING”: WHITMAN’S POETRY OF JUDGMENT

It would be absurd for humans...to hope that there may yet arise a Newton who could make comprehensible even the generation of a blade of grass according to natural laws that no intention has ordered.

—Kant, *Critique of Judgment* §75

A child said *What is the grass?* fetching it to me with full hands;
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he.

—Whitman, *Song of Myself* §6

Till the bridge you will need be form’d, till the ductile anchor hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.

—Whitman, “A Noiseless Patient Spider”

1. Whitman and the Question of a World

The longstanding critique of Whitman is that, by his relentless cataloguing and absorption of the world into himself—or, what amounts to the same thing, his total disinterest in the world insofar as it is other than himself—he fails to acknowledge the world as such: he destroys difference, particularity, the otherness of the other. Thus D. H. Lawrence savagely criticized Whitman—also his acknowledged master—as a poet of “allness” who created an “awful pudding of One Identity” that denied the existential separateness of persons.¹ Or Whitman is said to fold the world into his characteristically

¹ D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* [1923] (New York: Viking, 1961), 166.

American “imperial self”;² or he seeks to instantiate his actual physical presence in his poems through a false assertion of the magical powers of speech;³ or he attempts and fails to unify the fragments of a divided nation through a created persona that can “contain multitudes.”⁴ We can see how these critiques are extended in a familiar characterization of the Whitmanian project as white, masculinist, or otherwise falsely universalizing. From this perspective Whitman’s identification of himself with a variety of victims of social oppression, most infamously a fugitive slave—“I am the hounded slave, I wince at the bite of the dogs” and so forth—is a preposterous conceit.⁵

Turning the question of Whitman’s appropriateness on its head Harold Bloom celebrates Whitman as a poet of radical autonomy: a poet of autoeroticism, the true meaning of Whitman’s secret word “tally”: self-begotten, self-generating, self-satisfying, a perpetual motion machine of the imagination.⁶ Whitman can’t be accused of appropriating otherness because he is fundamentally unconcerned with otherness as such; he doesn’t claim to refer to a world but only to that which he has already absorbed into “Myself.” From this perspective, the Lawrentian charge amounts to a moralism that would legislate the imagination and that distorts the fundamentally individualistic and non-moral nature of poetry. For Bloom, Whitman is endlessly delighted by his own

² Quentin Anderson, *The Imperial Self: An Essay in American Literary and Cultural History* (New York: Vintage, 1971).

³ Tenney Nathanson, *Whitman’s Presence: Body, Voice, and Writing in Leaves of Grass* (New York: New York University Press, 1992).

⁴ Allen Grossman, “The Poetics of Union in Whitman and Lincoln,” in *The Long Schoolroom: Lessons in the Bitter Logic of the Poetic Principle* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

⁵ Though I will argue otherwise, below.

⁶ Harold Bloom, “Whitman’s Image of Voice” in *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

vitality and imagination; he is a heroic solipsist, the totally self-reliant man (in Bloom's sense of Emerson's sense) figured in a poem like Wallace Stevens's "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon": "I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw / Or heard or felt came not but from myself; / And there I found myself more truly and more strange."⁷

In what follows I argue that critical portrayals of the "universalizing" vs. "solipsistic," or inclusive vs. exclusive, Whitman actually rest on a shared assumption that we already know what self and other, subject and object, mind and world, *mean*. It is presumed by this shared metaphysics that these entities are stable, that they exist prior to the poetic act, and that relations of identity and difference simply inhere in the structure of the world. We already know how things are and are not related. By this conception, poetry merely plays with the pre-given materials of the world that we can all recognize; it does not play a part in discovering or creating the materials that make up a world. My argument is that Whitman does not consider these entities rigid or set. For him, we do not yet know what "self" or "world" mean. The project of his poetry is to discover their meanings.⁸ Whitman does not begin with conventional demarcations of identity and

⁷ George Kateb makes a strong case for the moral psychological soundness of the Whitmanian project of identification. He writes: "Could it be that unless a claimed kinship is the basis of observation all appreciation of 'otherness' tends to turn into a mere patronizing aesthetic of the picturesque or into a paternalist anthropological solicitude? Human beings may be denatured, in either case, by being seen or imagined only as surfaces. More likely, otherness will arouse fear and disgust. Finally I would say again that, at the least, it is democratic not to draw the limits too narrowly and not to give up too quickly or complacently in epistemological defeat. Whitman is straining to extend the limits of knowing, and it is democratically better to err on the side of presumptuousness than on the side of bafflement." George Kateb, *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 264-265.

⁸ This is where judgment comes in: as Linda Zerilli argues in *A Democratic Theory of Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), drawing on Hannah Arendt, judgment is a "world-building practice"—it brings a "common world" into being, against the idea that such a world preexists our actions.

difference. He does not recycle platitudes or portray what we already know in “poetic” language. I read Whitman, rather, as investigating the *nature of connection*. In a mood of wonder, Whitman’s most original poetry inquires into the nature of the bond that links beings. He asks: What binds us to life? What binds life into forms? What causes things to draw together to form a world, instead of remaining infinitely separate? Like Thoreau in *Walden*, Whitman creates a new form of thought in order to ask: “Why do precisely these objects which we behold make a world?”

My argument is indebted to Angus Fletcher’s powerful account in *A New Theory for American Poetry* of the realism of Whitman’s project.⁹ For Fletcher, Whitman’s poetic theory (as well as that of John Clare and John Ashbery) is fundamentally ecological because it is a way of thinking things in relation: it not only thinks *about* relation, but constructs relations. Whitman’s poetry provides a means of thinking our surroundings, of coming to recognize what it means to live in “a world.” In reading this poetry the reader also inhabits the poetry. For Fletcher the Whitmanian “environment poem” is an addition to reality that serves ultimately to bring us back to the actual world: it makes us aware of who we are and where we are, to echo Thoreau on Mount Katahdin. Only in poetic projects such as those of Whitman, says Fletcher, “will the actual world around us come to have a metaphysical value.”¹⁰ And thus, Fletcher’s vision of American poetry—what it was in Whitman and what it must become, in our age of environmental crisis, if it is to provide an experience of our dependence on and embeddedness in our environment—is radically different from the dominant model of poetry derived from the

⁹ Angus Fletcher, *A New Theory for American Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 227.

Romantic lyric of the individual consciousness. Fletcher advocates for a poetry that is more attentive to the reality beyond our minds; a poetry premised on what Adorno called the primacy of the object, some bedrock sense of a real world, in which the question of consciousness or mediation is simply less important, or important only insofar as it is in the service of establishing our connectedness to the world.¹¹ To quote Stevens again, though in a very different mood: “From this the poem springs: that we live in a place / That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves / And hard it is in spite of blazoned days.”

And yet the question remains: what, precisely, *is* the status of mind in a realist poetry, a poetry that values the world over the self, or that wishes to bring the self into the world, as a part of it? How can the “I” of poetry free itself from mere subjectivity in order to speak meaningfully of things as they are? While Fletcher gives an extraordinary reading of Whitman’s world-making powers, this question is ontologically prior to his account. “What is it then between us?”¹² Whitman asks the reader in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” and the question animates all of his work.¹³ In one sense, it is a rhetorical

¹¹ This focus contrasts with, say, Paul de Man’s idea of consciousness as an impasse or projection, for which there is no “outside”; nothing beyond the endless recursiveness of self-consciousness. This is the “unhappy consciousness” of Theory, for which there is always a further mask behind each mask.

¹² Walt Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1996), 310. All citations to Whitman refer to this edition.

¹³ For Nathanson this question emblemizes Whitman’s attempt to instantiate connection through performative language. Mark Noble in *American Poetic Materialism from Whitman to Stevens* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016) reads “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” as the highpoint of Whitman’s confidence in Lucretian atomism as the ground of connection between all things: an ecstatic celebration of the idea that a single indestructible substance connects things across time and space, and thus loss is impossible in the universe. I read the poem and its central question differently: not as an unearned performative fiat or a reflection of materialist confidence but as an effort to adequately express a sense of wonder that there *is* a common world at all, and that such statements participate in the ongoing

question, conveying his amazement that things *are* connected rather than infinitely separate. It follows from this that, as the poem will go on to say, what is between us, in the sense of what divides us, “avails not”—space and time are literally *nothing*; the bond is absolute, such that nothing “stands between” us. And yet I argue that here, as in all of Whitman’s most original poetry, the question is not just rhetorical: rather, he is genuinely inquiring into the *nature* of the bond, “what it *is*” between us, thereby opening a space onto a “nothing that is,” relation itself, the force of individuation and differentiation, composition and decomposition. Fletcher reveals the plenitude of Whitman’s world; but I argue that Whitman’s poetic powers are mobilized by a prior question: What is the ground of relation?

In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant gave the most powerful account we have of the mind’s effort to discover the ground of relation between itself and the world. Beyond the understanding and the reason, the topics of the first two *Critiques*, Kant posited a third mental faculty, judgment, in order to account for the kind of pleasure we experience in response to the beauty that we see in objects of nature and art, deriving from what appears to be their formal “purposiveness”—the feeling we get of order, direction, or rightness, in the absence of any concepts that could explain that perception.¹⁴ He was

making of that world in the manner of Kantian judgment. I discuss Noble’s reading at greater length in section 5, below.

¹⁴ My diction here of “what appears to be” and “the feeling we get” leaves open the question of what “gives rise to” these appearances and feelings: whether they “come from” the object or the subject; and what “gives rise to” and “come from” even mean from a Kantian perspective. It is important to Kant that what we feel is a response to the representation in our minds generated by our experience of the object; and thus what we feel is a response to our own representation, and thus not directly (only mediately) given rise to by the object itself. The feeling of taking pleasure in beauty is a response to our own mental image of the beautiful thing; it’s all in our heads; and yet—and this is the key point—this pleasure is the

convinced that this feeling rested on a transcendental, and thus universal, foundation: that it was not arbitrary, in the sense of merely personal or conventional, but rather the strongest evidence we have of a unity between the structure of the human mind and the nature of the world. In a late note, he writes: “The fact that man is affected by the sheer beauty of nature proves that he is made for and fits into this world.”¹⁵ Thus the experience of beauty, broadly defined, is what connects us to the world and to all other humans. It is a kind of secular grounding in the nature of things. Hannah Arendt saw judgment as the locus of Kant’s strongest political philosophy: judgment, the medium of singular universality, the ground of the claims we make upon each other in excess of any reasons we can give, is the basis of democratic political life.

In this chapter, I read the central Whitmanian problematic—the question of relation, of what is between us—through the lens of judgment as discussed by Kant and Arendt. For Whitman what connects us to the world is the structure of the imagination itself.

2. Judging Whitman Judging: D. H. Lawrence on Life Against Mechanism

The question of relation, of what is between us, is central to Whitman and to his reception. To read Whitman is to be caught up in the dynamic that animates all of his

best evidence we have that we are referring to something real, something universally accessible, a common object, and this evidence grounds the universal claims our judgments make. Beauty is the warrant of truth. I discuss this in greater detail below.

¹⁵ Quoted in Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 30.

work: it is to ask what would count as an adequate form of response to this work. What does it mean to *judge* Whitman? He often writes directly “to you, whoever you are.” He thus invites a reciprocal response, as if to a person, unless one treats the poetry with a detachment I believe to be alien to its spirit. I want to take as exemplary of this Whitmanian issue D. H. Lawrence’s several versions of what became his famous essay on Whitman in *Studies in Classic American Literature*.¹⁶ Taken together, these versions make up a fascinating document: they capture a single argument attempting to find its center of gravity. It is a passionate record of judgment; the reader can witness Lawrence’s process of finding an adequate and necessarily personal response to Whitman. Lawrence is trying to find the balance between his sense of Whitman’s great world-historical act of dignifying life itself and his simultaneous critique of what he perceived to be Whitman’s life-denying mechanistic materialism. Somehow for Lawrence Whitman represented both life and death. The drafts oscillate from reverence to excoriation; and the final version’s unresolved ambivalence is the source of its power, embodying its argument for a *discriminate* sympathy, an acknowledgment of the specificity of the claim the other makes on me, in opposition to what Lawrence saw as Whitman’s universal sympathy that altogether renounces judgment. In what follows, I will draw on passages from across the essays in order to sketch out the coordinates of Lawrence’s view of Whitman.

On the one hand, in the preface to *New Poems* (1920) contemporary with the writing of the *Studies*, Lawrence celebrates Whitman as the model for a “poetry of the present,” “the supreme poetry of the incarnate Now” that could capture the very “quick”

¹⁶ These have been published in D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, ed. Ezra Greenspan, Lindeth Vasey and John Worthen (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), providing a kind of archaeology of Lawrence’s thinking from 1919-1923.

of life in its incessant flux. The title's implication is that this would be a poetry adequate to the present time—the moment of high modernism—and thus also to the present instant, life as it is experienced, in process: the Bergsonian project central to modernism. For Lawrence, Whitman had gone further than anyone else in capturing the “immanence” and “incarnation” of a world of becoming, without God, without beginning or end. Whitman is himself a “liberating god” for Lawrence, as Emerson described the role of the poet in 1844, foreshadowing Whitman's arrival. In a version of the Whitman essay exactly contemporary with “The Poetry of the Present,” Lawrence gives a rapturous account of Whitman's poetry of life:

At its best it springs purely spontaneous from the well-heads of consciousness. The primal soul utters itself in strange pulsations, gushes and strokes of sound. At his best Whitman gives these throbs naked and vibrating as they emerge from the quick. They follow, pulse after pulse, line after line, each one new and unforeseeable. They are lambent, they are life itself. Such are the lines. But in the whole, moreover, the whole soul speaks at once: sensual impulse instant with spiritual impulse, and the mind serving, giving pure attention. The lovely blood-lapping sounds of consonants slipping with the fruit of vowels is unsurpassed and unsurpassable, in a thousand lines. Take any opening line, almost. — “Out of the cradle endlessly rocking—“ or again—“By the bivouac's fitful flame—“ or “When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd”—it goes straight to the soul, nothing intervenes. There is the sheer creative gesture, moving the material world in wonderful swirls. The whole soul follows its own free, spontaneous, inexplicable course, its contractions and pulsations dictated from nowhere save from the creative quick itself. And each separate line is a pulsation and a contraction. There is nothing measured or mechanical. This is the greatest poetry.¹⁷

Lawrence seems to be remarking here on Whitman's characteristic irregular, end-stopped lines, which he says spring spontaneously from a part of the soul beneath or prior to consciousness; they are “life itself” because their irregularity follows an inner, organic necessity instead of a pre-given form. Lawrence's celebration of Whitman's free verse is a radicalization of Emerson's idea in “The Poet” of a vital “meter-making argument”

¹⁷ Lawrence, *Studies* (Cambridge), 368-369.

giving rise to a poem's form, rather than form pre-existing a poem's argument.¹⁸ And yet notice that this praise of spontaneity and the pulse of life itself is not an anti-intellectualism: "the whole soul speaks at once"; the spontaneous pulses of life coming from "the creative quick" involve a "pure attention" of the mind in which "sensual impulse [is] instant with spiritual impulse." Lawrence aims to avoid what T. S. Eliot called the "dissociation of sensibility and intellect" by demonstrating their unity in Whitman's greatest poetry. This is not automatic writing, or the writing of an imbecile, a frequent charge against Whitman. Rather, at its best, "in a thousand lines," his poetry demonstrates a fusion of feeling and attention that captures the soul in its spontaneous motions, following an unpredictable yet non-arbitrary inner logic, a necessity not explicable by rules, that unfolds in real time, each line responding to the new demands of the moment. For Lawrence there is an exemplary beauty that emerges out of this organic rightness that has nothing to do with ideas of picturesqueness or perfection often associated with the "organic." At the root of this beauty is the perception of an order and a necessity, inexplicable by any conceptual determinations, emerging out of seeming disorder. As I will explain below, I believe that Lawrence here is recognizing something close to what Kant sees in nature and in the creative genius's capacity to convey "aesthetic ideas" through art, both of which Kant seeks to explain through the mental faculty of judgment, which coincides with what he called "the feeling of life." It is crucial for Lawrence that Whitman's poetry conveys a quality of necessity opposite to that of mechanism: each line is unpredictable. This counters any cliché about Whitman or free verse being free in the sense of lawless or undisciplined; rather Lawrence is redefining

¹⁸ The centrality of "pulse" and "pulsation" for Lawrence is also strongly Emersonian. I discuss this, vis-à-vis "impulse," in chapter 1.

freedom as a disciplined act of attention that can convey without distortion the unpredictable movements of life: its pulsations and contractions, ebb and flow, the continual, imperceptible self-differentiation that marks all organic life.

Lawrence believes Whitman's interpenetration of body and soul has performed a great moral service in world history: he is the supreme poet of life in that he has returned the soul to the body; he has "ensouled" the living, material person, resisting the cultural pull toward asceticism, the disembodiment or mentalizing of our nature:

"There!" he said to the soul. "Stay there!"
Stay there. Stay in the flesh. Stay in the limbs and lips and in the belly.
Stay in the breast and womb. Stay there, Oh Soul, where you belong.
Stay in the dark limbs of negroes. Stay in the body of the prostitute. Stay
in the sick flesh of the syphilitic.¹⁹ (172)

He gives dignity to our sensual being and to the outcast of society by returning the soul to the despised body, thereby forcing upon us the realization that to violate the body is to violate the soul. After centuries of Christian hatred of the body he gives value to actual material life without discrimination, cancelling the possibility of a hierarchy of human lives. He bestows value on *this* world without threats or promises of an afterlife. This amounts to a radically original "doctrine of life. A new great morality. A morality of actual living, not of salvation... Whitman, the greatest and the first and the only American teacher, was no Saviour... His was a morality of the soul living her life, not saving herself. Accepting the contact with other souls along the open road, as they lived their lives. Never trying to save them. As lief try to arrest them and throw them in gaol." (172-173) And thus Whitman's "essential message" is that the soul "is to go down the open road, as the road opens, into the unknown, keeping company with those whose soul

¹⁹ Lawrence, *Studies* (Viking), 172. Subsequent citations in body of text.

draws them near to her...the soul in her subtle sympathies accomplishing herself by the way.” (173)

Whitman’s “doctrine of life” emerged through a poetry that fused body and soul into a new intimacy in which neither was “abased” or subordinated to the other. (Cf. “Song of Myself” §5) But Whitman’s “mistake” was “his interpretation of his watchword: Sympathy.” Whitman at his weakest fails to maintain the boldness and, for Lawrence, *rigor* of his vision. Whitman’s sympathy ends up being a physicalized version of universal Christian love; a kind of saintliness. His love is indiscriminate, a pre-set program, and thus ends up failing to acknowledge the particularity of persons and his degree of relatedness, and thus distance, from them. It is an abstraction away from Whitman’s concrete linkage of body and soul in each singular person. And so the act of total identification with the “hounded slave” or the syphilitic prostitute actually betrays the great Whitmanian “morality of actual living” because it is not the product of any particular embodied person. The identification becomes mechanical, not a vital responsiveness of the soul:

“If Whitman had truly *sympathized*, he would have said: “That negro slave suffers from slavery. He wants to free himself. His soul wants to free him. He has wounds, but they are the price of freedom. The soul has a long journey from slavery to freedom. If I can help him I will: I will not take over his wounds and his slavery to myself. But I will help him fight the power that enslaves him when he wants to be free, if he wants my help, since I see in his face that he needs to be free. But even when he is free, his soul has many journeys down the open road, before it is a free soul.” (175)

...

“The evil prostitute has no desire to be embraced with love: so if you sympathize with her, you won’t try to embrace her with love. The leper loathes his leprosy, so if you sympathize with him, you’ll loathe it too.” (176)

For Lawrence, true sympathy would be a responsiveness to the other that acknowledged self and other in their particularity and limitation as opposed to an indiscriminate program of sympathy. Whitman's moral failure is his *lack of judgment*. The Whitmanian ideal that Whitman himself fails to achieve is "The soul judging for herself, and preserving her own integrity... The soul is a very perfect judge of her own motions, if your mind doesn't dictate to her." (176) This is a strongly Emersonian critique of Whitman. In its demand for self-integrity, it comes close to the "Are they *my* poor?" provocation in "Self-Reliance," helpfully glossing Emerson's difficult passage. In a strikingly counter-intuitive insight, Lawrence ends up portraying Whitman as a *rationalist* of sympathy, following a pre-determined program ("sympathize with all persons and things") instead of maintaining the strictness of intuitive judgment and thereby his "integrity": "The soul's deepest will is to preserve its own integrity, against the mind and the whole mass of disintegrating forces." (176) It is a classic Socratic plea for self-integrity, though it privileges judgment instead of reason. Lawrence thus agrees with Emerson: "nothing at last is sacred but the integrity of your own mind."²⁰ Lawrence writes: "Too often [Whitman] deliberately, self-consciously, *affects* himself... [A] self-conscious *mental* provoking of sensation and reaction in the great affective centres is what we call sentimentalism or sensationalism."²¹ There is an interesting psychology condensed here. Whitman "affects himself": this is a "self-conscious" posture, an intellectualizing defense against spontaneous affection or feeling. It is self-provoked feeling, feeling given rise to by conscious thought, a deformity Lawrence calls

²⁰ Lawrence's "soul" and Emerson's "mind" are synonyms. By mind Lawrence means the ego, one's self-conception, which blocks the free motions of the soul.

²¹ Lawrence, *Studies* (Cambridge), 404.

“sentimentalism or sensationalism.” To be sentimental is to be self-conscious about your feelings; it is to provoke certain feelings in yourself rather than feeling them in response to a specific external object or person. It is an intellectualizing of feeling, a kind of paradoxical self-numbing against true feeling. The Nietzschean critique, though Lawrence himself does not go so far as to make this charge against Whitman—perhaps because he sees so much of his own Nietzschean ideal of health in Whitman—is that Christian sentimentality is sublimated resentment, hidden violence against the other or different that seeks to neutralize this violence (and more importantly disavow it) through an “affected” universal love.

Against “sentimental” sympathy Lawrence advocates allegiance to the soul: “What my soul loves, I love. What my soul hates, I hate... For one and all, she has sympathy. The sympathy of love, the sympathy of hate, the sympathy of simple proximity; all the subtle sympathizings of the incalculable soul, from the bitterest hate to passionate love.” (176-177) In other words, like Emerson, Lawrence is advocating self-reliance not as self-assertion but as *obedience* to the soul. “I must accept her deep motions of love, or hate, or compassion, or dislike, or indifference... Purified of MERGING, purified of MYSELF, the exultant message of American Democracy, of souls in the Open Road, full of glad recognition, full of fierce readiness, full of the joy of worship, when one soul sees a greater soul. The only riches, the great souls.” (177)

To live authentically is to accept “the subtle sympathizings of the incalculable soul” in its widest range of responsiveness to chance meetings along the open road. It is to give up rigid universality. Lawrence here is extremely Emersonian, as is Gilles Deleuze, whose image of American literature was formed by Lawrence’s image of

Whitman's open road—though neither Lawrence nor Deleuze were aware of their indebtedness to Emerson.²² And yet Lawrence's vitalism is resolutely anti-materialist. For him, Whitman's indiscriminate embrace of allness abandons the *choice* or preference that elevates life above matter: "The difference between life and matter is that life, living things, living creatures, have the instinct of turning right away from *some* matter, and of blissfully ignoring the bulk of most matter, and of turning towards only some certain bits of specially selected matter... Matter *does* gravitate, helplessly. But men are tricky-tricksy, and they shy all sorts of ways." (164-165) And thus Whitman's well-known crisis around 1859-1860 after which he sings the praise of death (Lawrence cites "Scented Herbage of My Breast" from *Calamus* and "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking") signals the deep truth of his materialism: Whitman, the poet of life, is also the poet of death, whose call for "one identity" desires a sacrifice of the individual self to the oceanic whole. For Lawrence, life is not this fusion but "polarity," which he describes as the male and female principles, self and other in unresolvable antagonism. For Lawrence, Whitman denies polarity and thus ultimately denies life itself.²³

Lawrence identifies what we might call (cf. Freud, also writing around 1920) a death drive in Whitman: a desire to give up the suffering of individual existence and become part of the whole. This is the pessimism or "Buddhistic negation of the will" that Nietzsche diagnosed in Schopenhauer, Wagner and his younger self. Like Nietzsche and Freud, Lawrence suggests that life must absorb death into itself; it is the struggle with the

²² See Gilles Deleuze, "Bartleby; or, The Formula" in *Essays Critical and Clinical* (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

²³ Lawrence in early versions of the essay speaks in the language of Theosophy: "the upper and lower chakras" and so on. Lawrence shares polarity thinking with Coleridgean romanticism—a reactionary stance against Whitman's anti-polarity thinking, his monism.

death drive. It is the force that causes us to continue to resist, to maintain higher levels of excitation against self-dissolution. Nietzsche, too, suggests that vitality is equivalent to the degree of tension with which one can not only live but flourish, the intensity of self-destructiveness that one can master without succumbing to it. For Lawrence, life is resistance, selectiveness (Emerson: “man is a selecting principle”), self-defense: men “shy all sorts of ways.” So Nietzsche, Freud, and following them Lawrence are *moralist* vitalists: life is that in us which resists “easeful death,” which folds death into life’s dogged continuity. Lawrence ultimately thinks Whitman gives up the moral responsibility to maintain the burden of individuation, the continual heightening of tension and self-refining that defines what it means to be a person.

3. Kantian Judgment as “Enlarged Thinking” and “The Feeling of Life”

For Lawrence, Whitman’s refusal to follow the “subtle sympathizings of the incalculable soul” amounts to a refusal to judge, to determine his allegiances, as when Emerson speaks of “a class of persons to whom by all spiritual affinity I am bought and sold; for them I will go to prison, if need be.” Lawrence thinks Whitman’s problem is that he would go to prison for anyone; and so he renders meaningless the very idea of having an affinity for one person or thing instead of another. To refuse such affinities is to install an automatic identification with otherness that is essentially anti-life, since life is that which follows its own inner logic or tropism, its own inevitability without advance

calculation. Lawrence speaks of “the incalculable soul”; Emerson likewise says in “Experience”: “the results of life are uncalculated and uncalculable.”

Lawrence’s (and Emerson’s) idea of life as something unpredictable and yet by some occult inner logic coherent emerges out of the central intellectual dynamic of Romanticism. Romanticism can be seen as the first “re-enchantment” movement: a response to the disenchanted, calculable, mechanized nature put forward by Enlightenment thought. Its deepest project was to account for the reality of freedom in a material universe; to show that the Newtonian laws of physics and the Lockean association of ideas did not exclude the possibility of truly new and creative action. This could only be posited through the existence of some principle of soul or life force, something unpredictable and unforeseeable in nature that could challenge the materialist idea of mind and nature as mechanical.²⁴

I will turn now to Kant because in the *Critique of Judgment* he presents the conflict—between body and soul, matter and spirit, or what he called mechanism and purpose—at its greatest intensity without reaching for a resolution.²⁵ Instead he located the conflict within the structure of the human mind itself. Kant’s brilliant stroke is to suggest that the conflict *itself* reveals something about human nature, and that this self-recognition brings us closer to life. The third *Critique* is a sustained effort to unpack what

²⁴ Thomas McFarland pursues British and German Romantic efforts to refashion the soul concept against mechanism through ideas of originality and imagination, in *Originality and Imagination* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

²⁵ My sketch of Kantian judgment is informed by Eckart Förster, *The Twenty-Five Years of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); Mary Warnock, *Imagination* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976); Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*; and Michel Chaouli, *Thinking With Kant’s Critique of Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017). In what follows I cite sections and page numbers of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

is at stake in our feeling that life somehow exceeds the mechanical laws upon which we also know it to be built. Even from a scientific materialist perspective, we can't help but see a certain order or coherence in products of nature, as if they were purposefully designed. How is it that natural things seem to obey an inner logic or "purposiveness" in the absence of a divine plan of creation? (§10, 105) How is it that we recognize art or nature by a strong feeling of rightness and design in the absence of criteria that could fully explain such an intuition?

Kant, in order to account for what he considered to be a universal human experience—a pleasure that we derive from an unspecifiable sense of order or coherence in the world—posited the mental faculty of *judgment*. In cognizing objects of taste (an object that may be judged to be beautiful) and natural organisms, we perform mental operations that Kant calls reflective judgments: instead of applying a concept to a particular of experience and thus subsuming the particular under a concept (this is what Kant calls a determinative judgment) we begin with the particular and attempt to give an account of the principle or pattern that the particular exemplifies. In saying that a sunset or a painting is beautiful we don't mean that it corresponds to any rule of beauty but that it exemplifies beauty; we might say that beauty is not reducible to a set of definitions but that we can refer to a specific *example* of beauty: "X is beautiful."

The same structure holds for our cognition of natural organisms: science attempts to "make sense of" natural phenomena—to describe the functioning of a plant, or of an ecosystem—by discovering a pattern within particulars, rather than imposing a pattern on them. For Kant, it is in the nature of our minds that in the experience of beauty or in scientific investigation we *must* attribute some kind of purposiveness, order or pattern to

the object: for example, the human mind cannot think of the functioning of a heart without attributing to it a “purpose,” such as that it is “meant” to pump blood and oxygen throughout an organism in order to maintain its vital functions. What would it even mean to think of the heart in a non-purposive way? Or, think of Emerson’s embryo (discussed in chapter 1): what would it mean to conceptualize an embryo without imagining its teleology, its further development into the being it will become when it leaves the womb?²⁶ We necessarily think of an organism as performing a function within the larger system of which it is a part, from the microscopic to the cosmic level. The seemingly infinite degree of interactive order existing in the universe leaves us in speechless wonder; and yet at the same time we recognize that this particular order only appears necessary *for us*, given the structure of our minds—it does not necessarily inhere in the world itself.

The *Critique of Judgment* is divided into two sections, on “aesthetic” and “teleological” judgments—judgments about beauty and natural organisms, respectively—but both sections discuss the same mental faculty and on the most basic level elaborate one basic insight: that the judgment of purposiveness or order, whether in the context of beauty (of nature or art) or the structure of a natural organism, corresponds to a certain kind of pleasure (which I will discuss below), and is expressed in a certain linguistic form: “X is beautiful” or “X is a living thing.” The same faculty of judgment establishes my sense of the beauty of an object and my sense that an object displays the

²⁶ It would be valuable to compare Emerson’s way of writing about the embryo to other efforts to linguistically represent growth or development of living things, such as Goethe’s *Morphology of Plants*, which as Eckart Förster shows, is an effort to actually practice a new thinking of causation alluded to in Kant’s hypothetical mind. Förster, *The Twenty-Five Years*, 265-276, esp. 271ff.

purposiveness of nature (or, I want to suggest, the judgment establishes my awareness that something is *alive*). Thus: the way we think about beauty is the way we think about life itself; in both cases we *must* posit a purposiveness not attributable to any rule.

In the case of the work of art, our experience of purposiveness arises from the capacity of the artistic genius to mobilize “aesthetic ideas.” (§49; 192) These are overarching inexpressible principles (on the level of Kant’s other ideas of reason such as freedom, God and immortality) which the artist evokes through the forms of the work of art, ideas that in turn give rise to but can never be exhausted by the concepts we use to explain our experience of the work. (This is Kant’s version of the “heresy of paraphrase”: the idea that great works of art are always in excess of what can be said about them. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts, like natural things.) So the “aesthetic idea” underwrites the purposiveness of the great artwork, a purposiveness which can never be fully expressed in concepts. In nature, on the other hand, we experience purposiveness *without* positing a designing author: and so we ascribe to nature a “teleology without theology, a *natural teleology*.”²⁷ Kant sees this most prominently in examples of nature’s autopoiesis or self-organization, in which there is no longer a distinction between producer and product. Natural organisms are “reciprocally the cause and effect of their form” (§65, 245). The whole is not ontologically prior to the parts; in self-organization parts and whole somehow give rise to each other in the absence of any external animating cause.

Kant’s central insight in the *Critique of Judgment* is that there is a specific act of mind, and a particular kind of pleasure, that we receive from the experience of order in

²⁷ Chaouli, *Thinking with Kant’s Critique of Judgment*, 216.

the world, whether instantiated in nature or art. Hannah Arendt argues that this act of mind is the basis of everyday claims we make upon each other: not only “this is beautiful” but also “this is right” or “this is wrong.”²⁸ In ordinary experience our judgments do not appeal to rules or reasons: we find ourselves in the presence of things to which we *must* impute purposiveness for them to make any sense to us; for them to be cognizable at all. Kant’s boldest claim, the crux of his idea of judgment, is that our judgments possess *subjective universality*: a judgment is subjective, cannot be given authority by appealing to conventions or other empirical evidence (such as taking a poll), *and yet* has the force of universality, of an ought. (§6-9, 96-104) We expect others to feel the way we do, to experience the same pleasure of purposiveness because their faculties of understanding and imagination (their harmonious interplay is what generates this specific form of pleasure (§9, 104)) are biologically the same as ours. And so judgment is a fundamentally democratic model of thinking: it carries the conviction usually associated with objective truth and yet—and this is the key point—without any appeal to justification external to the experience itself. Kant grounds judgment within an individual experience that, by virtue of its specific feeling of rightness, is not merely individual but that which, within the individual self, connects us to others.²⁹

This is an admirable ideal: but what gives an act of reflective judgment authority? What makes it more than *merely* subjective? Why should we take anyone’s judgment seriously as possessing truth-value? Kant’s term “subjective universality” seems to be an oxymoron; it flies in the face of our strong belief that “subjective” means arbitrary; it

²⁸ Arendt, *Kant Lectures*, 67.

²⁹ See Arendt and, expanding on her account, Linda Zerilli’s reading of judgment as essential to democracy in *A Democratic Theory of Judgment*.

troubles our empiricist belief that taste is conventional or acculturated rather than a response that reveals something deeper than culture, a means of access to a transcendental stratum of the human being.³⁰ How can a subjective experience of a certain kind of pleasure, unmoored by concepts or norms, still hope to compel universal assent? Michel Chaouli observes what he calls an “existential dimension” in Kant, a search for order in a world no longer aligned with our reason by divine guarantee. Chaouli reads the Kant of the third *Critique* as addressing our deep *interestedness* (§41-42, 176-178) in the question of “whether the world can make a home for us...not as a psychological need but as something more fundamental, something for which Kant lacks a developed philosophical language.”³¹ The pleasure we take in nature and art “indicates nature’s ‘comprehensibility for the human power of judgment,’ and its beautiful products appear to us ‘as if they had actually been designed for our power of judgment.’”³² And so judgment gives us a feeling of the fitness of our minds to the world: as Chaouli puts it, it is “the name for a sensitivity or perhaps an urge *not* to heed the strictures laid down by reason, a physio-philosophical antenna for hints ‘as it were given to us by nature’... for

³⁰ It has for a long time been conventional to deny the very possibility of an aesthetic domain “deeper than culture”; see, among other culturalist postmodernists, Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1979; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984) and Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Cambridge, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1990) for whom every “discourse” is a mechanism of power, especially the supposedly preposterous idea of a disinterested Kantian aesthetic. By virtue of its status as a continuing dogma in the humanities (despite recurring “returns to the aesthetic”), it seems worthwhile to challenge this automatic response. What would it mean to take seriously, rather than scoff at the “idealism” of, Kant’s link between beauty and truth? I am arguing that beauty leads to a deeper stratum of the human being—that there is such a thing as a deeper stratum of the human being.

³¹ Chaouli, *Thinking*, 234.

³² *Ibid.*, 235; Kant, §61.

‘assuming a lawful correspondence’ between nature and ourselves. It is the capacity of our mind attuned to our specifically human needs.”³³

Kant at least manifestly disallows judgment from making ontological claims, claims about how the world actually is in itself. He vehemently asserts that purposiveness only exists *for us*; it is a necessity given the structure or “particularity” of the human mind. And yet he says that it is possible to think of “another understanding” that *could* comprehend nature’s own mode of causation beyond the antinomy within which the human mind is held captive; and the ability to posit such an alternative mind serves as the (however unsatisfying) resolution to the antinomy. (§77, 276) Eckart Förster has shown how Kant’s hypothetical account of “another understanding” was taken up by Fichte, Schelling and Goethe. Actually performing such a mode of (for Kant, superhuman) cognition in which discursive and intuitive thinking could somehow coincide, became idealism’s central project, as it lapsed into the claim that the mind can know things as they are without conceptual mediation.³⁴ And yet Chaouli shows how Kant himself, in passages from the late fragments collected in the *Opus Postumum* read alongside the third *Critique*, suggests a grounding for judgment beyond the hypothetical “other mind,” a grounding that refuses ontological dogmatism. Chaouli links the late Kant’s idea of “self-

³³ Chaouli, *Thinking*, 235.

³⁴ Eckart Förster, in *25 Years* writes of Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie*: “His methodology is wholly insufficient...he has clearly failed to learn the lesson...that ‘I am’ and ‘it is’ express two wholly distinct modes of being.” (249) Mary Warnock writes in *Imagination* that post-Kantian philosophy represents “a tremendous deterioration of the rational climate [because] the sharp distinction which Kant had drawn between what could and could not be known, between legitimate thought, and impossible, empty metaphysical speculation, had been done away with.” (63-64) Förster thinks Goethe was the most successful of post-Kantians in practicing a non-discursive thinking through his fusion of intuition and empirical observation in *Morphology of Plants* and *Theory of Colors*. Goethe’s practice could fascinatingly be compared with that of Emerson and other writers discussed in this dissertation.

positing” or auto-affection (as Chaouli puts it: “the way my body appears to itself in its motions...makes up one of the indispensable conditions of being able to comprehend the principle underlying physical forces and ‘organic forces’”) to Kant’s description, at the very beginning of the third *Critique*, of aesthetic experience as “the feeling of life.”³⁵ (§1, 90) What we feel in the judgment of taste is nothing but our own feelings of pleasure and displeasure “by means of which nothing at all in the object is designated, but in which the subject *feels itself* as it is affected by the representation.” (§1, 89) And so aesthetic experience involves a pleasure in oneself that is “the feeling of life”: but because the judgment carries subjective universality, “the aesthetic experience of beauty...is a way of feeling life, not my life alone, but life as it is shared by humanity.”³⁶ “The feeling of life” is the feeling of connectedness to an order beyond the self: it is experienced in the form of a pleasure that simultaneously individuates and universalizes.

Hannah Arendt in her political reading of the *Critique of Judgment* draws attention to the importance of imagination within the act of judgment. Imagination is the faculty that can make an absent object appear as if it were present to the senses; one can then be affected by the imaginative *representation* of an object rather than be distracted by the direct perception of it:

Only what touches, affects, one in representation, when one can no longer be affected by immediate presence...can be judged to be right or wrong, important or irrelevant, beautiful or ugly, or something in between. One then speaks of judgment and no longer of taste because, though it still affects one like a matter of taste, one now has by means of representation, established the proper distance, the remoteness or uninvolvedness or disinterestedness, that is requisite for approbation and disapprobation, for evaluating something at its proper worth. By removing the object, one has established the conditions for impartiality.³⁷

³⁵ Chaouli, *Thinking*, 264.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 266.

³⁷ Arendt, *Kant Lectures*, 67.

This capacity for spectatorial detachment through imagination allows for what Arendt highlights as Kant's emphasis on "the enlargement of the mind" or "critical thinking": "critical thinking, while still a solitary business, does not cut itself off from 'all others.' To be sure, it still goes on in isolation, but by the force of imagination it makes the others present and thus moves in a space that is potentially public, open to all sides; in other words, it adopts the position of Kant's world citizen."³⁸ Rather than an "enormously enlarged empathy through which one can know what actually goes on in the mind of all others," "enlarged thinking" is a capacity to detach from subjective conditions of self-interest and attain a generality of thinking by adopting the imagined impersonal "standpoints" of other people: "this generality, however, is not the generality of the concept...It is, on the contrary, closely connected with particulars, with the particular conditions of the standpoints one has to go through in order to arrive at one's own 'general standpoint'."³⁹

Let me pause here to summarize. There are several points from my sketch of Kantian judgment that I want to highlight with reference to Whitman. Kant was led to posit a special faculty of the mind, judgment, to account for our pleasure in "purposiveness without purpose," in reference to objects of nature and art. In the presence of an object that we perceive to be, in the broadest sense, *living*, we experience a pleasure that Kant calls a "disinterested interest," a pleasure in the existence of the object without any desire to possess it or put it to further use: we feel that it is simply good that this object exists, although this good is not attributed to a moral rule but simply

³⁸ Ibid., 43.

³⁹ Ibid., 43-44.

to our pleasure itself. As Chaouli and Arendt help us to understand, the pleasure we take in purposiveness is a pleasure in a certain kind of mental *representation*; while the object does initially give rise to a perception, our mental faculty of imagination then represents the object to us in an image, and this representation is precisely what we take pleasure in. And so it is important for Kant that the pleasure we feel derives from *our own* representation of an object; it is a form of self-affection, not a direct response to an object's presence. The faculty of judgment is self-reflexive: while it is an immediate intuition of an object without reference to concepts, what we take pleasure in is our own miraculous capacity to see something as, for example, beautiful. In saying "this landscape is beautiful" or in describing, as Emerson does, the "co-active growth" of the parts of an embryo, we take pleasure in our own capacity to judge, the nature of our minds such that we can experience order or coherence in the world. To dignify the world by recognizing beauty or life around us is to dignify the powers of mind that allow us to do so.

For Arendt, the ability to recognize purposiveness becomes the basic model for all of our everyday judgments of value: we assert a judgment that possesses the force of universality with no further ground than our capacity to make such a judgment. In asserting, "This man has courage," we are appealing not to criteria for courage but to a *sensus communis* or common sense that can "see in the particular what is valid for more than one case."⁴⁰ Judgments appeal not to predetermined rules or criteria but to the fact of

⁴⁰ Ibid., 84-85. While Kant uses the term *sensus communis*, his idea of an appeal to common sense should not be interpreted as an empiricism. (e.g., §22, 123; §40, 173) "Common sense" goes deeper than "what the majority of people think" or what is simply conventional. For Kant it is a transcendental category because it is internal to our judgments; it is a posited universality that attends the singular act of judgment. A judgment assumes universal meaningfulness; in appealing to common sense it also invents it. Arendt, I believe, does not adequately distinguish between Kantian common sense and an empiricist account of the idea. I take it to mean for Kant the necessary positing of a universal dimension to any judgment.

a world in which, if we cannot exhaustively *define* courage, our judgments of what constitutes an *example* of courage still carry our deepest conviction. Our judgments carry our sense that there exists a common world, composed of common objects, and that the give and take of judgment is what creates this world.⁴¹ As Linda Zerilli puts it, judgment is a “world-building practice.” What is essential is that judgment—the pleasure each of us takes in our capacity to make sense of a common world—grounds us in and constitutes our common world. We are connected by the pleasure we take in our faculty of imagination, an endowment we share with all of humanity. Kant calls this pleasure in one’s imagination “the feeling of life,” and it is from *this* feeling that judgment derives its universal force.

4. Whitman’s Acts of Judgment

For Kant, in witnessing aspects of the world around us as beautiful or as living, we experience “the feeling of life.” The capacity to judge, and thus experience a sense of fitness between our minds and the world, makes us feel alive and thus connected to the life beyond us. At the root of this feeling is a kind of mental excitation produced by the fact that we have minds at all: that through imagination we can form representations of things in their absence. The *Critique of Pure Reason* established the grounds of our confidence in our representations of the world. In the *Critique of Judgment* Kant is

⁴¹ Linda Zerilli’s *A Democratic Theory of Judgment* extends Arendt’s account of judgment by attaching it to the ordinary language reading of Wittgenstein, especially that of Stanley Cavell.

accounting for the sheer pleasure we feel in our capacity for representation that Kant calls “cognition in general.” (§9, 102) There is a strangely counterintuitive solipsism involved in our feeling of connection or relatedness to the world. Instead of saying that we experience *connectedness* to the world, we might put it slightly differently: through judgment, we experience *ourselves* as connected to the world. And in sum: for Kant this self-feeling *just is* the experience of connectedness. We take pleasure in a certain kind of self-experience, an experience of ourselves as alive, like the objects around us; and *this* is what genuine connectedness feels like, one that creates a new space between the familiar poles of subject and object.

In this section I read passages from Whitman’s “Song of Myself” in order to argue that his poetry dramatizes the democratic “world-building” power of judgment as theorized by Kant and Arendt: the reciprocity between recognizing life and feeling enlivened by one’s imaginative capacity to recognize life.⁴² Whitman’s poetry demonstrates how acts of imagination connect us to the world; and the sheer proliferation of such imaginative acts gives rise to what Angus Fletcher calls the “surround” of the Whitmanian “environment poem.” The Kantian framework of judgment allows us to see how the Whitmanian poem isn’t adequately described (as it often is) as being an aggrandizement or dispersal of a pre-given “self”: rather, the act of imagination itself participates in the creation of a world, through which self and other take on meaning and relation.

Whitman is most famous (and most easily parodied) for his epic catalogues, his lists of persons and things which are then inevitably identified with “myself.” For

⁴² Page references to Whitman are to the Library of America edition; I also cite sections of the 1891 “Song of Myself.”

example, section 15 of “Song of Myself” lists a series of personages put forward without any hierarchical ordering, captured in the midst of various actions:

The pure contralto sings in the organ loft,
The carpenter dresses his plank, the tongue of his foreplane whistles its wild
ascending lisp,
The married and unmarried children ride home to their Thanksgiving dinner,
The pilot seizes the king-pin, he heaves down with a strong arm,
The mate stands braced in the whale-boat, lance and harpoon are ready,
The duck-shooter walks by silent and cautious stretches,
The deacons are ordain’d with cross’d hands at the altar... (200)

After several pages of this, Whitman concludes:

And these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them,
And such as it is to be of these more or less I am,
And of these one and all I weave the song of myself.” (203)

It might seem “appropriative” of Whitman to speak of all of these people, as if he is claiming access to their experience; or as if he has the right to typify them or “sum them up” in a line. And yet note the form his registering of persons takes. There is a unique combination of generality and particularity in this list. Whitman’s use of the definite article (*the* carpenter) suggests that he is referring to a specific person; and yet the specific person serves also as an exemplification of an occupation or social role by being labeled as such (*the carpenter*). And yet the actions each is performing are not necessarily typical of their occupations; it is as if Whitman were recording what a series of people just happen to be doing at any given moment; a lesser poet might have represented these people *uniformly* performing actions representative of their type, in a mechanical fashion, like a kind of patriotic propaganda. But the more closely one reads the section, the less mechanical it seems. For there are other persons who are not typified by any occupation: “The youth lies awake in the cedar-roof’d garret and harks to the musical rain... The one-year wife is recovering and happy having a week ago borne her

first child”: these are not representative actions, just moments from anyone’s daily life. Whitman’s form of identification of these persons follows the model of Kantian judgment: *this* particular exemplifies a certain recognizable pattern (*this* is a fare-collector), a pattern which in turn could be exemplified by any number of other particulars (other fare-collectors). And yet that other particular would not be the same “the”: the same determinate article could be used to refer to another particular. Each of these persons is a “singular universal,” exemplary of a known type and yet singular because captured in the midst of a *contingent* action rather than one that necessarily corresponds to that type.

I am suggesting that even Whitman’s catalogues are not simply lists but better understood as representations of acts of judgment. These people are representative but also particular, not seamlessly exchangeable for others of the kind they nevertheless represent. The sheer contingency of the actions they are performing conveys the sense that they are caught in a random moment of someone else’s witnessing, which registers the specificity, the locatedness, rather than bland generality of Whitman’s observing stance. What I am suggesting is that, even in the most seemingly impersonal or list-like sections of the poetry, Whitman is always subtly rhetorically present in the scene. This presence is palpable in a quality of constructedness, a residue of self in the visible scene, even in what appears to be transparent mimesis, as in section 15 of “Song of Myself.” Thus, for example, in the list of persons alliterative sounds create the effect of occluding the transparency of our view of these people: *contralto* is followed by the *carpenter*; *duck-shooter* by *deacons*; *prostitute* by *president* by “on the *piazza* walk three *matrons*,” and so on. (My emphasis.) Through these alliterations it is as if Whitman is leveling

social hierarchies into the unity of a single sound that he or anyone could produce. But he is also constructing new forms of relatedness, new non-conceptual resemblances between socially segregated things. “The duck-shooter walks by silent and cautious stretches, / The deacons are ordain’d with cross’d hands at the altar”: here, in the second line the alliterative “d” and repeated “a” vowel sounds take over, the linguistic representation supplanting the represented scene, drawing attention to its artifice and alluding to the presence of the observer/writer. But he doesn’t do this systematically such that it becomes propagandistic, as if the “whole point” of the exercise were to make a political statement. Rather, such linguistic play is just one of the ways his mind works as it observes relations in the world, including that of his own language.

The observing self is also present in seemingly arbitrary parenthetical remarks threaded through the section: “The lunatic is carried at last to the asylum a confirm’d case, / (He will never sleep any more as he did in the cot in his mother’s bed-room).” It is as if the contingent person, Walt Whitman, must react to *this* particular, must add a further thought in *this* case; but the poem gives no reason why this particular would necessarily merit additional attention instead of any number of other particulars. In response to the crowd jeering at the prostitute Whitman writes, “(Miserable! I do not laugh at your oaths nor jeer you;)”; or about the young wagon driver, “(I love him, though I do not know him;).” These parentheticals are just particular judgments (“this is miserable”; “I love him”) and have no further authority, but Whitman suggests that they represent ordinary instances of strong feeling about the world that emerge unbidden, as they do for everyone.

Whitman acknowledges the mixture of “inward” responsiveness to an object (experienced as something “purposive” or living, like myself: a person) and “outward” imaginative representation of the object that these characterizations instantiate: “And these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them.” This reciprocal structure of judgment then authorizes the claim of relatedness: “And such as it is to be of these more or less I am, / And of these one and all I weave the song of myself.” Note that this is not an act of seamless identification or absorption of otherness into “myself” but a more modest claim of formal relatedness in the sense that he is both classifiable as a type and, as a particular case, escapes any finite set of classifications. The line “and such as it is to be of these more or less I am” if read in a more granular way than its compression invites, suggests an almost comical swerve away from statement rather than easy identification: “such as it is” is a shrug of the shoulders, a refusal to explain just “how it is”; it is unclear what it would mean “to be of these” beyond being another in a theoretically limitless series, since “these” refers to no set of things except “persons”; and “more or less I am” is yet another qualification, leaving room for further inequivalence between the “I” and the persons catalogued, and a winking registration of the indeterminate status of Whitman’s poetic “I” and even of the persons catalogued, whom we had thought so prosaic, so “workaday.” Finally, the line’s lack of punctuation creates an impaction of its phrases into each other, which not only impedes readability but creates different meanings depending on how one divides up the lines: my gloss corresponds to “such as it is to be of these[,] more or less I am”; but the line could alternatively be read as “such as it is to be[,] of these more or less I am” or “such as it is to be of these more or less[,] I am.” Each of these phrasings gives the line a different sense. Finally, the last line, “and of

these one and all I weave the song of myself” seems, after this, a too-neat summation: indeed, it was not in the 1855 version, only added later, and its extraneousness is obvious, as it blunts the force of Whitman’s most fascinating writing.

My point is that Whitman is always establishing relation to the world *through* acts of mind, in which the “tending inward” of reception coincides with a “tending outward” of representation; judgment’s ebb and flow. Whitman is never aiming for transparency or prose; he always registers, even if with great subtlety such that it is barely visible, the act of imagination, the texture of mind, in his representations. And so, in perhaps the most notorious passage of “Song of Myself,” the pursuit of the fugitive slave, it is crucial that Whitman literally foregrounds the act of imagination.

The hounded slave that flags in the race, leans by the fence, blowing, cover’d with
sweat,
The twinges that sting like needles his legs and neck, the murderous buckshot and
the bullets,
All these I feel or am.

I am the hounded slave, I wince at the bite of the dogs,
Hell and despair are upon me, crack and again crack the marksmen,
I clutch the rails of the fence, my gore dribs, thin;’d with the ooze of my skin,
I fall on the weeds and stones,
The riders spur their unwilling horses, haul close,
Taunt my dizzy ears and beat me violently over the head with whip-stocks.
(§33, 225)

On the one hand one can simply admire Whitman for this unflinching portrayal of the brutality of slavery. The poetry makes this reality of 1855—the institution of slavery itself, but especially what I am tempted to call the “inescapable” presence of escaped slaves in the North—visible and visceral.⁴³ And this is an example, one of the most

⁴³ Andrew Delbanco gives an account of the impact of the fugitive slave crisis on Northern sensibilities in *The War Before the War: Fugitive Slaves and the Struggle for America’s Soul from the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018). The Fugitive Slave Act—by which the federal government required that slaves who had escaped to the North be

powerful, of the effort of anti-slavery writing to create the experience of imaginative identification in Northern white readers, especially women, the most famous example of which is *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. So when Whitman says, "I am the hounded slave" he is making the point that if a black person can be a slave there is no rational reason why a white person shouldn't also be one. It may seem ridiculous to articulate this, as if it weren't too obvious to mention, but for a white person to imagine his way into the position of an enslaved black person, by means of Whitman's poetic account, is to have to confront something that should be unbearable. Whitman encourages one to think: "This unbearable thing may as well be happening to me. It is entirely contingent that it isn't. How can I go on living with that fact?" This is the "liberal" reading according to which the sympathetic imagination, engaged through sentiment, leads to political action. And a work like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* did have profound effects on the anti-slavery movement through the sentiments of white Northern women, just as it was designed to do. But especially following a work like Saidiya Hartman's critique of the numbing effects of sensationalist representations of racial violence, it has become harder to have unmitigated confidence in such logic.⁴⁴ We are surrounded by images of brutality that are meant to inspire humanitarian sentiment, especially in a media-saturated culture (the phrase "media saturated" seems quaint as I write this in 2018). It is clear that these images inure us to suffering, or worse, make us feel that a merely internal or momentary

forcibly returned to their masters in the South—made white Northerners feel personally implicated in the reality of enslavement. This was one of the major catalysts of the Civil War.

⁴⁴ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

sense of empathy counts as a response.⁴⁵ What I think is exemplary in Whitman's poem, complicating its politics of sympathy, is that the slave is actually portrayed *twice*.

Whitman begins a list of abominations:

The disdain and calmness of martyrs,
The mother of old, condemn'd for a witch, burnt with dry wood, her children
gazing on,
The hounded slave that flags in the race, leans by the fence, blowing, cover'd with
sweat... (225)

From a representative case of the national abomination of women being burnt as “witches,” Whitman moves on to a representative of the fugitive slave crisis, each narrated in two lines, followed by the summary “All these I feel or am.” At this point, we expect Whitman to move on to a new catalogue, but he doesn't. “I am the hounded slave” reads as a change of pace and of magnification, a pause in the ongoing flow of the poem to elaborate on the example that Whitman has mentioned. It is as if he is saying: it is not

⁴⁵ Adam Smith famously recognized this in his *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), in which he describes a European's complacent reaction to the news that an earthquake has killed a hundred million people in China—though it doesn't ultimately dampen Smith's faith in moral emotions grounded in reason. “Let us suppose that the great empire of China, with all its myriads of inhabitants, was suddenly swallowed up by an earthquake, and let us consider how a man of humanity in Europe, who had no sort of connection with that part of the world, would be affected upon receiving intelligence of this dreadful calamity. He would, I imagine, first of all, express very strongly his sorrow for the misfortune of that unhappy people, he would make many melancholy reflections upon the precariousness of human life, and the vanity of all the labours of man, which could thus be annihilated in a moment. He would too, perhaps, if he was a man of speculation, enter into many reasonings concerning the effects which this disaster might produce upon the commerce of Europe, and the trade and business of the world in general. And when all this fine philosophy was over, when all these humane sentiments had been once fairly expressed, he would pursue his business or his pleasure, take his repose or his diversion, with the same ease and tranquillity, as if no such accident had happened. The most frivolous disaster which could befall himself would occasion a more real disturbance. If he was to lose his little finger to-morrow, he would not sleep to-night; but, provided he never saw them, he will snore with the most profound security over the ruin of a hundred millions of his brethren, and the destruction of that immense multitude seems plainly an object less interesting to him, than this paltry misfortune of his own.” Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* [1759], ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 157.

enough to mention this in passing, however vividly. And so the summary statement “All these I feel or *am*” launches Whitman into an act of identification (“*I am*”) with the slave that serves as a singling out, a bringing into focus, a double take that foregrounds the *act* of imagination brought on as a response to the previous mention. I think we are meant to take note of the double mention of the “hounded slave”: first in the third person, then in the first person; to recognize the imaginative transfer that Whitman is effecting, from something external, not me, to something that is me. What we witness in the scene is not only the hounded slave but also Whitman in the act of taking on the role of the hounded slave. This is an example of impersonation in which we see the transformation as it takes place.

Whitman continues, in order not to trivialize his impersonations but to step outside of the frame and editorialize on what he is trying to do:

Agonies are one of my changes of garments,
I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the wounded
person,
My hurts turn livid upon me as I lean on a cane and observe.

It could be argued that this represents a too facile “trying on of perspectives,” not adequate to the difficulty of inhabiting the other’s experience. This is a major contested issue of contemporary life. To my mind, though, Whitman practices an “enlarged thinking” like Arendt’s highlighting of that term in Kant, as I discuss above. “Ask[ing] the wounded person how he feels” would misguidedly attempt what Arendt calls an “enormously enlarged empathy through which one can know what actually goes on in the mind of all others.” Whitman does not want to know “what actually goes on in the mind of all others” but to inhabit their positions through imagination. It is crucial that Whitman is writing poetry because the poetic representation *takes over* for the witnessed thing and

allows for the “remoteness or uninvolvedness or disinterestedness” that Arendt values in judgment’s capacity to provide the “general standpoint” of a “world citizen.” When Whitman says “my hurts turn livid upon me as I lean on a cane and observe,” this exemplifies the detachment of Arendt’s spectator who in imagination “makes the others present and thus moves in a space that is potentially public, open to all sides.”⁴⁶ And yet this “enlarged thinking” remains “closely connected with particulars, with the particular conditions of the standpoints one has to go through in order to arrive at one’s own ‘general standpoint’.”⁴⁷ And so, as with the “hounded slave,” Whitman’s reference to a “wounded person” will become another exercise in imaginative identification: “I am the mash’d fireman with breast-bone broken.” In each case, Whitman frames the representation *as* an act of imagination before performing it. While he is putting forward a vivid image that is meant to absorb the reader, he wants you to remember that it is a *created* image. I have already discussed Whitman’s penchant for linguistic graininess, the sound of the words that occludes the fantasy of a transparent image, and here “breast-bone broken” performs that function. In another anti-realist gesture, the fireman is somehow recording the moment of his own death—“The kneeling crowd fades with the light of the torches”—which reminds us that Whitman is the fireman but also the one who “lean[s] on a cane and observe[s]” the scene, and that perhaps what we are witnessing is a melding of perspectives, as when the fireman/Whitman says, “White and beautiful are the faces around me”: Whitman admiring men’s faces as he leans on his cane amid the crowd observing the scene, even as he gives voice to the dying man looking upward into those faces—perhaps even seeing Whitman’s face in the crowd.

⁴⁶ Arendt, *Kant Lectures*, 43.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 43-44.

I have been emphasizing how Whitman's signaled presence in these scenes is essential to their capacity to instantiate a feeling of relatedness between mind and world.

Whitman describes his characteristic stance like this:

Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am,
Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary,
Looks down, is erect, or bends an arm on an impalpable certain rest,
Looking with side-curved head curious what will come next,
Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it. (§4 191)

It is crucial that Whitman is “apart from the pulling and hauling” and “both in and out of the game.” This obliquity to the game while somehow still remaining in the midst of the action, is a self-division in both space and time, whatever the case requires, that allows for both “watching and wondering,” or we could say, perceiving and imagining. To quote Arendt, again: “Only what touches, affects, one in representation, when one can no longer be affected by immediate presence... can be judged to be right or wrong, important or irrelevant, beautiful or ugly, or something in between.”⁴⁸ It is extraordinarily Whitmanian of Arendt to say that a mental representation actually “touches” or “affects” us—what a wonderful insight, that we *feel* our thought—and gives rise to judgment. Standing apart allows Whitman the “nonchalance” that defines his posture. Emerson glosses a similar pose in “Self-Reliance”:

The nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner, and would disdain as much as a lord to do or say aught to conciliate one, is the healthy attitude of human nature. A boy is in the parlour what the pit is in the playhouse; independent, irresponsible, looking out from his corner on such people and facts as pass by, he tries and sentences them on their merits, in the swift, summary way of boys, as good, bad, interesting, silly, eloquent, troublesome. He cumbers himself never about consequences, about interests: he gives an independent, genuine verdict. You must court him: he does not court you.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Ibid., 67.

⁴⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), 261. Subsequent references are to this edition.

This nonchalance, the free use of one's judgment without fear of reprisal in which one is "sure of a dinner" that, after all, one deserves, is the healthy attitude of democracy.

Whitman: "Both in and out of the game"; Emerson: "looking out from his corner on such facts as pass by"; Arendt: "right or wrong, important or irrelevant, beautiful or ugly, or something in between"; Emerson: "good, bad, interesting, silly, eloquent, troublesome."

In standing "apart," one gains the capacity to feel one's own thought without being distracted by the force of sensory input. Whitman is often discussed as a poet of auto-eroticism, and there are scenes in "Song of Myself" that suggest this, most powerfully sections 28-29, beginning "Is this then a touch?" and in the beautiful triangulated fantasy of section 11, "Twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore." Harold Bloom has identified Whitman's figure of the "tally" as a secret reference to masturbation, registering a kind of self-generating poetics, Whitman asserting his radical originality.⁵⁰ I want to take a different approach to such moments in suggesting that Whitman is also a poet of *self-intimacy*, who takes delight in his capacity for mental representation. This is not to exclude the erotic, by any means, but to reframe it as a moment within the structure of judgment: in feeling our thinking we are also feeling other people and the world because of the common construction of our minds. Self-intimacy, the feeling of thought, is the root feeling of judgment. A meeting between Whitman's self and soul becomes erotic, but initially it is a wordless togetherness, a "lull" and "hum":

I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abase itself to you,
And you must not be abased to the other.

Loafe with me on the grass, loose the stop from your throat,
Not words, not music or rhyme I want, not custom or lecture, not even the best,

⁵⁰ Bloom, "Image of Voice," in *Agon*.

Only the lull I like, the hum of your valvèd voice. (§5, 192)

Near the end of the poem, after Whitman has travelled through all of time and space, has experienced nothingness, reckoned with death and life, there is a return to the particular:

There is that in me—I do not know what it is—but I know it is in me.

...

I do not know it—it is without name—it is a word unsaid,
It is not in any dictionary, utterance, symbol.

He will contradict himself (“Very well then I contradict myself”) and name this unnamable word: happiness. (§50, 246) We might call it “the feeling of life.”

5. Two Versions of Realism

I have been discussing Whitman’s poetry of judgment: its connective and world-building force understood as a poetic enactment or practice of Kantian judgment. I want now to consider accounts by Mark Noble and Angus Fletcher that offer different approaches to what both acknowledge to be the profound *realism* of Whitman’s poetry: the ways in which it understands itself as an embodiment of reality or world. It wants, in some primary way, to *be* life rather than a mere representation of it. It operates according to a monistic epistemology or ontology, rather than a dualistic logic of representation versus reality. My argument has attempted to account for this quality through the idea of judgment. For Kant, judgment mediates between mind and world, self and other; it is a means of bridging the strict divide between sense and understanding that Kant had established in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Judgment functions by means of exemplification rather than subsumption under concepts; it stays close to particulars, and

brings the self into relation to those particulars such that the relation itself becomes real insofar as it invests the self with “the feeling of life.” Whitman’s poetry creates intimacy between self and world through judgment, with the crucial intervention of imaginative representation. In this section, I align my approach to that of Fletcher, who attends brilliantly to the formal poetic means by which Whitman can be said to realize a world, whereas Noble, while he addresses with admirable seriousness Whitman’s commitment to a materialist ontology, fails to answer the question of how that conceptual program manifests *as poetry*; why Whitman’s atomism *must* express itself through a particular practice of poetry rather than prose.

I will summarize the approaches in some detail in order to contrast how these arguments are made. Mark Noble, in *American Poetic Materialism from Whitman to Stevens*, gives an account of Whitman’s vexed relation to the radical materialist doctrine of Lucretian atomism.⁵¹ When Whitman says, in lines 2-3 of “Song of Myself,” “And what I assume you shall assume / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you,” for Noble this registers his actual belief that everything is connected by its shared material nature. Noble traces the ethical stakes of materialism across the first three editions of *Leaves of Grass*, beginning with Whitman’s ecstatic confidence about an atomist conception of the self (in the 1855 *Leaves*, with 1856’s “Sun-Down Poem” representing the height of his confidence) in which Whitman practices “a kind of high-stakes alchemy – a special chemistry of embodied presence in which the subject reduces to matter and matter converts to spirit” and presents “a world [in which] we are finally capable of neither loss nor death.” (48-49, 55) Even the “touch” section of “Song of

⁵¹ Citations to Noble are in the body of the text.

Myself,” usually seen as registering a crisis, is ultimately reabsorbed into this affirmative paradigm. 1856’s “Sun-Down Poem” finds Whitman convinced of the survival of the self after death. However, in 1860, in “As I Ebb’d With the Ocean of Life” and the “Calamus” sequence, Whitman becomes ambivalent about the consequences of a thoroughgoing materialism. In “As I Ebb’d,” the “flow” of “Sun-Down” becomes a poetics of ebb or “drift” in which the subject contemplates its finitude, estrangement, and dissolution and “the atomistic components of an object-world accrete to little more than a detritus of subjectivity” (68). Noble observes in “As I Ebb’d” “nihilistic gestures...[that] register a psychic disappointment” and Whitman’s sense of the absurdity of “making poems that [would claim to] remake the world.” (68) The “paradoxical engine” of the 1860 poems is the creation of the poem as a “margin” (emblemized by the drifts lying at our feet, safe from the tide) “meant to fashion a space in which the embodied subject can be preserved, however provisionally, against the material fact of being made into debris.” (70) Likewise, the “Calamus” sequence, against a now conventional reading that celebrates it for its cruising sexuality, actually forestalls the “adhesive” unity it promises. In sum, Whitman’s darkening vision between 1855 and 1860 “represents the tortuous bind that a materialist poetics imposes on whomever it also offers a ground” (79); “Whitman’s poet may convert matter into spirit, but he may not outlive it.” (80) So rather than a “crisis of faith” what Whitman’s early poetry registers is Whitman’s awareness by 1860 of the “tragic” consequences of atomism: that death is the end of the person—even if the atoms of which the person is composed will become more life.

Noble’s reading is essentially cognitive, a reading of theory; he deftly traces the ideas about materialism that inform the content of the poems. But he does not answer the

question as to why these are poems in the first place: why does Whitman think through poetry? What is the conception of poetry that animates these poems such that they could not be written as philosophical prose? How are we to account for the strangeness and originality of Whitman's poetic forms—wouldn't Whitman's materialist ontology necessitate a materialist view of poetry itself?

Angus Fletcher provides a reading of Whitman's thinking through poetry: he gives a strong account of why form is integral to, enactive of thought rather than ornamental of a pre-existing thought. In *A New Theory for American Poetry* Fletcher characterizes Whitman's poetry as a radically new "grammar"—a new way of arranging experience—in the era of Jacksonian democracy which, in a climate of widening (though still of course radically exclusive) suffrage and majority rule, worked to weaken the propertied minority represented by the Founders, and which created the new social category of "unpropertied individuality."⁵² "From the poet's vantage point this would require a new poetic expressive language whose grammar would reflect the different basis of speech and communication in the new political climate—a new grammar of status relations. Grammar implies the concept of the social mechanism. The American sentence will actually have to change." (101) The question Whitman's poetry attempts to answer is: "What is the coherence principle for this or any other environment? What is post-Jacksonian coherence?" (97-98) The principle of coherence would be found in a theory of poetry: what Whitman calls, in *Democratic Vistas*, "a new theory of literary composition for imaginative works of the very first class, and especially for highest poems, is the sole course open to these States." (quoted in Fletcher 100; Whitman 992)

⁵² Citations to Fletcher are in the body of the text.

And what Whitman means by adhesion and cohesion is not simply “love of comrades” but a larger ontological and ecological project, “what the Ancients meant by *philia*, the precondition of any working state, what Lucretius meant by saying that in the nature of things *amor* had to command the cosmos.” (100) For Fletcher, this new ontological project is an imaginative vision *symbolized* by “the Whitman grammar” or “the Whitman phrase” (103) which has several characteristic features: 1) Forms of intransitivity, “almost never any strong sense of subject, verb, and object...an arrested liminal passage between and between and between. The lack of transitivity is staggering in its consistency... To read Whitman aright, we have to remain perpetually intransitive.” (108) 2) Instead of an emphasis on the clause, which subordinates and affirms a hierarchical ordering Whitman writes in *phrases*, thus democratizing poetic thought by de-hierarchizing it (110). 3) A “theory of undulant form” in which the phrase is a wave, no two exactly alike: “waves for Whitman are *eidolons* of passage and transport, signs of his own fervor” (147)—and Whitman actually *writes* in waves via 4) the trope of *anaphora*, “phrasal processions of thoughts” through repetitive figures that create the feeling of pulsation, “ritual, procession, or when let loose produces an opposed sense of onrushing elemental force” (154); this is “a vaguely magic device” related to ritual naming. (155) 5) The adjacency of people, places, and things creating a “*neighborhood of images and ideas*” (156). 6) Whitman’s characteristic “parallel present participles” creating a sense of ongoing presentness (158). 7) Use of asyndeton or choppy, discontinuous rhythms. 8) Poetry of “middle voice,” a grammatical form between active and passive meant to represent the subject acting on or for himself (165ff): “a sometimes obscure but nevertheless intimate involvement of the self in the action taken. This type of

expression transpires whenever the subject finds himself or herself in the midst of an environing situation and seeks to express this fact of interest in, connection with, whatever surrounds the self.” (167)⁵³ [Examples Fletcher gives include verb forms such as: suppose, believe, know, wish, am not, am to be believed, like, love, enjoy, here I grew up, have good housing, know well, and so on. (167)] 9) A commitment to a principle of *coherence*, which for Fletcher following Coleridge and Gödel is distinct from mechanical self-conformity, wholeness, or perfection: rather it has a quality of “completeness,” a loose hanging-together.

Fletcher’s bold overarching point, made through careful formal anatomizing, is that the Whitmanian poem does not just represent but *is* itself an environment, is *real* in the sense of possessing an “equal share of Being” with our ordinary environment without being *identical* to it:

This view would assert that there are two external real worlds, the one we daily walk around in (or drive cars through), and the one the environment-poem has invented. Both would have equal shares of the real—equal shares of Being. This view blurs the sharp distinction between fictions of fact and fact itself, but the point is that such poems are not *about* the environment. In some sense they share the same character, the same intrusion, the same coextension in our lives as has the environment. Supposing then that such poems are intended to surround us in exactly the way an actual environment surrounds us, there will occur a breakdown of the old distinction—a classical distinction throughout critical history, no matter how complex its profile at different historical periods—between the world within the poem and the world ‘out there,’ outside the poem. The environment-poem seeks symbolic control over the drifting experience of being environed, and it introduces the experience of an outside that is developed for the reader inside the experience of the work. (227)

Through the experience of inhabiting a poetic environment, “the actual world around us [will] come to have a metaphysical value, but the price of seeing this will be to blur the

⁵³ On middle voice, cf. Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), esp. 24-30.

classic distinction between idea and thing. Oddly, then, the consequence of an interest in science will be a metaphysical blurring and uncanny fragmentation of the unexamined manifold of ‘things we know to be the case’.” (227) Fletcher here is saying that poetry’s main project should be the creation of an attachment to the world through which existence itself takes on metaphysical value; but this involves a reciprocal recognition of the poem as a world and the world as a poem. This is a striking insight: to come closer to the actual world, or to value it—which may not be separable aims—is to see it with “metaphysical blurring and uncanny fragmentation,” or perhaps we could simply say imagination. Fletcher’s realism is Borgesian: reality has become language-like; but rather than creating a deconstructive groundlessness, this attaches us to reality because reality is now seen to contain patterns, shapes, structures that make it available to the mind; we can think *with* it, alongside it, as part of it. The goal of an environmental poetry that is committed to a basic realism should not be to eliminate imagination, but rather to intensify it. The imagination is what connects us to reality, not what occludes our vision of reality. This is the upshot of Fletcher’s environmental formalism.

This *realist* understanding of imagination is precisely what Kant is aiming at through his formulation of judgment. Judgment is a form of connection with the world that grows out of our investment in it, our capacity to experience the pleasure of imaginative stimulation, the pleasure of form, in relation to the world. It is *through* the act of imagination, not in spite of it, that anything at all becomes valuable to us; that existence itself might become valuable. Fletcher is exemplary because he attends to the fullest range of imaginative techniques not as a flight from reality but as our very means of connection to it—and this argument is central to my thinking in this dissertation.

In the spirit of this realist account of Whitman's figuration, I want to extend my reading of Whitman on judgment by noting, in passing, some of the tropes and figures that materialize Whitman's poetry of connection, each of which could be discussed at great length. I want to give some sense of the extent to which connection is Whitman's constant theme: it is all he writes about. "Song of Myself," which I've discussed, continually instantiates tropes of identification with all forms of otherness often by impersonation: "I am the man, I suffered, I was there." (§33, 225) The materiality of the atom, as Noble elaborates it, is another conceptualization of connection that often enables Whitman to make claims of physical unity with his reader: "Whoever you are holding me now in hand" (270) or "If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles" (247) or "I am with you, you men and women..." (308). Then there are figures of electricity, touch, conduction: "I Sing the Body Electric" and its metaphors of charge and magnetism; perhaps Whitman could be read as a "field poet" (as in later Whitman-inspired poetries) of the electromagnetic field. This is also registered in his frequent use of the word "filament," as in telegraph wire, a wire of conduction and communication. In "A Noiseless Patient Spider" the spider spins out "filament, filament, filament," the attempt at anchorage doubling as telegraph wire that would pass a signal. In "Song of Myself" "Is this then a touch?" (§28, 215) is "conducted" by the previous section in which music conducts Whitman into a nearly fatal ecstasy at the opera: "steep'd amid honey'd morphine, my windpipe throttled in fakes of death"; followed by the caesura on being, in which Whitman, unlike the quahaug's rigid shell⁵⁴ has "instant conductors all over me..."

⁵⁴ Perhaps Whitman had in mind the great image from Emerson's "Compensation" on "the natural history of calamity" in which "the shell-fish crawls out of its beautiful but stony case, because it no longer admits of its growth" since "growth comes by [electric?] shocks." Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, 301, 302.

To touch my person to some one else's is about as much as I can stand." (215) Electric "conduction" leads into a series of resonances around the root "-duc-" involving leading, bridging, moving across ("Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"), lending themselves to metaphors *about* metaphor: conduction, education, ductility, etc. The phrase "ductile anchors" appears twice in his work as an emblem of a connectedness that is flexible rather than confining, similar to Fletcher's understanding of formal coherence against mechanical *conformity*. And "ductile anchor" leads to Whitman's master term of "adhesiveness," ever-present from *Calamus* (1860) through and beyond *Democratic Vistas* (1870), the "love of comrades" that is the glue of democracy: "Here is adhesiveness, it is not previously fashion'd, it is apropos," the on the fly joining together of what had been separate (301). In *Democratic Vistas*: "Adhesiveness or love, that fuses, ties, and aggregates, making the races comrades, and fraternizing all. (973) Adhesiveness is a joining of hands that can conquer skepticism as in "Of the Terrible Doubt of Appearances" in which "He ahold of my hand has completely satisfied me." (275) Here Whitman is electrically "charged" with the feeling of connection. And in the following poem, Whitman, in mock-academic mode, finds at "The Base of all Metaphysics" this same adhesiveness: "The dear love of man for his comrade, the attraction of friend to friend..." husband and wife, children and parents, etc. (275) In "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life" adhesion creates the saving margin of washed up debris, gathered on the edge of land, matted, splayed out, to which Whitman can adhere: "I too but signify at the utmost a little wash'd-up drift, / A few sands and dead leaves to gather, Gather, and merge myself as part of the sands and drift." (395) Or in his two greatest poems, "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," the

poetic *translation* of the mockingbird and the *tally* of the hermit thrush, respectively.

“Tally” in the sense of correspondence, agreement, accord, match, fitness, consistency, harmonization, dovetail: “and the voice of my spirit tallied the song of the bird” (464).

Leo Spitzer, in a 1949 bravura reading of “Out of the Cradle” that draws on his vast philological learning, finally celebrates the artistry of the poem for finding imaginative means to represent something nonhuman. He conveys the subjectivity of a bird, that most hackneyed emblem of the pathetic fallacy, in a radically original way, for Spitzer unsurpassed in “1500 years of Occidental poetry.” I quote at length because the passage is magnificent:

The manner in which Whitman has ‘translated,’ to use his modest expression, the song of the mockingbird into words deserves boundless admiration. I know of no other poem in which we find such a heart-rending impersonation of a bird by a poet, such a welding of bird’s voice and human word, such an empathy for the joy and pain expressed by nature’s singers. The European poets we have listed above [Eichendorff, Shelley, Hugo, Arnold, Baudelaire, et al.] have accurately defined or admiringly praised the musical tone of the bird-notes issuing from tiny throats, but no one attempted to choose just those human articulate words [Onomatopoeas (for example *tweet-tweet*) such as occur in folk-poetry would be stylized phonetic approximations, neither human nor bird-like, of the inarticulate sounds of the bird.] which would correspond to birds’ song if these creatures had possessed the faculty of speech (Eichendorff had his bird sing in the first person, but it sang conventional Romantic lines): the simple, over and over repeated exclamations of a helpless being haunted by pain, which, while monotonously repeating the same *oh!* or giving in to the automatism that is characteristic of overwhelming emotion (“my love, my love”), call upon all elements to bring back the mate.⁵⁵

Spitzer’s combination of extraordinary learning, precision, and passion make his reading adequate to its subject. Against the portrayal of Whitman as appropriative and

suffocating, here he uses the force of his genius to give voice to a “helpless being.”

Spitzer beautifully captures the fundamental realism of Whitman’s imagination—his

⁵⁵ Leo Spitzer, “Explication de Texte Applied to Walt Whitman’s Poem ‘Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking’,” *ELH* 16.3 (Sept., 1949), 242.

ability to convey the radically other such that it is again uncannily alike us, its difference preserved—and the ethical stakes of that faculty. Compare Lawrence’s different, though no less impassioned, account of what might be called the poem’s realism:

His verse at its best springs sheer out of his soul, spontaneous, like the song of a bird. For a bird doesn’t rhyme and scan.—The miracle of pure spontaneity. The whole soul speaks at once, in a naked spontaneity so unutterably lovely, so far beyond rhymes and scansion.⁵⁶

6. Judgment and Repair

Emerson’s “Experience,” as I discuss in chapter 1, consists of a proliferation of accounts—resonant sentences or brief vignettes from various discourses—of our separateness or detachment from the world; for instance: “An innavigable sea washes with silent waves between us and the things we aim at and converse with.” In the preceding essay in *Essays, Second Series*, “The Poet,” Emerson describes the poet as in effect solving the ontological problem of “Experience”: “the poet...re-attaches things to nature and the Whole,—re-attaching even artificial things, and violations of nature, to nature, by a deeper insight.” (455) In the same essay: “Genius is the activity which repairs the decays of things.” (457)⁵⁷ There, in 1844, Emerson could say: “I look in vain for the poet whom I describe.” (465) In 1855, in one of the great acts of recognition in American literary history, Emerson finds his poet. Upon reading the first edition of

⁵⁶ Lawrence, *Studies* (Cambridge), 417.

⁵⁷ Cf. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s idea of reparative reading, influenced by Melanie Klein’s theory of maturation as reparation. Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,” in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

Leaves of Grass he responds to the unknown Walt Whitman: “I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed. I am very happy in reading it, as great power makes us happy.” It is to his everlasting credit that Emerson could recognize Whitman’s genius in an unsolicited book without context or preparation of any sort. The intense strangeness of this book—its irregular groupings of ellipsis-filled, unrhymed lines that would later be somewhat domesticated into the sentences and sections of “Song of Myself,” to say nothing of its content—was this poetry? Emerson’s homely cliché “wit and wisdom” may be a way of dodging the question of what, in fact, *Leaves of Grass* was.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ The question of the ontology of nineteenth-century American poetry has been raised recently, particularly with reference to Emily Dickinson’s poems, by among others Sharon Cameron, *Choosing Not Choosing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Susan Howe, *The Birth-Mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1993); Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 1-18; and Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). This question might be posed about Whitman, the other great nineteenth-century original, like Dickinson seemingly without precursor. And yet his poetry was never defined primarily as lyric and does not raise the interpretive questions that Dickinson’s does. Dickinson’s multiple undecidable variants, the fascicle pamphlets she constructed, her ambiguous relation to publication, the fact that many of her poems were sent to various recipients as letters, along with the idiosyncrasies of her notation and the material surfaces of her writing, have made the status of the lyric and of nineteenth-century poetry generally open questions in current literary criticism. For Cameron, Dickinson’s idiosyncratic practices are a radicalization of the lyric; for Jackson, they demonstrate that the lyric is a category constructed by literary criticism (from John Stuart Mill’s definition of the lyric as overheard speech to twentieth-century ideas of the poem’s autonomy), a category that “idealizes” “material” American nineteenth-century practices of writing and reading poetry. In this chapter, I take a different approach to the ontology of poetry by characterizing Whitman’s poetry as emerging from a theory of repair rather than from conventions of lyric subjectivity or particular formal features (though of course he does draw on lyric conventions with extraordinary sophistication; the point is simply that they are not definitional of his practice of “poetry”). And so “poetry” for Whitman is not “the lyric”; it is, I argue, the human product that manifests the reparative force of nature itself. Its purpose is to repair or reconnect what has been sundered. I see this as a manifestation of life as Eros, of creating provisional order by bringing concepts together by following their own tropisms, acting as a vehicle or conduit of connection. It is also related to the idea in Lurianic Kabbalah of repairing the brokenness of the world.

But Emerson's enthusiastic recognition of a "great power" in Whitman "that makes us happy" suggests that, on a deeper level, he recognizes that this is poetry in the major sense in which he defines it in "The Poet." "As great power makes us happy": imagine Nietzsche writing this, and you'll come close to Emerson's meaning. Emerson, I think, means "happy" in the sense of abundance, fullness, centrality.⁵⁹ To be happy is to experience the necessity of the contingent (of what had been mere hap or happenstance).⁶⁰ For Emerson, Whitman's poetry produces this state. Like Coleridge on the imagination or Shelley on "poetry in the general sense," Emerson is less concerned with verse forms of individual poems than with an account of poetry as *poiesis*, the emblematic mode of human making; a mode of action or "power" that mends nature by repairing its "decays," re-attaching what had seemed unnatural or extraneous ("artificial things, and violations of nature") to the whole, thereby overcoming our alienation from a world that had seemed discontinuous or foreign to us.⁶¹ The poet possesses a "deeper insight" that has real effects in the world; a faculty of connecting, or bridging, things that had seemed unrelated, and as a consequence drawing us closer to the world through a sharpened awareness of both similarity and difference. We see how "poetry" in this large sense becomes essential to living: it is a kind of creative thinking, an attentiveness

⁵⁹ Compare Whitman's happiness ("There is that in me—I do not know what it is—but I know it is in me. / I do not know it—it is without name—it is a word unsaid") with Hamlet's unhappiness: "I have that within which passeth show."

⁶⁰ Emerson's use of "power" to describe Whitman is contemporary with his central idea of power, in *The Conduct of Life* essays, as the affirmative faculty of mind that dissolves or reframes the conflict between fate and freedom so that they are no longer seen as opposed.

⁶¹ Cf. Polixenes to Perdita in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* (4.4): "This is an art / Which does mend nature, change it rather, but / The art itself is nature." To my mind this is the very core of romanticism.

required for effective action of any kind. It allows us to see a particular thing as an example of a kind of thing; and it allows us to put rules into practice by discerning when and where a particular rule is or is not applicable. It is thus closely related to Kant's definition of the imagination. This connective faculty of mind—"insight" into what links beings and the capacity to represent it so as to make it apprehensible to others—is what Emerson means by genius, a definition he shares with writers from Kant and Coleridge to David Bohm and Angus Fletcher. I think Emerson's praise of Whitman's great power to make us happy suggests that Whitman's work possesses the connective or reparative force that Emerson believes to be poetry's highest task.

My account of Whitman's poetry has been inspired by Emerson's central characterization of the poet as repairer of things, which I think Emerson recognized in Whitman. To read Whitman as Emerson's poet may seem utterly conventional; and yet I do so because I believe that Emerson's account of the reparative force that defines poetic genius, and its relation to Whitman's poetry, have not been rightly understood. The fundamental, strange *realism* of both Emerson's account of poetic reparation and of Whitman's poetic project have not been acknowledged. For both Emerson's poet and Whitman's poetry are continually absorbed into idealist paradigms alien to their thought. Either their grand poetic projects are said to be essentially symbolic programs (Emerson is putting forward a familiar romantic/humanist conception of the creative imagination; Whitman is projecting a poetic image of democratic community) or they are said to actually intend their texts to be realizing forces in the world which necessarily fail to do so, because a text, "merely" symbolic, can make nothing happen. Both alternatives amount to the same account of the literary as unreal; the difference is that in the latter, the

writer is naively ignorant of this truth. I think—and this has been the argument of this dissertation—that these paradigms rely on a commonsense opposition between the imaginative and the real which these writers refuse; and that this refusal is the source of their originality and their value for us. As I argue in chapter 1, I see Emerson’s poet as in a genuine sense “repair[ing] the decays of things” because for Emerson imaginative constructions are not primarily representations of reality but additions to or enlargements of reality; the imagination at its strongest is ontological in that it leads us toward rather than away from reality.

I’ve argued that Whitman pursues and could be said to realize such a reparative or connective project through his poetry. Another means by which he realizes connection is through his incitement to interpretation. Before concluding, I want to dwell on just one line from the 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*. In the midst of a catalogue of tasks and qualities of the American poet, Whitman writes: “He judges not as the judge judges but as the sun falling around a helpless thing.” (9) This is a radical redefinition of our vernacular sense of judgment. Troping on the idea of “casting judgment,” passing judgment from on high, from the position of a vengeful God or the high seat of a judge above the accused, Whitman naturalizes the act of judgment: instead of God it is the sun; instead of judgment in the sense of a cold weighing of the scales of justice and meting out of punishment, we have the sun warmly “casting” its rays. All at once it illuminates, reveals, brings into the light of visibility something that had been ignored, “cast” out, left in darkness. The delicately unidiomatic “falling around” calls our attention to a gentler illumination than the conventional “falling upon” in the sense of spotlighting, putting on the spot, “bringing to light” as in penetrating into, unveiling something better kept

hidden. Rather, it suggests revealing something “in the best light” by paying attention to it in its fullness, from all sides, seeing it all “around,” lighting up its surfaces. “Falling around,” an example of Whitman’s characteristic use of the present participle, suggests not a single monolithic act, a passing of judgment, but a continuous activity: the helpless thing is continually engaged with gentleness, a caressing action. “Falling around” also evokes another idiom of illumination, “playing upon,” the sense of which infuses the activity with a slight playfulness that mitigates the sternness of judgment. And there is a feeling of the sun’s warmth, its rays an embrace, a putting of one’s arms “around” someone; the “around” giving the sense of support and comfort but its merely prepositional neutrality forestalling any sense of invasiveness, suffocation or cloying sentimentality. Judgment is radically refigured as an act of illumination, support, comfort, compassion for something “helpless,” the insight into the way in which a “thing” (literally anything: a person or state of affairs) could not be any other way simply because it is *itself*, the thing it is, however it may have arrived at that condition. Whitman acknowledges the necessity in anything’s existence—that it *is* itself and not another thing, thus registering the full force of “is.” “Falling around” is a continuous being-with rather than a disgusted repudiation or rejection, “casting” off or out with a presumption of finality blind to the fact that, though the thing is what it is *now*, it *will* necessarily change and may even flourish;⁶² and the present participle (“fall-*ing*”) suggests that this activity

⁶² This is essential to George Kateb’s Emersonian/Whitmanian account of democratic human dignity: our ability to value persons is dependent on their radical unknowability, their unforeseeable potential to perform a great action (of courage or generosity or art, say) at any moment. Persons are always in excess of themselves; what holds democracy together is the fact that we can never give up on a particular person because anyone is *capable* of doing something valuable. This is a faith in the “excess,” the “more,” of any given person, rather than a sentimental platitude about every person’s innate specialness or difference. Rather: it is precisely that we can never fully account for what is special about a given person because

of judgment as being-with will continue to follow the thing through its changes: it both acknowledges its current status, leaves nothing out, sees the thing from all sides—and also leaves open the possibility of transformation, in fact encourages growth: the sun is the engine of living growth. Nor is the sun’s activity unidirectional; as the thing changes it will reach back toward the sun, like a plant’s heliotropism or the growth of a child; and so the sun “falling around” the thing encourages reciprocity, it is activating rather than enervating. “Falling around,” while it suggests a downward motion, also suggests a sense of “aroundness” in the sense of the horizontal; and so the sun is at the same time elevated from and leveled with the plane of the earth, it is a collaborator, a partner; we might personify it as a friend or group of friends who encourage or cheer on; and here the playfulness returns: teasing, cajoling, whatever it takes to lighten the oppressiveness of unmitigated verticality and authority, the crushing weight of gravity that will eventually leave every “thing”—ourselves, whoever we are—helpless.

All of this, I believe, emerges from Whitman’s moral image; it is an image that makes an argument about the equivalence or inseparability of judgment and encouragement, knowledge and love: it redefines these terms through a metaphor that allows us to imagine a merging of their definitions so that, if we absorb the image into our thinking and feeling we can no longer imagine knowledge without love. Genuine knowledge is not separable from the complex constellation of meanings that link it with love. It is through love that what we call knowledge becomes genuine knowledge; and

no person can ever “evaluate” another’s worth as if it were an apprehensible quality or quantity. George Kateb, *Human Dignity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

through this transformed sense of knowledge that what we call love becomes genuine love.

My reading of Whitman's line merely unfolds the resonances the line contains; I believe the line's reason for existing is to spur such an attempt. The beauty of the line resonated with me; this non-conceptual yet non-arbitrary resonance between subject and object is exactly what Kant means by an aesthetic *judgment*, and thus Kant and Whitman are surprisingly aligned on the nature of judgment. That inchoate resonance spurred me to write about it in order to understand the source of its beauty. That source is its capacity to embody in an image, to make present, an argument for a new concept: love/knowledge.⁶³ This is the transformative force of Whitman's work: its ubiquitous subject is the nature of connection; and its inquiry into forms of connection is always also an effort to produce connection. To *read* Whitman, to attend to his work, is to produce the realization his work intends by completing the connections he provokes. To my mind, this is what poetic *realization* ultimately consists in: enlargement of life through metaphorical transformation of our given concepts. By undergoing an experience within ourselves of this transformation we become able to see the world differently; we are not identical to the "thing" we were before we allowed the text's rays to "fall around" us, producing a reciprocal tropism within us encouraging us to read the text as it has read us. Whitman's judgment is a mutual activity; no longer a relation of judger and judged but the embrace of a helpless thing so that we resonate with it—and text and reader, subject and object, are thereby no longer helpless.

⁶³ Allen Grossman's more felicitous term "true-love" also applies here. Grossman, "Hard Problems in Poetry, Especially Valuing," in *True-Love: Essays on Poetry and Valuing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 15-38.

This is an example of the way in which I think literature, in a concrete sense, can be *real*; though a text is ontologically distinct from “flesh and blood” reality, it can transform our thinking and feeling in a concrete way; it can have a *real* effect on us. In the most straightforward, non-metaphorical way, the imaginative becomes our flesh and blood. But such change requires imaginative faith: the reader must be available in order to respond to the claim the text makes, must believe that such a claim is possible. Skepticism, the rationalization of a refusal to feel vulnerable, will foreclose our awareness of that claim. To be moved requires an initial openness to being moved, a willingness to be affected by a text’s force and to follow, as far as one can, the meaning of that force. Ultimately the reader chooses whether to live in a world in which it is better never to be seduced, or a world in which literature has transformative power.

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