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I know that the world I converse with in the city and in the farms, is not the world I *think*. I observe that difference and shall observe it. One day, I shall know the value and law of this discrepancy.

– Emerson, “Experience”

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## INTRODUCTION

### IMAGES OF NOTHING: TOWARDS A SECULAR AMERICAN AESTHETIC

I see by its face that it is visited by the same reflection; and I can almost say,  
Walden, is it you?

-Thoreau, *Walden*

For the romantic imaginary that has haunted modern thought, art and America have both served as utopian images of the good: as promises of a new world. But from the start, it has been hard to say what this world would be like. For Kant, the non-conceptual order we perceive in beautiful objects is a symbol of morality, presenting a sensible intuition, a discernable hint, of a world structured in accordance with ends; for John Winthrop, the American colony would be a “city upon a hill,” a hint of the kingdom of God shining forth in the world of men. Stendhal’s (and later Adorno’s) formulation, that beauty is a promise of happiness, claims that the most contingent or seemingly insignificant object points the way towards our ultimate end; the slogan pronounced by Lothario in Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister* – and echoed in the symbolic extension of Americanness not only to citizens of the United States but, as Whitman writes, to “Americans of all nations at any time on earth” – that “here, or nowhere, is America,” argues that the ideal of a self-determining or free polity, if it makes sense at all, must apply to everyone, regardless of any historical or national traits that might attach to them.<sup>1</sup> What is common to these

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<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 225-8; John Winthrop, “A Modell of Christian Charity,” in *The Winthrop Papers*, vol. 2 (1623–30). (Boston: Massachusetts

images, and what makes them distinctively romantic, is that the normative ideal, the good to be achieved, is pictured as something that issues directly from experience, rather than serving as an external, guiding contrast with it. Indeed what defines both of these symbols – what we can call their form – is their capacity to bridge the opposition between two sets of terms, understood by philosophy and religion, at least until romanticism, as fundamentally opposed: morality and knowledge, the norms that guide us and the objects we experience, the city of God and the world of men. The Platonic notion of the good, for example, was of a non-sensible true form or *eidos* opposed to the partial, deceptive images contingent on merely sensory experience; thus the good city imagined by his *Republic* was, famously, the one that excludes the misleading pleasures of poetic representation, not to mention the deceptive opinions or *doxa* (splendor, that which appears) whose exchange is the hallmark of politics as such. The contrast couldn't be greater: the utopian promise figured by art and America is of a world in which the very capacity that Plato values, for picturing things as in the end they ought to be (the form of the good), emerges from the experience of things as they now *appear*. What art and America are is an image of *themselves, as good*. What such symbols promise or model – the reason why, in Winthrop's words, "the eyes of all people are upon us" – is just that the world itself might become *like* them.

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Historical Society, 1931), 282–95. Stendhal, *De l'amour* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), 59. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Univ Of Minnesota Press, 1997), 311. Walt Whitman, 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, in *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York: The Library of America, 1982), 5 Johan Wolfgang von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, trans. Eric Blackall (New York: Suhrkamp Publishers, 1989), 270.

The self-referentiality of these symbols becomes more apparent the further we press on them. In the beauty of the flower and the sunset – but also the metaphor and the brushstroke – we find something that strikes us as good exactly by failing to serve any discernable purpose outside of its mere existence and presentness to our senses, simply the fact that we are here to witness it, to find it beautiful. In the concreteness of the American experiment, a city of men that is also a city of God, we see realized a capacity for self-determination that must, therefore, be incipient everywhere, saturating the world.<sup>2</sup> There is no trait that marks an American other than his desire to be one; no rule that determines the beautiful object, other than its display of beauty. The American polity is a kind of artwork; the beautiful object is a kind of political utopia.

In this romantic logic, the circularity internal to each of the two terms seems to depend on an unstated reciprocity between them. If aesthetics and Americanism each imagine their reference as that which they cannot specify, the reciprocal pressure of these two discourses – philosophical and political, national and world-historical – forms the space between them as the beyondness to which they both point. The American aesthetic object comes into being self-consciously in the middle of the nineteenth century, at the intersection of post-revolutionary European philosophy and an emergent American

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<sup>2</sup> Kant hints at a connection between political and aesthetic form, in what seems to be an allusion to the French revolution (*Critique of the Power of Judgment* 246-7), where he views this revolution from the point of the view of the spectator. Whether or not it succeeds, and whether or not one approves of the actions of the revolutionaries (he says one cannot), the event is a *sign*, like beauty, of the purposiveness of the world. Arendt's discussion of this connection in *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, which are in fact lectures on the third *Critique*, try to explicate this link, and I draw throughout on her suggestive reading.

national experience.<sup>3</sup> But this object, shaped by these twin pressures, does not fill the space between them, as if, connecting the two, it overcame the famed “gap” that haunts modern thinking in various guises.<sup>4</sup> Rather, it takes the shape precisely of an escape from the form it inhabits. We read in Emerson of the wonder he feels in encountering “a new thought”: “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.”<sup>5</sup> A line like this, which *describes* the experience of discovering a thought as a promise of a new world, has served countless readers and critics as the ground of such an experience itself. What it suggests is that the image *is* what it *represents*, but precisely because it points beyond itself, “dying out of nature,” out of experience, to live in the “unapproachable” world that it “finds” right there. When Stanley Cavell borrows this line for the title of a book of lectures on Emerson and Wittgenstein, linking the “grammatical” investigations of the latter with the aesthetics of a “moral perfectionism” he works to develop in the former, he describes

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<sup>3</sup> This is not itself a new way of describing American romanticism: from Emerson’s 1842 lecture “The Transcendentalist,” to Melville’s “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” to D.H. Lawrence, to Perry Miller and Sacvan Bercovitch, to Gilles Deleuze, Stanley Cavell, and Fred Moten, the disruption, completion, or transformation of a Europe-originated thinking by the particularity of “American” experience has been a theme of writing on American literature. I discuss these earlier accounts throughout this dissertation.

<sup>4</sup> For example, between “mind and world” in post-Kantian philosophy; between desire and its object in psychoanalysis; between sign and referent in structuralism; between “human design” and “natural order” for the empiricist social science of someone like F.A. Hayek. See Robert B. Pippin, “Avoiding German Idealism: Kant, Hegel, and the Reflective Judgment Problem,” in *Idealism as Modernism: Hegelian Variations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1997; John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Harvard University Press, 1996); Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, vol. 11 (WW Norton & Company, 1998); Gottlob Frege, “On Sense and Reference,” in *Arguing About Language*, ed. Darragh Byrne and Max Kölbel (London: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Experience,” in *The Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1987), 259.

what he finds between them as a “quest” or “question” in romantic writing that is precisely *about* its audience, about those who could truly hear it: one that, in denying a “*given* set of readers,” denies the *givenness* of what is being expressed.<sup>6</sup> The discovery of this literary object, this “new yet unapproachable America I have found in the West” is, in Cavell’s terms, simultaneously an approach to it and “reproach” by it, an experience of the object that unravels the framework of experience as such, a rebirth that, “dying out of nature” and out of the givenness of the object, is reborn not to a serenity of reincarnation and representation but a question about them that, formed in the reading, haunts beyond it.

Born in the nineteenth century American aesthetic object, this dynamic persists in the contemporary world. It can be seen in the scholarly visions of critics like José Muñoz, who take as romantic objects new cultural-historical formations like queerness, envisioning them as “that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing,” objects that, by making visible their failure to take shape in the world of which they are a part, allow us to “see and feel...new worlds” in critique<sup>7</sup>; in the attraction, not to say seduction, that American mass culture continues to exercise on the world, now, in the form of social media, increasingly less as a distinct cultural object that models a particular American way of life and more as flexible *form* that promises to

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<sup>6</sup> Stanley Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures After Emerson After Wittgenstein* (Living Batch Press, 1989), 12.

<sup>7</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 1. Muñoz’s project partakes of a larger effort to use critique to publicize resistant cultural formations as images of alternative forms of democracy; see also Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (Zone Books, 2005), and Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990).

realize a common selfhood by publicizing evidentiary images of it; and in the apocalyptic “dark optimism” of recent art and literature that images the future as an encounter with the nineteenth century’s economic and environmental legacy, channeling, in Ben Lerner’s recent book about a Brooklyn writer, Whitman, and “looking back at the totaled city in the second person plural...I am with you, and I know how it is.”<sup>8</sup> The persistent faith in the image as such, as a promise of visionary life, carries over from its object the desire to overcome itself. In Lerner’s narrative, whose first-person narration constantly returns to the optative mood, to look “back” at the ruined American city is to look back at Whitman’s looking ahead, imagining the countless “others” who will see “the shipping of Manhattan,” its “freight” and “shows,” “objects than which none else is more lasting...fifty years hence...a hundred years hence, or ever so many hundred years hence.”<sup>9</sup> Lerner’s desire, at the start of his book, to “project myself into several futures simultaneously... working my way from irony to sincerity in the sinking city, a would-be Whitman of the vulnerable grid” (Lerner 4) takes *his* object, the “sinking city,” as Whitman: which is to say, he imagines the ironic collapse of Whitmanian optimism – the “sinking” or merging of the writer’s own boundless ambitions into a city that, “totaled” itself, mirrors publicly this Americanist ambition – as itself what he will describe; *and* he takes his own literary mediation of it to *be* this vision, and its reality, to be a “projection” of himself into a future, one that, “with” his reader like Whitman, is also with the

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<sup>8</sup> Ben Lerner, *10:04: A Novel*, (New York: Faber & Faber, 2014), 240. “Dark Optimism” was the title of an exhibition at MOMA in 2013; see Eleanor Heartley, “Art for the Anthropocene Era,” *Art in America*, February 4, 2014. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin, eds., *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies* (Open Humanities Press, 2014). See discussion about anthropocene criticism in chapter 2 and about contemporary aesthetics in chapter 4.

<sup>9</sup> *1891-92 Leaves of Grass*, in *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, edited by Justin Kaplan, (New York: The Library of America, 1982), 308-13.

Whitmanian America, the “totaled city,” that they imagine themselves beyond. This contemporary and flourishing romanticism, both cultural and (as I will argue throughout this dissertation) scholarly, maintains the one that emerged in the nineteenth century precisely by trying to overcome it; the songs, or advertisements, that constitute American culture from Whitman to Twitter and back again promise at once some new indefinable beyond and an identity or “self,” the two together in a new world that looks just like this one. “The United States themselves,” Whitman imagines in what is perhaps the greatest American poem, “are essentially the greatest poem” (1855 *Leaves of Grass* 5). It is an image of world that, in contrast to Plato’s, can live with what it imagines.

### **Would-be Whitman**

There are, of course, problems with this image. Indeed, such problems have formed the object of much of the scholarly research in the last 30 years on aesthetics and in the field of American Studies; such research in turn is part of a longer lineage of thought about aesthetics and American culture haunted by the threat that the utopias they figure might collapse into their opposite, the promise of redemption into a guarantee of apocalypse. If beauty promises merely more of itself, and America merely that the world might become American, we cannot but wonder – indeed, such symbols explicitly ask, and conspicuously fail to answer – *what would this be like?*

As symbols of self-determination without externally-imposed law – of a freedom from, as Kant says of aesthetic judgment, any determination by a concept – the world that they figure is not necessarily a harmonious one. Both romanticism and Americanism are marked, from the start, by the threat of rottenness in the world, the collapse of meaning and the withdrawal of presence; the freedom of self-determination figures also the death

of God, and the release from explicit structure suggests the possibility that we are merely seduced into a darker, more insidious world, one whose outlines are harder to see and thus impossible to challenge. The threat haunts both literature and its critique, “experience” and the philosophical attempt to discern its limits and form.

On the one hand, the “New World” promise of beauty, from Donne’s erotic apostrophe to America, in which “to enter in these bonds, is to be free,” to Schiller’s claim that aesthetic education turns the duties of reason into sensuous pleasures and a state of morality into one of leisure, constantly threatens to turn, as if wordlessly, into its opposite, the nightmare of Kafka’s *Amerika* and the deathly cults of sensuous beauty, the antiheroes of Baudelaire, Huysmans, and Wilde and the hypnotized masses – American and Americanized – described in Benjamin and Adorno’s modernist laments, the horrific underworld that lurks, like in Don DeLillo and David Lynch’s all-American tableaux, right beneath the surface.

But this sense of threat extends also into the critique that, trying to get a handle on such images, finds itself picturing its own collapse into them. This threat, which we could call provisionally that of an aesthetic politics, has taken America as a symbol of a risk internal to democracy itself, from Tocqueville’s projection of an “orderly, gentle, peaceful slavery,” the probable fruit a self-imposed technocratic despotism, to Benjamin’s ominous warnings about the “consummation of *l’art pour l’art*” in humankind’s “experience of its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure,” to the worries of recent modernist critics like Walter Benn Michaels that in describing substantive norms as contingent on ways of seeing (a tendency “prefigured... in [Kant’s] *Critique of Judgment*”), and thus political injustice as the result of prejudicial vision or

inharmonious images, American politics has “imagined...structural difference” – norms themselves, and thus the space in which to contest them – “out of existence,” and finally to the very recent, urgently public sense that the dissatisfactions of neoliberalism and the demagoguery of a social media public sphere have paved, in national politics, a path back to the fascism that American democracy was supposed to have vanquished.<sup>10</sup> If conceptually and normatively substantive claims are redescribed as a mere aesthetic or cultural play of difference, meaningful political debate seems to collapse into a spectacle of political feeling whose outcome can no longer be challenged. If the good is promised by the *absence* of any specific claims or ideas, then this absence becomes what is wanted; if beauty promises a silent perfection, an inexpressible because complete world, then the words it motivates orient towards their own erasure, the collapse of the conditions of saying, thus meaning, anything at all.

These threats – epistemological, historical, and political, not to mention personal and psychic – are real, as history has demonstrated and scholarship attested.<sup>11</sup> So too is

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<sup>10</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2000), 692. Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media* (Harvard University Press, 2008), 42. Walter Benn Michaels, *The Beauty of a Social Problem* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 58, 67.

<sup>11</sup> For a recent political account, see Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015). For the threat to one's sanity, Melville's *Pierre* has rightly served American studies as an origin story (see also Michael Paul Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville*, Knopf, 1983, and Sacvan Bercovitch, “Pierre, or the Ambiguities of American Literary History,” in *Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America*, London: Routledge, 1993, 246–306). More recently, the literature and criticism trying to reflect on and inhabit the psychic world of neoliberalism has produced a rich and troubling archive – for example, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, (New York: Viking, 1977); Steven Shaviro, *Post Cinematic Affect*, (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2010); Beatriz Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, trans. Bruce Benderson (New York, NY:

the promise: aesthetics and Americanism have served over the last 400 years as enabling forms for any number of projects that are broadly recognized as individual and collective achievements of human happiness. Indeed, the pressure of this threat and promise is particularly apparent in the present. I am not here concerned with adjudicating these claims. Rather, I want to suggest a different task for criticism: not a path that tacks between the two – between literature and philosophy, nation and world, “affirmation” and “negation,” aesthetics and politics – toward their reconciliation, but a thinking that tries to inhabit the space that their pressure on the present opens up. What has made the American aesthetic at once a persistent object of utopian aspiration and a constant target of critical suspicion is the sense that, in imagining its overcoming of its own boundaries or form, what it figures is the collapse, or the achievement, of critique itself. This dissertation tries to show how critique finds its voice not by averting this threat but by inhabiting it: by taking the threat of critical collapse as critique’s “object,” what it discovers as valuable and thus, in other words, transforms. If the threat is of something like aesthetic theodicy, of which American aesthetics has stood accused from Emerson to Hollywood film to the recent critical movement of “surface reading,”<sup>12</sup> one might oppose

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The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2013), as well as more generalist laments like Thomas Frank, *What’s the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004) and Mark Andrejevic, *Infoglut: How Too Much Information Is Changing the Way We Think and Know* (Routledge, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> Henry James gives his voice to this accusation when he speaks of Emerson’s “ripe unconsciousness of evil” as “one of the most beautiful signs by which we know him” (*Partial Portraits*, Macmillan, 1899, 7). Stanley Cavell’s discussion of the ability of film to “avoid...modernism’s perplexities of consciousness” (*The World Viewed*, New York: Viking, 1971, 118-9), the inevitably interested or intentional *form* that representation takes, and Hollywood film’s inhabitation of this “innocence,” thinks through this threat eloquently. Ellen Rooney’s “Live Free or Describe: The Reading Effect and the Persistence of Form” (*Differences* 21, no. 3, 2010) critiques what she sees as a claim to escape “suspiciousness,” thus to achieve total disinterestedness, in Stephen Marcus and

to this something like what Hannah Arendt, in an early title for *The Human Condition*, thought of as “*amor mundi*,” the love of the world, or even what, in his fable of eternal return, Nietzsche calls *amor fati*, the love of fate.<sup>13</sup> The work, and the goal, would be to say precisely *this* difference, between a theodicy that justifies the world as it is by reference to a (thereby dogmatic and unthought) concept that transcends it, and a passionate avowal of thought’s immanence to the world that, rather than *explaining* the world’s incompleteness, takes it as precisely the evidence of thought and desire’s reality. To see in the tension between thought and its object, image and the world, the form of a desire for difference that is thereby its realization would be to imagine a secular aesthetic.

Such a concept of American literature owes something to the kind of thinking developed eloquently by Bruce Robbins, who argues that literature can illuminate a secularism that is “not mere disobedience, not merely the gray emptiness left behind after the relentless elimination of colorful, life-enhancing superstitions. Launching radiant new stories, new images, new figures of speech, the desiring imagination illuminates various ways out of our self-imposed tutelage.”<sup>14</sup> Here, remembering a phrase from Kant,

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Sharon Best’s influential program for an emerging “Surface Reading” (*Representations* 108, no. 1, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Arendt letter to Karl Jaspers, *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers Correspondence, 1926-1969* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 264; Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Vintage, 1974), 223.

<sup>14</sup> Bruce Robbins, “Is Literature a Secular Concept? Three Earthquakes,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 72, no. 3 (September 1, 2011), 316. Other recent arguments for a secular yet enchanted vision of literature are Paul Grimstad’s “Against Research: Literary Study and the Trouble With Discourse,” (*American Literary History*, October 8, 2014, 1–17), and, less subtly, Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly’s *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* (New York: Free Press, 2011), and Jane Bennett’s *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (Princeton University Press, 2001). See also Weinstein and Looby’s introduction to their edited collection *American Literature’s Aesthetic Dimensions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), where they

imagination “illuminates” enlightenment as the goal of literature.<sup>15</sup> But where for Robbins this secularism is the mark of literature’s capacity to guide or “urge society down the necessary road away from theodicy” (294), I argue instead for one that takes the threat of theodicy – the risk of critique’s affirming, in the literary image, something that merely is, that might be bad, that might lead nowhere – seriously, indeed affirms the necessity of that *threat*, as such. What the imagination “illuminates” is not the “necessary road” away from the infantile desire for transcendent justification and toward the maturity of a self-identical, self-actualizing, and self-present moral law – as if this road itself can be “seen,” or given – but rather such a path’s *non*-necessity, thus its fundamental uncertainty. (As Foucault is keen to note in his reading of Kant’s essay, the emphasis falls on the negative; the “light” does not “illuminate” a way out, but itself “is” an exit.<sup>16</sup> As if the artificial fire in Plato’s cave partook of the sun itself, the thinker’s image illuminating itself from within. What then does she see when she leaves?) This secularism would take literature as that which paradoxically cannot know, and thus cannot guarantee, its own secularity, and must therefore constantly imagine (which is to say, realize) it.

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describe the critical mood to which they aim to give voice as “disenchantment with disenchantment” (6).

<sup>15</sup> Kant opens his “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment” with the sentence: “*Enlightenment is mankind’s exit from its self-imposed immaturity.*” *What Is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, ed. James Schmidt. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, 58.

<sup>16</sup> Michel Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, vol. 1, *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, (New York: New Press, 1997), 508.

A secular concept of American literature would be in tension with its own claim to picture the good, and thus with accounts of literature as illuminating a path to secular redemption.<sup>17</sup> It would thus see literature as open to its own guilt, to the knowledge of its own complicity with the world that it refuses to justify. Such a concept thus also has affinities with the image of literature that one finds, on the other side of the methodological aisle, in a book like Elizabeth Povinelli's recent *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism*.<sup>18</sup> Drawing on theorists (including Foucault, Deleuze, and Agamben) who have suggested links between the economic and social order of the post-war period and the logic of aesthetics, Povinelli argues that the violence of contemporary social arrangements can best be understood as the effects of "late liberalism." An anthropologist, Povinelli's immanentism takes the form of a description of how in the wake of turn-of-the-century anti-colonial challenges to authoritarian rule, colonial powers tried to understand cultural difference as an object of knowledge, one that, properly understood, could be granted the space it needed to maintain its subjects within that difference and thus within the power relations that it sustained. For Povinelli this culturalization of colonial power is symbolic of a broader political shift into "late liberalism," where a "division of tense" between *objects* of cultural knowledge and *subjects* of it – those whose culture was constituted as a set of rules ("society of fixity") and those whose culture took the form of the (anthropological, economic) study of those rules ("society of potentiality") – authorizes an indefinite

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<sup>17</sup> For such arguments, in addition to Dreyfus and Kelly, see Richard Eldridge's *Literature, Life, and Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), and the recent collection *The Humanities and Public Life*, ed. Peter Brooks (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014). See further discussion in chapter 1 below.

<sup>18</sup> Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

deferral of moral judgment into the “future anterior,” where the harms of the present are imagined to be redeemed in the world that will have been its goal (26-7). The humanistic discourse that tries to *understand* culture as an object becomes a crucial instrument in *producing* it as such. And if, globally, imperialism revealed the Enlightenment’s epistemic and political need for an object or outside, the American hegemony that emerged on the other side of the nineteenth century internalizes this exteriority as its very principle, a melting pot of self-naturalizing citizens. This secular or economic theodicy, in which the creative destruction of the present is redeemed in the formless horizon of uncountable future value it imagines, is (as I argue further in chapters 2 and 4) precisely aesthetic, and for Povinelli, this allows literature, if not to escape discourse’s implication in worldly power, to point the way out. Though the bulk of her book focuses on global cultural politics and draws more frequently from historical case studies in Australia and Asia, she opens with an epigraph from Whitman, and begins her account by summarizing a short story by the American fantasy writer Ursula Le Guin called “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas.” Le Guin’s story simply describes Omelas: a place where the citizens are “not dulcet shepherds, noble savages, blind utopians...they were mature, intelligent, passionate adults...not simple folk, you see, but they were happy”: the very picture of a mature utopia.<sup>19</sup> However, their happiness depends on – their maturity is explained by –the existence of a small child in a broom closet, beaten, starved, covered in sores. The citizens’ awareness of this child, and of the dependence of their happiness on its pain, is a dark fable of enlightenment utopia: this, the story shows, is a happiness that includes its own privation, that overcomes exactly that which limits it, that can know sin.

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<sup>19</sup> in *The Wind’s Twelve Quarters* (Clarkesville, Ga.: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1975), 278

Why picture this? For Povinelli, Omelas provides a clarifying image that, in its counterfactuality, shows us what in fact is true; reading this, we see what in fact we do. Late liberalism's infinite deferral of justice is in fact a concrete apportioning of health, wealth, and opportunity that does not merely *happen* to exploit some for the benefit of others but predicates the *form* of pleasure that orients the whole – precisely the pleasure of the infinite deferral that wealth and health promise – on the image (the knowledge) of its opposite, of the pain of bodily limitation. (I discuss this logic further under the name of “biopolitics” in chapter 3.) In “Omelas” we *see* the logic of the utopian image, of a secular theodicy whose formal completeness or justification depends on the *concrete* denial of its reliance on an external guarantor. What Omelas shows is that this happiness imagines its own “maturity” by simultaneously knowing *and* denying its outside, by turning that which is other to it into an inside that, imagined as infinite, is erased in its specificity. Like America itself, literature serves as a metaphor that, showing the *relation* between these two terms (society of fixity and society of potentiality, subject and object), not only explains but *is* the deeper logic underlying both. Le Guin's story ends when she describes the titular ones who walk away; refusing this logic, they exit the story: “the place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all” (“Omelas” 284). The point of Le Guin's parable, in Povinelli's reading, is to get us, Plato-like, to exit from the realm of images that it imagines, this dark world of the Americanized present. For Povinelli the story “merely provides a convenient narrative starting point for the concerns of [her] book” (5): the writer's inability to “describe” the world beyond the image, “at all,” is what authorizes the critic, precisely by describing the image itself, to do so, and to imagine in criticism a

way of overcoming it. By *seeing* this world, the one governed by a logic that predicates its happiness on the sins it acknowledges, we free ourselves from it, and into the realm in which our words, pointing to reality itself, point beyond the “late liberal” aesthetic logic that has infected it. But (following still Povinelli’s account) the *point* of Le Guin’s story – not just its aesthetics, but indeed its “moral,” and its claim to representational accuracy – is that what is outside Omelas is precisely *this*: the “mature” and thus realistic utopia it pictures is in fact our world. We do not finally “see,” in criticism, the logic of this image as a form that can guide us anew – whether, as in Robbins’ account, it is imagined as a picture of the “enlightenment” that draws us forward, or in Povinelli’s, as a picture of the dark prison that repels us.<sup>20</sup> We do not discover in the literary image some infinite capacity to move toward the light, or away from the dark. Walking away from Omelas, exiting the realm of fiction, we find precisely *ourselves, in it*.

This is where American literature lives: in thinking, thus in the world. The form that this dissertation investigates, at the intersection of Americanist and aesthetic (and literary and critical) utopianism, does not reveal any special thing beyond it, either to be affirmed or rejected, redeemed or destroyed. Rather, both the promise and the threat of the Americanist aesthetic, I aim to show, lie in the very structure that, as an accident of history and an intention of philosophy, defines it: an image, not of something that the structure contains or forms, but of precisely the collapse of, or a liberation from, that structuration or formation itself. “Discovering form” is the name I give to this literary-critical dynamic. It describes at once the formal *capacity* to discover or reveal something

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<sup>20</sup> I mean these respective positions roughly to correspond to two sides in the division within American literary criticism that I develop further in chapter 1 under the name of Ishmaelites and Ahabians; these could also, even more roughly, be described as formalist and historicist positions. See also further discussion in this introduction, below.

new (an object, a promise), and the act of discovering “form” itself – this capacity – *as* something new, an object or a promise. (Indeed, I mean this grammatical ambiguity to bring out one that is implicit in the notion of “American study” itself, in which the mode of inquiry, its form, is in some sense the object that is being asked after; the Americanist investigates Americanism, and to understand it will be to understand how there could be such a question in the first place. A similar ambiguity exists in the notion of aesthetic critique.) My argument is that, if we can see how this structure is common both to literature and its critique, to the sense of threat and that of promise that they negotiate, the relation between the two can be transformed. If aesthetic and Americanist form each point toward that which escapes them – the ever-receding referent of the metaphor, the law beyond law of “Nature’s nation”<sup>21</sup> – the strange recursiveness of the Americanist aesthetic, in which American law looks like aesthetic harmony and the metaphor’s reference is America itself, forms this beyondness into something that is immediately present. We *cannot* look for this reference, for a sense of what that beyond would be, outside of the object: this impossibility is what the Americanist aesthetic object refers to, and is. In turn, the question of what this utopian form promises, or threatens, becomes not one to be answered empirically – as if the goal itself, the new world, were an object, to be discovered – but one to be dissolved, or answered, in the very act of asking it. Rather than trying to *make* literature confirm its, and our, power – to discover in it this discovering form – we might let it show that this is what we have, and still need. What the study of American literature would thereby reveal is not any final worldly confirmation of the

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<sup>21</sup> Perry Miller coins this term in an essay on “The Romantic Dilemma in American Nationalism and the Concept of Nature,” collected in *Nature’s Nation* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1967).

fears or hopes that critique voices, but just the worldliness of that desire itself: a desire for the world that lives within it.

### **A Loose America**

I want to begin to fill out this picture of American literature by returning to the one with which I began: Whitman's image, in which "the United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem." In pronouncing this sentence, Whitman seems at once triumphant and oddly placid, as if the rather grandiose claim he announces is hardly remarkable, already obvious: not needing specification, not worth justifying. Is "essentially" an intensifier or a qualifier? Are the United States and poetry linked in a greatness that goes all the way down, and all the way up, an essence beyond words and things? Or are they just more or less like each other, more or less great? The casual mood of Whitman's syntax opens onto rather large questions. If we grant his claim, in its capaciousness – if the United States *themselves*, as such, are already "essentially the greatest poem" – what newness or difference could an American poem, like the one he writes, or a poetic America, like the one he writes about, promise? Moreover: how could either even *exist*?<sup>22</sup> Leaving, in the casual "essence" of his metaphor, no room for elaboration, the mutual reference of its two terms at once contracts into the space of this particular metaphor and expands into a question about the very possibility of reference itself, hanging the meaning of poetry on its actualization in a nation, and the meaning of

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<sup>22</sup>The problem is implicit even in Whitman's grammar: the non-singularity, the endlessly proliferating diversity of the United States ("themselves...are") is exactly the kind of thing that funds their singular unity as "the greatest" poem. At the time he wrote, "the United States" was shifting from a plural to a singular proper noun, but Whitman's formulation characteristically encompasses both. (It's not just that the states *comprise* or together *form* a poem: *they* "are" one). See Benjamin Zimmer's discussion of the evolution from plural to singular usage in "Life in These, Uh, This United States," *Penn Language Log* <http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/myl/language-log/archives/002663.html>.

the United States on poetry's capacity to exceed the actual. If what the U.S. promises is precisely its own poetic character – its spontaneous capacity to overcome itself, to mean and to matter exactly beyond any descriptions or formations of it – how could a poem capture this? And if it could, what could that America be worth? Bruce Robbins, in an essay on the Richard Powers novel that forms the subject of my final chapter, describes Whitman as “contradicting himself in order to contain a more multitudinous and contradictory truth,” acknowledging, in his words, the multitudinous nature of his American experience, articulating a larger truth in the shape of a larger “I.”<sup>23</sup> But far from expanding himself *in order* to “contain,” Whitman's poetry disperses what he already contains: if he is the one whose I “contains multitudes,” his poetry, imagining this being only in the shape of the world – speaking an “I” that precisely *is* America, or nothing – threatens a dissolve not only of his own boundaries but of the world that it would, in containing, picture. Yvor Winters, not a fan of Whitman, nonetheless captured the work of the latter's form very well when he argued that Whitman's writing of “loose and sprawling poetry to express a loose and sprawling America,” insofar as it tries to express a particular worldly form through the disintegration of a poetic one, “tends towards the formless [and thus] fails to be expressive of anything.”<sup>24</sup> We might say more exactly that it expresses nothing, or *tries* to. The “Americanness” of the poem, and the poeticalness of the United States, threaten to destroy one another: the meaningful content that the poem is meant to commemorate, and thereby to activate as a promise or model, is just that any attempt to specify it would reveal its own failure to do have done so. Insofar

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<sup>23</sup>Bruce Robbins, “Homework: Richard Powers, Walt Whitman, and the Poetry of the Commodity,” *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 34, no. 1 (2003), 87.

<sup>24</sup> “The Influence of Meter on Poetic Convention,” 93-143 in *Primitivism and Decadence*, 136-7.

as it (the poem) does not encompass this model (America), it itself fails to be a model, a guiding image of something more; insofar as it does, it reveals that model itself to have failed, to have fallen from a position of regulative normativity in excess of its instantiation in any particular poem. Revealing the U.S. as the “greatest” poem, it reveals its own poetic limitedness in comparison with it, and thus deflates them both, emptying the poem and America of the promise of something – Americanness, and poetry – beyond itself. Less “great,” promising no new good, as a poem and as American it offers nothing at all. Indeed, the line itself is conspicuously flat, unwieldy, and didactic: constrained and prosaic in exactly the way it had promised not to be. And yet: it is in this very failure that we see the “poetic,” and American, form of Whitman’s words. Sentences like these express the peculiar power of an art recognizable instantly as Whitmanian and American, sublimely poetic and deeply prosaic. “Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos,” grandiose and naive, figurative and homely, flat-floated and practically weightless: the words of *Leaves of Grass* differentiate themselves, articulate their particular form, their distinct and significant way of using language and imaging the world, precisely in their almost mystical ordinariness, their poetically prosaic form.<sup>25</sup> Their form is their indifference from their content. Whitman’s looseness is not exactly a genial sociability, an ability to “contain” difference, even contradiction; it is more like a willingness, or a compulsion, to let go of his self, and his language, to “disseminate” it with no guarantee of return.<sup>26</sup> The experience, in turn, of such words is one of a curious, and quite specific, tension. To enjoy such a poem, to find our imaginations, as Kant says,

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<sup>25</sup> 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, 50.

<sup>26</sup> See Michael Moon, *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in Leaves of Grass* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

released into a free play by it, is also to find ourselves constrained, bound doubly by it to the thought, or the intuition, that, as a poem and as a norm or a political claim, it is curiously lacking – unpoetic, parochial – and that insofar as we like it, something is missing in us: we have failed at once fully to grasp it and finally to free ourselves from it, both to understand what it means and to overcome our own attachment to its particularity, to Walt’s way of saying it. Though his tone is unrepentantly optimistic, sublimely confident, the effect of reading him is ambivalent. If his writing does not quite, as Emerson says of Thoreau, make one “nervous and wretched” with its “unlimited contradiction,” the ease and expansiveness into which Whitman’s words invite us courts also a vertiginous sense of loss.<sup>27</sup> As critics have long noted, Whitman’s mood is almost impossible to sustain, his phrases, such as this one about America, often deflating into a patness that borders on embarrassing.<sup>28</sup> But I think we can see that this is not just a question of our and his limited capacity to endure the sublime (or, that such a limitation is not in tension with the poem’s form, as if it pertained, contingently, to our quantitatively greater or lesser reserves of spirit), that it is not a failure to “contain” the poem’s imagery, to be as capacious as Whitman; the sublimity itself *is* this threat, or promise, of an emptiness or transcendence of words, and thus a loss of or release from form. What is moving about Whitman is precisely his transgression – or innocence, and this is just what we can’t know or say – of such a limit. It is not just difficult to decide whether Whitman’s words are universal or jingoistic, clarified to their essence or pressed into a

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<sup>27</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Harvard University Press, 1971), 10.

<sup>28</sup> See F. O. Matthiessen’s sensitive discussion of this in *American Renaissance* (Oxford University Press, 1968, 517-32). I discuss this aspect of Whitman’s poetry further in the conclusion to my final chapter.

mold; the criteria by which we would tell the difference lie in the very words themselves. “America” hinges on poetry; but the poem is merely an expression of Americanness. It would itself have to be its own evidence for the claims it makes. And though the poem is an object, the form by which the reader would recognize it – as a poem, as American – thus opens into the reader’s judgment, which is to say experience, of it. When we tire of him, fall out of sync with his mystic mood, it is as if we have tired of ourselves, have lost the almost cosmic, world-sustaining energy that, seeking in his poem, we found in our own reading. The form that the poem marks out is just its own failure to provide one; whether this is a liberation into the good or a collapse into nothing is exactly what the poem cannot say, since the liberation would be *from* its form, the collapse *into* it. The responsibility for sustaining or enduring the poem’s words devolves onto its readers, at the same time that it demands that readers find themselves, completely, in those words. “And what I assume you shall assume” (*1855 Leaves of Grass* 27). Whitman’s – and “America’s” – poetic failures, flush with his highest achievements, become the reader’s. If the poem is “good,” if it promises us a new world, what it shows is its own failure to separate itself from the reader, to provide an image of anything different. “Celebrate myself,” the prose poem demands at once our ecstatic acceptance and our skeptical disappointment, discovering our own enjoyment of it in our failure to grasp it as different from ourselves. If the utopianism of aesthetics and America have been understood as the promise of a new start, a new path, the experience of Whitman would seem rather to promise just itself: that the end that we seek is either “here or nowhere,” that whatever it is we want, it will not come from outside, and thus the object of our desire – the thing promised – itself is exactly what we already have.

This is a deep challenge to literary criticism. In promising a better world, what such literature promises is that a redeemed world, a world as literature, would look exactly like the disappearance of literature, and, along with it, the critical discourse that it sustains. Insofar as we grasp it – insofar as we take this promise seriously, enter into it – it slips through our fingers, not just evading but seemingly betraying us, as if the promise, once we hear it, is just that there is no one on the other side to keep it: no voice for the reader to hear, and thus no object to support the critic. “Discovering form,” the intersection of these two utopian forms, aesthetic and American, at once completely realizes and indisputably collapses them both; it is the form of critique and its object, the being and the end of both. Serving as the object of their reciprocal promise, actualizing their form beyond form, the American aesthetic makes good on itself by showing that it already exists: that the meaning beyond words, value beyond norms that, in trying to interpret it, we wanted, are just these words and values. What the American aesthetic gives us is just our own desire for this special object, *as the object: irrefutably there*, not as a guarantee of something further, but just the worldly existence that, by virtue of our grasping it, it is. What it allows us to specify, turn into an object of critique, is just the need for specification, for objects, itself: the need to be able to *identify*, to actively delimit and pick out, objects that nevertheless will tell us something that we could not have known without them. To get these objects into view is just to get into view the critical impulse itself. And yet, this is not nothing; to bring it into view is not “merely” a formal procedure. The work is one of critical apperception – of orienting ourselves in thinking towards our own need to overcome the objects that orient our thinking – and this itself is a worldly, that is to say real, activity. Grasping our own limitations, as Kant and Foucault

argued, is precisely a concrete and historical process; its activity is neither analytic nor empirical, but synthetic and practical.<sup>29</sup>

The burden of this dissertation will be to show that this apperception is something we can learn to do (indeed, is something we *must*, in doing criticism, already be doing, and yet thereby need to learn): that, insofar as we find ourselves wanting something (wanting everything) from American literature – insofar as, within the terms of an increasingly globalized and publicized American academic discourse, we feel compelled to do literary criticism, to read and say things about these objects and the culture they express – what it can give us is just the capacity to accept that gift, which is to say, to give it up. To grasp such an object is to see it vanish, and with it, our desire for it. This is not to say that American literature, or any other thing critique might grasp, *is* this knowledge; or that, in grasping it, we *have* this knowledge, *know* our limitations, and therefore, once and for all, overcome them. Rather, it is simply to say that, in denying us literature as a (special kind of) object, and thus denying us a new world, what the critical encounter does instead, if we want, is open out – partially, concretely, yet never predictably – onto *this* world, the one in which we read and think: the world not, as Benjamin worried it might become, as an “object of contemplation,” something we could, in knowledge, possess, and therefore fail to, but as the field in which images, words, and thoughts reveal their incompleteness, and thus their reality.

To give such claims more, or the same, traction than the kind of Whitmanian platitudes that are their evidence, I will need to give a brief overview of how the American literary object has served critique in the past. Since my argument is that what

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<sup>29</sup> See their respective essays entitled “What is Enlightenment?”

the American literary object gives us to see is the critical desire itself, my interpretation of this object is equally an interpretation of the critical history it has gathered around it. Elucidating my central concept, American literature's "discovering form," thus entails showing how this concept emerges in the critical relation with the object, rather than pertaining either to the object "itself" (and thus being the formal insight that my discourse discovers) or to a mistaken critical picture (and thus being the falsehood that a true view of the object dissolves).

To that end, one goal of this dissertation is to show how the insistence on "discovering form," both by literature itself and the critical discourse surrounding it, evinces what Wittgenstein and Stanley Cavell have called a skeptical dynamic, and what in a slightly different register Marxism calls the work of reification: the constant search for a guarantee that nothing is certain, for the knowledge that there is more to know before one decides what to do; a solid proof of the world's evanescence. But my argument is equally that to show this is itself to make an argument for, and thus to affirm, critique's capacity to do something other than merely repeat this skeptical dynamic. In getting "discovering form" into view we do not finally "have" such a form, in either its final solidity or its absolute nothingness. Instead, what we find is just the opening – essentially unspecified – that that dynamic makes. Rather than discovering a "new" way of thinking about things – by way, circularly, of discovering a new thing to think about – my argument aims to show that the resources for overcoming whatever it is that, in reading such objects, we see, or realizing whatever it is that, in doing critique, we want, are precisely what we have.

In this sense, a reading of critique will provide the material or content for a critical or formal claim that can only subsequently be articulated by the literary texts themselves. Thus the rest of my introduction, and the chapters that succeed them, follow a trajectory opposed to a traditional one in literary scholarship, in which the quasi-intuitive discovery of a new facet of the object motivates the articulation of an as-yet-unpronounced claim, subsequently transforming critical consensus. Here, that is to say, I want to show the newness of an object, and the claim it makes on us, emerging from what is already a deeply public or conceptual discursive field – a field formed by the history of critique, and by the matter of history – rather than originating in a private intuitive experience of the object, whose expression subsequently achieves that intuition’s publicity and thereby transforms a conceptual or discursive field.

First, I will discuss the dynamic of discovering form within the discipline of American studies. Then I will show how it structures discourse in the U.S. humanities more generally, in order to suggest a resonance between problems that have haunted the Americanist aesthetic since its inception and the current sense of a public crisis of the humanities. Here we can see how the recent claim, by both advocates for the cultivation of humanistic inquiry and those that deem it redundant – the claim that the failure of humanistic critique to articulate a distinct claim for the value of its object portends a world in which such non-fungible value has vanished – evinces the dynamic of the Americanist aesthetic I call discovering form. This, in turn, will allow us to see how a renewed attention to the curiously recursive representation of literary form *within* American literature could reframe, and thereby make a new claim to value for, literary criticism in the present.

## Sacvan Bercovitch and the Rhetoric of Americanist Redemption

For the study of American culture and literature, the threat and promise of discovering form, and of the collapse of the difference between the object and our judgment of it, has constituted the very form of the object itself. There is not, in other words, the danger of taking artworks as images of political utopia, or of taking norms as merely matters of taste: to correctly grasp the object of scholarly inquiry, what Lionel Trilling called “Reality in America,” one *must* succumb to this threat: must, in other words, blur the boundary between one’s own inquiry into the object – one’s desire to understand it, and thus to gain the capacity to make a claim about it – and the object itself.<sup>30</sup> To inquire about American culture and literature has meant precisely to learn about one’s own confusion with it. Whitman’s “what I assume you shall assume,” his taking on of and loss into the world as his claim on the future, has been an assumption scholars, too, have felt obliged to make.

Sacvan Bercovitch, in his study of the symbolic workings of American identity, influentially traced this dynamic back to rhetorical modes cultivated by the Puritans. Bercovitch describes how the Puritan ministerial “Jeremiad,” a pervasive rhetorical form that chastised colonists for falling away from their covenantal obligations to God and higher things, in fact took the very spectacle of the colonists’ worldly sinfulness as a sign that the covenant’s utopian promise had yet to be fulfilled, and thus was still active. The Jeremiad has a tripartite structure: it reveals the sinfulness of the colonists’ worldly actions; compares these sins with the original promise they had made (the covenant); and then interprets this relation through this lens of scripture. The colonists are measured

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<sup>30</sup> “Reality in America,” in *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2008).

against the covenant, their “contract with God,” and found wanting; failing to live by its words, their actions lay waste to the promised world that it pictured. Yet – and here is the properly interpretive move – by reading this failure itself through the lens of scriptural prophecy, the inevitable distance between their worldly sin and the word of God becomes itself the sign or *figura* of the promise, an immanent realization of the covenant’s “fusion of secular and sacred history.”<sup>31</sup> Linking the colonists’ sin to that detailed in the Bible, the jeremiad transforms these actions into signs, at once spiritual and worldly, pointing towards redemption by demonstrating its failure to come to pass. Because the covenant itself merges man’s limited, discursive language with God’s infinite logos, the latter’s redemptive power fusing with the secular and temporal concreteness of the former, their worldly failure to live up to it – their actions’ inadequacy to their words – can be seen as worldly evidence of the covenant’s reality, and of their own language’s Godlike power. Their failure to live by their word, in showing the distance between word and the world, is itself worldly evidence of the power that the language of the covenant has achieved. Their *actions* become in some sense sacred or *metaphorical*, “meaning” their own failure, thus beyond it; conversely, their *words*, the interpretations that measure this distance and keep faith with the covenant, acquire a *literal* force. Worldly facts become a representation of the beyond at the same time that the letter of the Godlike text becomes literally manifest, rendered true.

The burden of Bercovitch’s claim is that this structure is not just an interpretive lens through which one can understand both American rhetoric and American history, but rather the form that, in holding the two together, fatally determines them both. The

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<sup>31</sup> *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. 1978), 9.

colonists themselves interpreted things this way, and that is what made the interpretation accurate. It is by seeing their own worldly actions (their falling away from God's word) in what we could call an essentially *literary* way – as merely *representing* actions, in such a way that they thereby *mean* or signify something beyond themselves, something inexpressible – that the Puritans could interpret their worldly negativity as a utopian promise. And, conversely, it is by reading their guiding text as essentially real – as constituting, in its words and *as* words, their literal destiny – that they could discover, in their lives, the city of God all around them. The content of “Americanness” reveals itself as a pure aesthetic form; rhetorical (and later, literary) form becomes interpretable precisely in its embodiment as “American.”

Bercovitch argues, perhaps questionably (though, one should note, consistently) for the vast implications of this rhetorical mode across American history and culture, and his conclusions are (again, consistently) at once deeply pessimistic and wildly messianic. He sees the jeremiad in everything from “Thoreau condemning his backsliding neighbors by reference to the Westward errand,” to the moral fervor of the new social movements of the 1960s, to Barack Obama's promise to ““restore our image as the last, best hope on earth,””<sup>32</sup> all of which turn the threat of collapse, of the American world's failure to present a scene adequate to, and thus fulfilling, a law beyond it, into the very form of that law, the promise of its utopian form.

For Bercovitch, this dynamic shaped the terms of both American culture and its criticism, and, in uniting the two, posed an intractable problem for both. If the form of

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<sup>32</sup> *American Jeremiad* 11, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (rev. ed., New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), xxxix.

American ideology “fed on the distance between promise and fact” (*American Jeremiad* 23), monetizing every instance of worldly difference, every sign that America did not fit the image that it had promised itself, into the very form of a promised consensus that it thereby revealed as already actual, then any cultural consensus – any claim to inhabit a shared normative project – was founded exactly on the failure of consensus; and yet, at the same time, anything that resisted it, any normative claim *against* consensus towards a better or different normative horizon, thereby only strengthened it, failing to be different in the right way. Any American critique – any jeremiad – insofar as it makes a claim to discover, in its own dissatisfaction with worldly events as it represents them, an image of a better world – and in a broad sense this is just what critique, from the romantics to Adorno to Lionel Trilling, *is* – only reinforces the fatal fusion of America and literature, secular and sacred that, according to Bercovitch, collapses the possibility of any true difference, any real possibility of a claim to a different order of things. By giving culture the form of criticism, and criticism the form of culture, the productive distance between the two vanished. By making, as F.O. Matthiessen described the ambition of classic American literature, “the word one with the thing,” the word at once becomes real and loses its power, its difference or otherness, its capacity to project or promise a different world.

As critics have pointed out, Bercovitch’s own writing rather urgently begs the question; his absolute denial that critique, or more specifically any explicit critique, could escape the insidious logic of its object, thus that U.S. culture could escape the cunning of

Puritan reason, itself evinces the this-worldly fatalism that is his object.<sup>33</sup> His pessimism – disallowing, *a priori*, any representation of a new norm, a different picture of the good – becomes a kind of iconoclastic messianism, and though he was not primarily a literary critic, literature is his crucial allegory, serving as both supreme ideological object for the Americanist critics and citizens he aims to reform, and as that alone which enables a critique of them; in other words, as something like a jeremiad. In *The Puritan Jeremiad*, his central example of the work of the jeremiad is a theoretical text, entitled “Chronometricals and Horologicals,” that urges us to remember the difference between God’s perfect truth and the imperfect, relative truths of man. But this text itself is imaginary: it is discovered by the protagonist of Melville’s *Pierre*, and though, Bercovitch says, it has usually been taken as a “jeremiad against Jeremiads,” its point is not so much to remind us of the difference between God’s world and man’s than to suggest that grasping it will itself reconcile them: “by their very contradictions they are made to correspond.” Because this jeremiad is itself “unreal,” imaginative, it can serve in Melville’s text as “the most incisive critique we have” of the jeremiad, of itself; more incisive, presumably, than his own (*American Jeremiad* 29). By making a convincing case for literature’s capacity to “unify” its own “ambiguities,” and mount a “sustained, dramatized critique” of them, his own critique reveals a deep faith in his object, precisely by denying that, as criticism, his own words can *say* or promise anything beyond it, beyond the fallenness that it singularly presents.<sup>34</sup> Each manifestation of this logic thus incipiently contains our redemption from it. This is exactly what Bercovitch cannot *say* –

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<sup>33</sup> Donald Pease makes this argument in “New Americanists: Revisionist Interventions into the Canon,” *Boundary 2* 17, no. 1 (April 1, 1990), 20-1. See also Lauren Berlant *Anatomy of National Fantasy* (University of Chicago Press, 1991), 221 n.10.

<sup>34</sup> “*Pierre*, or the Ambiguities of American Literary History,” 304.

because to do so would be to claim a new consensus, a fulfillment of the promise – and it is exactly what he *means*. Such a meaning is not hidden, does not itself need to be uncovered or explicated: it saturates the structure of his interpretation, which is also his object. There is nothing further that can be said: that is what it says.

Such question-begging, then – as I argued above in relation to the Americanist literary object itself – is not a problem that Bercovitch’s discourse hides, its unexpressed content, but its very form, its claim. His critical insight is just that critique cannot redeem the object; what this insight reveals is just that the object had already said that. My argument is that Bercovitch’s fatalistic vision does not have to be, and ought not to be, the last word; that, just by getting this relation between critique and the world into view, it becomes possible to transform it. But it is important to say that as far as it goes – in its grasp of its object – such a view not only stands up to, but usefully elucidates, arguments in favor of a more explicitly normative, or polemical, role for literature. For Bercovitch, one can never directly identify literary objects, our modern contracts with God, as guiding our worldly activity towards the good; it is only in making explicit how they *fail* to redeem us (how we fail to be redeemed by them) that critique can attest to their power, and thus make a – necessarily indirect, even silent – normative claim. Conversely, critics like Donald Pease, concerned to historicize and thus secularize the logic that for Bercovitch has a transcendental or constitutive status, argue that because such logics have served particular ideological purposes in distinct historical conflicts, they can be grasped concretely and thus meaningfully and pointedly critiqued. Pease argues that the consensus argument of first-generation American studies, which is something like the affirmative version of Bercovitch’s lament, can be traced to the Cold War imperative to

understand America as a flexible form, an idea without ideology, a nation that is “purposive without purpose,” in distinction from the concrete and thus limited purposes that characterized its Cold War enemies.<sup>35</sup> Such critics turned American literature into exempla of this infinitely capacious form, with Melville’s Ishmael as its jocular and welcoming liberal hero, “quick to perceive a horror, and...still be friendly with it.”<sup>36</sup> Pease argues instead that within *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael, far from an independent, infinitely capacious narrative principle, reveals a deep need for his own Jeremiah – Ahab – as a delimited principle against which to construct himself, and thus to form the text itself, his narrative. *Moby-Dick* is not an image of American consensus; to read it is to see the collapse of such an image. But curiously, it is Melville’s text *itself* that collapses this (seemingly extrinsic and historically distinct) image of consensus. Pease argues that it is exactly by reading the text that we are liberated from the false consensus. Or anyway this is the experience that, in critiquing the book, he both undergoes and makes available. He describes his “personal failure to remain persuaded” by the canonical interpretation; what is at issue is *not* “[Pease’s] ability to convert this failure into the power to prove the superiority of one reading over another” – he is not making his *own* normative claim about what the text means, what it is, as if using rhetoric to subsume the object under an even broader consensus – but rather the text’s own capacity to resist – *in* its readers – its

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<sup>35</sup> Pease, “New Americanists,” 19-21. Though Bercovitch understands himself to be arguing against this first generation of “liberal consensus” critics (and, indeed, all previous critics), Pease (rightly, I am arguing) links the former’s messianism to the one he uncovers: “Bercovitch’s dissensus restores value only to the principle of dissent. For this dissensus does not emerge out of resistance to specific cultural arrangements or presuppositions of a prior consensus...because such contestatory relations between the new dissensus and the old consensus would do just what Bercovitch insists can (must) never be done, that is, argue for the effectiveness of an oppositional movement” (20).

<sup>36</sup> Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (eds. Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., New York: W.W. Norton. 2002), 22.

critical formation towards a specific end (namely, the maintenance of a Cold War consensus).<sup>37</sup> For Pease, as for many of the so-called “New Americanists” that followed in his wake, the text can and must be recognized as a normative force in worldly affairs; but what I want to emphasize is that for such critics it functions this way not by representing any good – or indeed, anything at all – (Pease does not, for example, see in *Moby-Dick* any alternative political vision to be affirmed<sup>38</sup>), but by enacting its own *failure* to lead us in any such direction; by discovering, *in* critique, critique’s own failure to discover a normative form. To the extent that critique can make an argument for a discrete normative goal – the destruction of the Cold War consensus, the articulation of alternative social, political, and economic formations – it is the text’s unworldliness, its strange *resistance* to conceptual capture, that energizes and makes possible such a claim. As it does for Bercovitch, the Americanist literary object serves Pease as a normative promise precisely by revealing to us how our own critical attempts to frame such a

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<sup>37</sup> Donald E. Pease, “*Moby-Dick* and the Cold War,” *The American Renaissance Reconsidered*, 1985, 113–55.

<sup>38</sup> Pease’s recent rereadings of *Moby-Dick* (“C.L.R. James, *Moby-Dick*, and the Emergence of Transnational American Studies,” in *The Futures of American Studies*, eds. Donald E. Pease and Robyn Wiegman, Duke University Press, 2010, and “Pip, *Moby-Dick*, Melville’s Governmentality,” *Novel* 45, no. 3, 2012) have emphasized the sense in which it hints at (in the relation between Pip and Ahab), and has served as a ground for imagining (in C.L.R. James’ reading of the text), alternative worlds; but, again, the normative work of the text (and of the critical publicization of this work) is less to affirm these visions than to give an experience of their negation. A broader, less parochial version of my argument would link this mode of negative critical utopianism to a continental genealogy of negative critique running from Schlegel to Marx to the Frankfurt school; Adorno’s lifelong attempt to give voice to this negativity that for him resided only in the aesthetic dimension – which nevertheless could be, with sufficient critical labor, excavated from the most instrumentalized, impoverished forms of life – has affinities with the vein of Americanist critique I am working to bring out. Fredric Jameson’s *Marxism and Form* (Princeton University Press, 1972) contains an early formulation of this continental line of thought that influenced Americanist critics of the last 40 years.

promise not only fail to attain it but negate it, collapsing its redemptive liberation into a worldly coercion. Though much of the historicist and more programmatic scholarship that has followed in Pease's wake has tended to see literature itself as explicitly coercive (Wai Chee Dimock's reading of Melville in *Empire for Liberty* is as a more direct progenitor of such work<sup>39</sup>), underlying such jeremiads is the claim that the literary object itself is the locus of this singular normative capacity, as it were to give and to take away; if we can trace our sin to it, this is because it is what gives our sin meaning, allows it to point beyond itself. If literature is coercive, it thereby shows a power to which we must return if we are to become free. The idea that what we need from literature, as from a contract with God, is a guarantee of our failure to be redeemed by it stakes everything on the success of this failure; it is the secret Catholicism of the black mass, cultivating an unutterable imaginative, or rather sacred, space for the final intervention of the absolutely other. Though such historicism wants to secularize its object, the worldliness it uncovers is exactly that from which we thereby are enjoined to flee.

The historicist or New Americanist critique has the real, and non-trivial, virtue of, in Pease's words, "desublimating" the Americanist aesthetic, making visible not only its worldly effectiveness, but its secular origin ("New Americanists" 26). That this continues to be a possible object of scholarly discovery attests to the fact that we still want to learn of our own imaginative capacity: that is, of our capacity to learn from ourselves, to be haunted or constrained, surprised or inspired, by that which we have made. I mean to suggest that, whatever insight such accounts provide into a unique American object (a literary tradition, a historical phenomenon), or however revealing are their possible

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<sup>39</sup> Princeton University Press, 1989.

*failures* to do so (say, the occlusion of alternative traditions or logics), the value proper to them is their manifestation, their figuration, of the relation between critique and its object that is itself (and this is not a paradox) their object. What such critique frames is the fact that the “dream” of America and the scholarly attempt to interpret or conceptualize that dream – and the *desire* for that dream to become real and the sense that its realization would be its end, the collapse of the possibility of redemption – have been linked from the very start. The same “nervousness and wretchedness” that attends to the Americanist text attends, as well, to the accounts of it; not only the artifacts of American life, but the attempts to redeem their meaning threaten us with the collapse into just the world that we meant to redeem. The secondary move – clerical or academic – does not release us from this worry, but rather inserts us into it.

But this collapse has a value of its own, one that cannot, for better or worse, be made fungible, cannot serve to orient or ground a new or further representation. Far from indicting scholastic reification (as if revealing that we had lost ourselves in a maze that nevertheless didn’t exist), my argument is that to see in literary critique the dynamic of “discovering form” is just to see what it is that we *are* doing in asking, from literature *and* criticism, “life itself” and its interpretation, for some further guarantee from the objects we desire. (Indeed, one of the virtues of Bercovitch’s argument is that it gives evidence, for better or for worse, of how “philosophically” troubled the supposedly practical American spirit is.<sup>40</sup>) As Wittgenstein works to show, the threat that

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<sup>40</sup> This is of course a claim that Stanley Cavell makes explicitly in his readings of Emerson and Thoreau, and my approach throughout this dissertation is deeply indebted to his work. See Emily Budick’s attempt to link Bercovitch and Cavell (“Sacvan Bercovitch, Stanley Cavell, and the Romance Theory of American Fiction,” *PMLA* 107, no. 1, 1992); though the latter would seem to affirm the very tradition that the former

philosophy's persistent skepticism expresses and tries to defend against, of being caught in the grip of worldly illusions – and thus, of having blinded ourselves to the *true* image or *eidos* (form), the one in comparison with which the world itself seems lacking – is not itself an “illusion,” but just what it shows to be real; the trick is to see *this*, to see in the problems of philosophy the very shape of the world about which it wants to get clear.<sup>42</sup>

The Americanist, or literary, version of this would be to see critique's utopian aspirations neither as in need of final worldly justification nor as themselves simply and disappointingly worldly facts, but as the evidence and form of desires whose meaning, and value, are still open and active.

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wants to reject, Budick argues that “it is in their apparently very different, even mutually exclusive interpretations [of literary texts] that Bercovitch and Cavell most profoundly concur on American culture” (82). This sentence, consciously or not, is a rather close paraphrase of Bercovitch's slogan for the *Jeremiad*, which he borrows from the curious “metaphysical treatise” in *Pierre*: “by their very contradictions they are made to correspond.” I discuss this “treatise” further in the final section of this introduction.

<sup>41</sup> We should note further that this sense is not new; Tocqueville, for one, gives an account of Americans' singular taste for abstraction or “general ideas” (433-7). The citizens of Jonathan Swift's “Laputa” (which Schlegel, riffing off of Goethe's aphorism quoted earlier, associates with “America,” and which will reappear in the second and third chapters of this dissertation), seem also, despite their resolute, almost heroic empiricism, rather haunted by a metaphysical disquiet. *Gulliver's Travels* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001); Friedrich von Schlegel, *Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms*, trans. Ernst Behler and Roman Struc (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1968), 97-8. Thoreau's account of his neighbor's astonishing daily “penance” records a similar observation. *Walden* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 3.

<sup>42</sup> I am drawing on Cavell's discussion in *The Claim of Reason* of what he calls Wittgenstein's grasp of “the truth of skepticism,” which he summarizes as an insight that “the human creature's basis in the world as a whole, its relation to the world as such, is not one of knowing, anyway not what we think of as knowing” (Oxford University Press, 1979. 241-3). I am not sure that, as Cavell sometimes seems to suggest, literature can provide us with some other basis, what he calls “acknowledgment,” but I mean to pursue his suggestion that the (philosophical) desire for literature is the form of a search for such a basis. See my discussion below of Michael Fried and Walter Benn Michaels, whose reification of the concept of acknowledgment into what Fried calls “grace” and Michaels the “fact” or “experience of form” pursues a tendency in Cavell that I wish to distance my own argument from.

This is a delicate balance, but if it has been hard for American criticism to achieve, that difficulty is itself expressive of the world on whose behalf it would be maintained. I want now to suggest how the Americanist literary dynamic outlined above structures inquiry in the U.S. humanities more broadly. Seeing this parallel will show how a renewed attention to this dynamic on its own terms might, far from “solving” any crisis “within” the academic humanities, reveal the call (both internal and external, out of hope and skepticism) for the humanities to justify their value as already an expression of that value; and thus, to reveal in the intensity with which both the believers and the philistines continue to ask, as Anahid Nersessian has recently put it, “who cares?” – about the humanities and the non-fungible value they (fail to) express – the question’s own answer.<sup>43</sup>

### **The Crisis of the Humanities and the “Fact of Form”**

The objects of the humanities or human sciences, we can say analytically, are those whose nature is their artifactuality, their display of their own existence in accordance with human ends; studying such objects (cultures, practices, histories) clarifies the purposes behind human activity and makes those purposes available for evaluation and debate. Such a definition is the basis of humanistic research as it emerged in the nineteenth-century research university. Does this definition apply to literature? In a sense, literature would seem to be the purest embodiment of human artifactuality: language objects, things made out of meaning, a pure *poesis* or making. And yet it is precisely literature’s resistance to normative clarification – to the specification and elucidation of what purpose, exactly, it serves – that has given it a special place within

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<sup>43</sup> “Who Cares?” in “We, Reading, Now,” *Stanford Arcade*, July 2015.

the humanities. Foucault's persuasive account of the modern episteme argues that the human sciences, conceiving of man at once as the subject and object of knowledge, produces in "literature" a use of language that fails to signify any reality outside of itself, an object that is at once "the center of Western culture" and inassimilably foreign to it, at once the most fully transparent form of signification and the most opaque, resistant thing; both human and its very negation.<sup>44</sup> John Guillory describes how "literature has been made to play a kind of allegorical role in the development of the disciplines, as the name of the principle antithetical to the very scientificity governing discipline formation in the modern university."<sup>45</sup> As an object of scholarly research about the human, literature embodies that which, in the human, resists research, and thereby links scholarship to the human world that, in taking the latter as its object, it had separated itself from. Studying literature is a kind of specialization in being human; in the terms of someone like Friedrich Schiller, an aesthetic education transforms the very dispartateness, fragmentation, and mediated character of modern life into a new image of the whole, a second nature, revealing the very partiality or multiplicity of human life as its universal character.<sup>46</sup>

To the extent that the university was seen as the bearer, or even author, of a spiritual, cultural, or national tradition – of a particular yet collective human project –

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<sup>44</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon, 1971), 43.

<sup>45</sup> "Literary Study and the Modern System of the Disciplines," in *Disciplinary at the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Amanda Anderson and Joseph Valente (Princeton University Press, 2002), 19–43.

<sup>46</sup> See Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man, in a Series of Letters*, trans. Elizabeth Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967). Martha Nussbaum is an example of a current advocate for such an understanding of the humanities. See *Not for Profit* (Princeton University Press, 2010) and *Cultivating Humanity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

such research has a clear role to play, providing a kind of engine for the formation and explication of whatever that project was seen to be. For the brief period of post-WWII expansion in post-secondary education, the U.S. research university may have served this purpose. But, as numerous institutional histories in the past 20 years have pointed out, this mission, inherited from a synthesis of the German ideal of philosophical research and a British notion of cultural, especially literary, tradition, is no longer seen to orient the contemporary university, and its collapse is especially dramatic in the U.S. academic humanities. In a prescient account whose terms continue to shape discussion, Bill Readings described in 1996 how the end of the Cold War entailed the collapse of a model in which the university trains citizen-subjects and serves as a bearer of national culture, and the emergence in its stead of a university that is less an institution or a structure than the discursive form of a newly totalizing market logic, responsible for producing a quality identified as “excellence.”<sup>47</sup> This logic (which, Readings argues, is the same thing as “Americanization” [3]; we can begin to note this story’s resonance with the narrative of Americanism as apocalypticism) is essentially that of an “end of ideology”: it entails the end of a notion of national (or even relevantly or stably distinct) cultures, and thus the loss of a “hero” for the university’s narrative of enlightenment, a collapse which could also be described as achieving what Foucault argued was the goal of literature, the disappearance of “man,” the “emprico-transcendental doublet,” as such: the final collapse

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<sup>47</sup> Readings’ book is *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1996). There is too much recent scholarship to cite, but a sample of the range that bounds my discussion here include: Nussbaum’s *Not For Profit*, Sarah Brouillette’s “Academic Labor, the Aesthetics of Management, and the Promise of Autonomous Work” (*nonsite.org* n. 9, 2013), Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, “The University and the Undercommons: Seven Theses,” *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004), *The Humanities and Public Life* ed. Peter Brooks and Hilary Jewett, and Wendy Brown’s *Undoing the Demos*.

of the human sciences' recursive dualism into its own ideal of an unshakable subject-object or thing-in-itself of knowledge. But, according to Readings, a new, ghostly hero (or villain) of the university rises from the ashes: something that Gary Becker would describe as "human capital," but which does not strictly speaking have to live in a human subject at all.<sup>48</sup> This bare capacity for self-valorization, or "excellence," is not tied to any specific kind of object, and thus can be applied to any domain whatsoever. Without a subject and without a goal, the thinking of the human sciences becomes "dereferralized" (Readings 17). Terms like "critical thinking," and its younger though not-so-distant cousin "disruption," emerge to describe nebulous, portable techniques that can be used to interpret and legitimate anything from subcultures to social engineering policies to business management techniques. The value of an artifactual object, or an interpretation, is not measured against any goal – any specific, thus arguable, project – but merely, and tautologically, against the discourse of "excellence" itself – a "good" interpretation, an "interesting" object.<sup>49</sup>

As this specificity disappears, so too does the distinction between the normative *intentions* governing artifacts and the relative or incidental *facts* of their existence; and, by extension, that between normative debate about such intentions and pragmatic techniques for achieving them. This is both a result and a primary engine of

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<sup>48</sup> Gary Becker, *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., (University of Chicago Press, 1994).

<sup>49</sup> See Sianne Ngai's highly suggestive history of the emergence of the concept of "the interesting" as a central aesthetic category for modernity. "Merely Interesting," *Critical Inquiry* 34, no. 4 (2008). Her claim is that this category itself is more than "merely interesting," that is to say, while it performs a bare fungibility of aesthetic value, it holds open the space for a resistance to such universalization; to designate something as interesting is precisely to imagine its fungibility or "interest" as potentially non-fungible. My critique of Walter Benn Michaels and Michael Fried below attempts to expand on this point.

marketization, or neoliberalization. The university, rather than serving as a locus for deliberation about or clarification of collective intentions which the market then actualizes, collapses into the latter. The distinction between scholarly logos and instrumental *techne* blurs, and a recursive process begins in which “excellence” is measured by market value, while market value, de-linked from any external goals for which it would supposedly serve as mere instrument, becomes increasingly valorized as “excellence” itself.

And yet, as Readings argued, this does not mean that the humanities lose their role in this new “university of excellence.” Though their de-funding or “optimization” portends the disappearance of “actual” humanities, it is precisely the “structuring argument” of the humanities that is radically inflated into the principle of “excellence” that defines the very idea of the university and thus of scholarly inquiry as a (now no longer national or cultural but global or ontological) regulative principle. “Throwing out the baby while keeping the bathwater,” disciplines like cultural studies “preserve the structure of an argument for redemption through culture, while recognizing the inability of culture to function any longer as such an idea” (Readings 17). As national literatures lose their role as “heroes” of a process of enlightenment, as cultural ideals or cities of words against which the present world can be measured and judged, and thus through which its transformation can be imagined, their “structure” paradoxically becomes pervasive. The idea of a regulative or inspiring difference seeps into the world itself; the humanities’ disarticulation and clarification of norms becomes the job of the market, and the market’s previously-accidental sorting mechanism becomes in turn freighted with moral significance. The humanities’ role becomes a clarification and thematization, not

of what is *different* from the merely worldly, but of what is proper to it; rather than guiding us *away* from the partiality of worldly interests, it reveals the hidden meaning inside them. Rather than being in tension with the world, it reveals and justifies the logic by which the world already operates.

Since Readings wrote, the approach he identified with the rise of cultural studies has diffused into race, gender, and ethnic studies, performance studies, and transnational studies. These approaches are increasingly understood less as alternative disciplines that trouble the distinction between artistic works and cultural facts than as modes of inquiry proper to traditional humanistic disciplines themselves. Indeed, the breakdown of that distinction – between the description of a stable or at least recognizable object and the “disruption” of such stability – has itself become a more or less universal disciplinary principle within the humanities. Meanwhile, Readings’ argument that the disappearance of “actual” humanities is in fact compatible with an increasingly broad role for the humanistic imaginary rings truer than ever, and is cognate as well with an emerging consensus about the “affective” or aesthetic nature of late capitalism, in which the modeling of the individual on the corporation – the entrepreneurial self, the prudent steward of cultural, social, or other forms of human capital – itself relies on a notion of the business and the economy as a whole as fundamentally creative or expressive, its logic essentially aesthetic.<sup>50</sup> The strange rise of the term “curate” to describe the ordering of everything from lifestyles to website “content” to the arrangement of products in stores is enough to suggest how pervasive this has become. (One cannot but suspect that the original meaning, the priestly care of the soul, is not far from the surface of contemporary

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<sup>50</sup> I discuss this logic, the aestheticization of the market and the marketization of the aesthetic, in chapters 3 and 4.

usage.) As in the Puritan narrative described by Bercovitch and Perry Miller (and, in a broader version of this story, Max Weber), the promise of redemption in this world, the contract with God, turned out to be a contract with Capital itself. The “baby” is gone, but the project of redemption continues without him. The object’s divine infinitude is endlessly transmuted into an infinite fungibility, an ever-receding secular optimization.

Most troublingly, it is again the very *interpretation* of this declension – the humanities as jeremiad – that serves as the engine of this limitless, and thus purposeless, transfer of the divine purposive form into a secular (though divinized, or aestheticized) reality. In cultural studies, the object of interest was often the surprising resistance, creativity, or normative clarity of seemingly complicit, derivative, or morally deviant cultural practices; critique’s excavation of these powers revealed the capacity for this expanded field of “cultural practice” to generate its own resistance and self-overcoming, and thus, implicitly, questioned the need for a separate discourse of disinterested “culture.” More recently, as scholars like Adolph Reed and Walter Benn Michaels have argued, humanities work focused on investigating racial, ethnic, and gender inequality have often taken these apparent failures of worldly justice as sites of, essentially, market failure. In such work, the goal of criticism is to grasp the literary or cultural expression of this inequality as a kind of sign pointing out the not-yet-excellent, telling the market where to do its work.<sup>51</sup> The jeremiads of cultural studies affirm, as Bercovitch might have argued, that the solution is just more of the same. Rather than an image of a different

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<sup>51</sup> Adolph Reed, “*Django Unchained*, or, *The Help*: How ‘Cultural Politics’ Is Worse Than No Politics at All, and Why” (*nonsite.org* no. 9, 2013), and “Nothing Left,” *Harper’s Magazine* (March 2014); Walter Benn Michaels, *The Beauty of A Social Problem*.

world, literature and culture provide (rather inexplicably) new techniques for “improving” this one.

Such skepticism about the complicity of humanities discourse in neoliberal policy is, like Bercovitch and Pease’s skepticism about an earlier, more nationalistic complicity, healthy. As Foucault argued, and as I argue further in my final chapter, such discourse, like neoliberalism, and indeed liberalism itself, relies on a fantasy of otherworldly difference that it must simultaneously deny, an outside to legible market behavior that continuously provides it with the inventiveness that is its own form.<sup>52</sup> But I am less interested here in revealing this complicity than in linking it with its opposite. For if the so-called modernist critics of the neoliberal humanities argue that, threatened with this collapse of aesthetics and economy, it is all the more important to discover and affirm autonomous aesthetic objects against a “dereferentialized” neoliberal world, these objects themselves increasingly turn out to be nothing more than reified absences of reference. Walter Benn Michaels’ recent book *The Beauty of a Social Problem* displays this move explicitly. Michaels argues that, in a time of increasing class stratification, art cannot offer any specific policy suggestions for fixing such inequality, but is at the same time uniquely situated to give a “vision of the structures that produce both the policies we’ve got and the desire for alternatives to them” (xiii). Michaels argues that neoliberalization works by collapsing norms into preferences, claims into opinions, and arguments into viewpoints, and by extension redescribing policies, institutions, and other forms of human structure as, not expressive instantiations of value-laden, and thus arguable, ends, but simply transparent data that reflect varying levels of market optimization. It thus

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<sup>52</sup> See Foucault’s *Order of Things* and *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978-1979*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

transforms discrete and qualitatively incommensurable meanings and values into more or less *valuable* (“excellent”), quantitatively larger or smaller amounts of the one kind of value that can be objectified, namely, money. What goes missing is “form”: the qualitatively discrete shape that language or other kinds of human structure gives to the objects they aim to modify, what Michaels, following a post-Kantian philosophy of language, calls “aboutness” or reference, the capacity for humans to mean something *by* something else; for a policy or a norm, a sentence or an action, to be instantiated in the world, and for that worldly instantiation, in turn, to be evaluable based on its agreement with that form.

For Michaels, here following influential arguments made by art historian Michael Fried, what the art object can do is provide a kind of irrefutable proof of form. The artworks Michaels refers to, and valorizes, are ones that, in his description, are about aboutness: they turn “form” itself into an object. He describes how in a photograph by Arthur Ou of a garden enclosed in latticework, the lattice both frames or forms an image and is itself part of the image or the object framed, such that the photograph is “a view *of* the frame itself, the non-identity of the physical frame and the conceptual one. It’s a view of something that cannot (just) be seen, namely the fact of form” (97). Viewing such an object, we experience its *capacity* to be invested with form or normativity; we *see* the invisible difference between it and what it means. Art reifies the difference between form and content, concept and object: form itself becomes an object, a “fact”: thus, irrefutable. Michaels’ claim is essentially that art can thus show, as an objective fact, that not everything can be reduced to an objective fact; it makes irrefutable the claim that claims can be contested; it universalizes something whose value cannot be reduced to a universal

form. In this account of art, the notion of form loses all of its specificity: what we see is not *a* form – not any specific meaning, not a way of taking things – but form “itself.” Form becomes, not a specific claim, but like the object it forms a “mark,” indicating something beyond it: precisely, itself. Not form but the fact of form, not an intention but “intentionality,” and, as Fried wrote in his famous essay “Art and Objecthood,” not meaning but “meaningfulness *as such*.”<sup>53</sup> Art is not an image *of* anything in particular, but the reality of the infinite capacity to mean, to go beyond: it is an image of, or a contract with, God. We could equally call this “excellence.”

But, as with the criticism it opposes, I am not concerned here to reveal the symptomaticity, or say the market value, of this discourse. I do not claim that anything extraordinary is discovered in noticing that the object held up by such critics as a kind of talisman against the neoliberal monetization of the world is itself eminently monetizable. One can notice this by casting a glance at the art market. One could equally, with Marx and Benjamin and Bloch, discover in the commodity – in any object of daily life, wrapped up in history – what Fried and Michaels discover in the art object, namely, the investment or orientation of human desire beyond the present reality in which it is materialized.<sup>54</sup> What I do want to mark, to claim is worth describing, is the *reciprocity* of this investment in a beyond of value, its arcing across the critique of art *and* the reality of

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<sup>53</sup> Michaels 67, Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” in *Art and Objecthood* (University Of Chicago Press, 1998), 162. Michaels also quotes Fried’s sentence on Michaels 84.

<sup>54</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital Volume 1* (London: Penguin, 1992): 125-177; Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,” in *Walter Benjamin: selected writings Vol. 2 Part 1*, ed. Michael William Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2005), 207–21; Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight, vol. 1 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986). See also Fredric Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,” *Social Text*, no. 1 (1979): 130–48.

the profane (“neoliberal”) world, and the fact that in each realm the meaning, the interest, of this discovery depends on the *act* of denying – not merely on the absence of – its availability in the other. The value articulated by the humanities, like that captured by the market (“human capital”), emerges from the discovery of a form located in the other that cannot be contained by it, that calls forth a supplemental discourse to orient it.

What is remarkable about the art objects that Michaels brings into view, then, is not that they are different from, *or* that they are identical to, non-art objects; but that their very difference is their capacity to be “about” their similarity to them. The fact of form, the irrefutable promise of meaningfulness, which Fried also calls grace and, taking his epigraph from Perry Miller’s biography of Jonathan Edwards, links to the Americanist aesthetic, is what the object shows as its fallenness.<sup>55</sup> In Fried’s epigraph, it is by imagining “all the world annihilated” that we grasp behind it some force (God’s creative power) that exceeds any of its particulars. As Michaels argues, “it is the formlessness of the commodity,” which is the formlessness of the commodified world, “that makes possible the experience of form” (103). What the fact of form offers is the formless capacity for form: just, that is, the world.

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<sup>55</sup> This is the epigraph, as quoted from Miller’s *Jonathan Edwards*: “Edwards’s journals frequently explored and tested a meditation he seldom allowed to reach print; if all the world were annihilated, he wrote... and a new world were freshly created, though it were to exist in every particular in the same manner as this world, it would not be the same. Therefore, because there is continuity, which is time, ‘it is certain with me that the world exists anew every moment; that the existence of things every moment ceases and is every moment renewed.’ The abiding assurance is that ‘we every moment see the same proof of a God as we should have seen if we had seen Him create the world at first.’” “Art and Objecthood,” 153.

The lure, or promise, of the Americanist aesthetic, to which Michaels and Fried attest eloquently, is that one might discover in the world something beyond it, experience that which has been beyond our capacity to experience. But what they find is that – insofar as their discourse can discover it, can say it – it is just the world, and just the language, that it meant to exceed. We can imagine the humanist as a Nick Carraway: at the end of *The Great Gatsby*, sprawled out on the beach in front of Gatsby’s “huge incoherent failure of a house,” the narrator famously imagines

the old island that flowered once for Dutch sailors’ eyes — a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby’s house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.<sup>56</sup>

This image, in which the “inessential houses,” the gaudy signs of meaningless wealth built up on the shore, “melt away” to reveal to the narrator this old New World, is equally an image of the loss of the Arcadian dream that it figures. The “transitory, enchanted moment,” the “face to face encounter,” for the “last time in history,” is this one, this moment: the one that, in imagining, the narrator creates. This is the image of discovering form, of a worldliness in excess of itself, calling out for a human inhabitation worthy of it. What we see in this passage – and what, I am claiming, we can see in the very act of literary criticism itself – is that the commensurability is not with some external thing. The utopian promise is equally a vision of its collapse, a wondrousness turned towards the fallen world that Gatsby has built (and into which the narrator has wanted to be seduced). Nick’s experience, and his narrative, wants desperately to excavate the greatness, the

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<sup>56</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 140.

excellence, in Gatsby's worthless things, to redeem aesthetically his ridiculous quest; what he finds is that that was the Gatsby-esque ambition too. What makes this literary image itself powerful – responsive, like the “fresh green breast,” to our “capacity for wonder” – is that it imagines itself, its own desire, at once a seductive fantasy and a disappointing reality. The world that it pictures, “American” and “aesthetic,” is one in which enchantment, the world's promise to give us more than we could imagine, is commensurate with disenchantment, with the knowledge that that beyond is exactly *what* we imagine.

My argument is that we can learn from this, and the work of the rest of my dissertation will be to model, in readings of literature, not some knowledge that we would thereby gain but the experience, in other words the act, of learning it. Against the modernist melancholia that refuses its own dependence on the worldly formlessness which it must constantly imagine, and which remains attached to the transcendence that it would give up, this method would understand the humanities as posing no new questions, discovering no new value, but as the attempt to affirm, to inhabit, the very worldly dissatisfaction, or desire, that it discovers. If the humanities' crisis, like Gatsby's, is that it is not clear anymore who cares about the value it seeks – who it is supposed to redeem, what purpose it serves – what this crisis can give public voice to is the fact that this question *already* shapes the world in which it cannot seem to find its place. As Americanist critics have argued, the question driving “Americanization” continues to be: what end does this worldly work serve – for whom is all this “excellent”? (In Perry Miller's paraphrase of the jeremiad: “who are we?”<sup>57</sup>) For critics like Michaels, the

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<sup>57</sup> Perry Miller, *Errand Into the Wilderness* (New York: Harper, 1956), 10.

American jeremiad provides an answer by opposing these two questions. To the extent that we are in *this* world, doing this, we lose ourselves; to the extent that critique can discover in art the form of another world beyond it, this world is revealed as unreal, formless. (One might note that in reversing Plato's allegory, this account blinds itself to that allegory's literary or imaginative character.) But I think we should see these questions, not as pointing in opposite directions, holding us apart from the world, but as deeply similar, seeking the same object: ourselves *in* the world, neither at home nor "alienated" but uncanny, *unheimlich*. Like neo-, or old, liberalism itself, what such questioning, humanistic and economic, both wants to and cannot acknowledge is that it simultaneously "adds value," mixing its own intentions with the object and thus the world, and discovers that value already "in" and as the object itself, an excess to intention that cannot be accounted for. The impetus for humanistic critique, like that for the logic of a marketized excellence that aims to encompass it, is that there is something unworldly, unsettled, incomplete in the world as it is. Could we learn instead from both that that thing – call it meaning or value, beauty or capital – *is* the world, and thus is the sphere, not *against* which, as if against a ground from which we depart, but *in* which our words and actions are directed?

### **Leave your theory**

I want to conclude by modeling such a reading. Thoreau's *Walden* is an obvious place to go, partly because, as Stanley Cavell remarks, it is perhaps the best example of the American tendency to "overpraise and undervalue" literary or cultural works, to maintain them as distant stores of value, their remoteness from the business of daily life a reassuring confirmation that the American quotidian is already saturated with such

value.<sup>58</sup> In this sense, readings of *Walden*, lay and professional, have tended to find exactly what they wanted by reifying it, admiring (or dismissing) it from afar, an unknowable (or irredeemably pretentious) poetry of the everyday. Our questions about it, and desires for it, have their answers tucked away in Thoreau's well-secured little estate. And yet, what in *Walden* serves this purpose so exemplarily is the explicitness, and the moral urgency, of its effort to realize the promise of the Americanist aesthetic, to collapse image and world, and thus to render impossible that very distance between itself and its readers, the distance over which he can articulate that value and from which his readers can admire it. Thoreau would turn Walden, a world he discovers, into *Walden*, the one he imagines; and this would happen when *Walden*'s words discover their reader, enchanting her, forming her world. The identity of Walden and *Walden*, world and word, is both the mystic goal of Thoreau's book and its very condition, the point from which he starts. As Stanley Cavell and Sharon Cameron have argued, the "Walden" that he discovers is not an untouched Arcadia *about* which he writes, but his process of writing itself.<sup>59</sup> It is the place where he works in his field and earns his living "by the labor of my hands only," i.e., writing, "cultivating tropes," and indeed measuring them out, giving what he repeatedly calls an "account," meaning equally the story of his life and the "counting," the measuring, of the depth and breadth of Walden and *Walden*, troping Walden towards itself: "*Walled-in*," self-contained, a book and a world.<sup>60</sup>

But this identity between promise and realization, Arcadia and America, self and world – at once a wildly speculative metaphor and an analytic definition, guaranteed – is

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<sup>58</sup> *Senses of Walden* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981), 33.

<sup>59</sup> Cavell, *Senses of Walden*; Sharon Cameron, *Writing Nature* (University of Chicago Press, 1989).

<sup>60</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 200.

also between Walden and the town, and himself and his neighbors, and thus redemption and apocalypse; between his own world of writing, where he lives “by the labor of my hands only,” “brag[ging] as lustily as chanticleer,” and the world of men who are “laboring under a mistake,” living lives of “quiet desperation” (2, 90, 4, 7). Though he says that his account is “confined to the narrowness of my experience,” and aims only at a “simple and sincere account of [my] own life,” he writes in the next paragraph that he would “fain say something, not so much concerning the Chinese and Sandwich Islanders,” some *supposedly* far-off life, “as you who read these pages, who are said to live in New England” (2). Would that hold his readers’ interest more – would these persons – “you who read these pages” – be, in fact, more exotic? His account of his own life is necessarily an account of his reader, thus of the self as strange to itself; his “simple and sincere” experiment equally a theory of those who are “said to live” – who (try to) live *in their claim* to live – in a “new” England. The living – his and theirs – would be in this “sincere account”; the uncertainty of its success constitutes the interest or strangeness of the text. What he describes as his townsmen’s failure to discover their “chief ends in life,” and their choice instead of no end at all, “piling up treasures” for a fantasized “endless,” thus lifeless, life, has a curious resonance with his own project, one driven by a deep restlessness and seemingly issuing in nothing, mere *signs* of life, his merely having “said” to have lived. What makes the book alternately exhilarating to read and deeply confounding, to the point of feeling, at times, like a kind of trespass or violence against the reader, is that Thoreau both refuses to accept the world as he finds it – the world of his townsmen – and insists that the only world that can exist is the one we

find.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, his refusal, his image of a different world (thus his account of “his” life), takes the form of his finding this one, his townsmen’s. If “Walden” is the name of some exception in the order of things, some Eden just next to Concord, this other world is found only in *Walden*, in a language that, to redeem his townsmen, he must borrow, or perhaps steal, from them. Thus his claim to get away from their “mean and sneaking” lives begins with a 90-page accounting of his costs, down to the last half cent spent on chalk and nails, his one pumpkin and three cents’ worth of salt (5, 51, 62); he debunks the self-indulgent, “watery-eyed” fantasies of Walden’s bottomlessness as well as the attempts to give it a “market value” by indulging in his own longing reveries (gazing into the pond and wondering, “Walden, is it you?”), and conducting a survey of its exact depth and breadth (310, 218, 211, 310). These maddening reversals are only the most obvious of Thoreau’s resolutely literal and yet willfully obscure style, which can be described as a persistent ironism, or what Emerson called his wretched-and-nervous-making “unlimited contradiction.” But I think Thoreau’s style, his form, is best understood, following Stanley Cavell, as the historicity, or say objectivity, of his words and his life: at once an *understanding* or grasp of this objectivity, and a *commitment to* or enactment of it; which would, ideally, amount to the same thing.

*Walden* tries to discover and convey an experience of genuine wonder, not at some far-off world, but this one: the one with which, if he and we have sought out this

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<sup>61</sup> Denis Donohue’s introduction to the recent Yale edition of *Walden* describes it as “one of the classic works of American literature, and the most truculent. Few books begin, as this one does, by insulting its readers” (vii). My account of *Walden*’s work on the reader draws on readings by Stanley Cavell (*Senses of Walden.*), Walter Benn Michaels (“Walden’s False Bottoms,” *Glyph* 1 [1977]: 132–49), Sharon Cameron (*Writing Nature*), and Joshua Kotin (“Private Utopias, Transnational Modernism” [Ph.D., The University of Chicago, 2011]:11-43).

text, we have presumably been disappointed. The “incredible and astonishing scenes which I daily witness in town,” the “thousand remarkable” penances of the Puritan work ethic, exceeding the labors of Greek myth, are not what Thoreau goes to escape, but actually to try to live; his own labors, hardly less Herculean or Sisyphean, hardly less strange in their sacralization of the ordinary work of *oikonomia* or household management, are not a rebuke of or “alternative” to the “lifestyle” of his townsmen but an attempt to make himself worthy of it, and thus to make it worth something. Suspicion has dogged Thoreau, from “my townsmen’s...very particular inquiries...concerning my mode of life,” which he says are the reason for his writing, to the continued attempts, as for example in a 2015 *New Yorker* article called “Pond Scum,” to expose behind the “fantasy...image...of a national conscience” the “real Thoreau,” who hated people and whose mother did his laundry. This suspicion is not misplaced; indeed, it is Thoreau’s own. (“I never knew, and never shall know, a worse man than myself” [83].) The threat that his experiment would simply be “cabin porn...a fantasy about escaping the entanglements and responsibilities of living among other people,” in other words, a fantasy of life as literature and America as an escape from the social contract, is exactly his theme.<sup>62</sup> And the fact that Americans can still read it as a guide to individualist self-sufficiency – as do, for example, the “lifehacking” entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley who trade interpretations of how best to withdraw into the “voluntary homelessness” modeled by *Walden*, while outsourcing their sociality onto the involuntarily homeless, who are

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<sup>62</sup> Kathryn Schulz, “Pond Scum,” *The New Yorker* (October 19, 2015). Compare Cavell’s account of this threat: “the writer knows his readers will take the project of self-emancipation to be merely literary. But he also knows that this is because they take everything in a more or less literary way: everything is news to them, and it always comes from foreign parts, from some Gothic setting,” *Senses of Walden*, 81.

paid to turn themselves into wifi hotspots<sup>63</sup> – does not expose *Walden* as disingenuous: it gives evidence of what it both is and is trying to be, its necessary complicity with the world it wants to transform. Thoreau says that he

should not obtrude my affairs so much on the notice of my readers if very particular inquiries had not been made by my townsmen concerning my mode of life, which some would call impertinent, though they do not appear to me at all impertinent, but considering the circumstances, very natural and pertinent. (1)

Is it his mode of life itself or his townsmen's inquiries *about* it that "some would call impertinent"? Which of these calls for or justifies his account, his words' obtrusion onto his readers? If their inquiries are "pertinent," it is because his life itself is not, has succeeded at being at odds with theirs. What cannot be said in advance is whether it is life at Walden or the language of *Walden*, its inhabitation or its critique, that is "pertinent," since what each would be pertinent *to* is what both Thoreau and his critics are wondering, aiming to discover.

And so *Walden*'s specific rejection of, and claim on, his world – his jeremiad – is saturated with that world, and thus is formed out of its language. And his task is not to replace it – to invent or discover a new language – but, to use the terms he gives in a theory of his own practice, to "translate" it: to "live on" this language, that is, to "understand" it, and thereby to be carried away by what is "volatile" or impertinent in it, to become, in his language and his life, "*extra – vagant*" (69, 352-3). I want to focus on a small moment in the first chapter of *Walden*, "Economy," where Thoreau is still working out his contract with his readers, engaged in getting what he keeps referring to as his "business" off the ground. This chapter can be seen not only as an allegory, and parody,

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<sup>63</sup> Atossa Abrahamian, "Let Them Eat Code," *Dissent*, (Spring 2014).

of the formation of the United States (the date on which he begins to occupy his cabin is, “by accident,” July 4<sup>th</sup>), but also, in keeping with the allegory and with the parody, as an image of the state of nature, akin to those of classical texts of political economy such as Locke’s and Rousseau’s. He wants to find out what are the true “necessaries of life” (11). But a significant difference is that for him this does not mean imagining a state of nature, and then as it were trying to act in accordance with it. For the classical imaginary the state of nature, even understood in a purely negative or privative sense, served as a regulative image for political theory. By revealing, through contrast, the dissatisfactions or limitations of the current social structure, it generated insights that could guide a renewed social contract. (In this sense it served much in the way I have been describing the image of the aesthetic as “discovering form.”<sup>64</sup>) But when Thoreau begins, trying to reduce life to the basics, by saying “we may imagine a time...,” the image of an “infancy of the human race,” when some “enterprising mortal crept into a hollow in a rock for shelter,” opens onto a claim in the present: “every child begins the world again” (28). Such images, as he says about the book as a whole, do not refer to a far-off land or time; the infancy or origin is one that, to the extent it is imagined, is lived, which means that the image itself is not an end or maturity to be achieved but incomplete, in its infancy. In a state of nature man is reborn, with no external supports, uncovered against the world and thus with nothing hidden from him, nothing to discover: at once infantile and mature, innocent and enlightened. But for Thoreau, though he begins without what he calls “the usual Capital,” the first step to rediscovering this state is not to imagine a naked savage,

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<sup>64</sup> See Tony Brown, *The Primitive, The Aesthetic, and the Savage* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012) for a reading of how these images funded enlightenment concepts of historicity and political economy.

but to visit the tailor. To conclude, I want to dwell a bit on this moment, which, though it serves, like every incident in *Walden*, as a field for Thoreau to cultivate his tropes, also places him in the position of a consumer of them, and a reader.

His discussion begins with a kind of theory of clothing (and indeed, he borrows liberally here from the “Philosophy of Clothes” in Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*, which was perhaps the most important literary link to Kantian philosophy in the nineteenth century U.S. and a deep stylistic influence on nineteenth century American writing).<sup>65</sup> He remarks that, among his townsmen, the state of one’s clothing has acquired an almost metaphysical importance, as if it, not the body, is the image of the soul. And this image has become not a support, not that by way of which one can move and live in the world, but a straightjacket, an impenetrable barrier between soul and world, all the more crippling for the invisibility of its restrictions. They are so obsessed with maintaining external appearances that

[i]t would be easier for them to hobble to town with a broken leg than with a broken pantaloons. Often, if an accident happens to a gentleman’s legs, they can be mended; but if a similar accident happens to the legs of his pantaloons, there is no help for it. (22)

Clothing, in this image, reflects a state of society in which a person’s worth – call it soul, the capacity for meaning, an opening towards the divine, that which passes show – becomes completely reduced to what is visible, graspable, on the surface. A gentleman’s worth is the worth of his clothes, and in such a value there can be no “accident”: clothes mean exactly what they say. In such a world one’s identity itself becomes like an object.

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<sup>65</sup> Robert Sattelmeyer’s *Thoreau’s Reading* gives evidence of his having read *Sartor Resartus* at Harvard and of having had it with him at Walden (Princeton University Press, 2014), 38-9.

The value that an impeccable pantaloone expresses is just the capacity to display value, wealth; we could call it, borrowing from Michaels and Fried, the fact of form, meaningfulness itself. Instead of the soul expressing itself outwardly, the garment determines the soul inwardly, and in turn self becomes like a garment: something whose expressiveness, its capacity to mean, is the only thing it can mean, and which is thereby constantly at risk of meaning nothing, of disappearing. “Town” is where an accident is impossible; where, insofar as one has (i.e. *is*) fallen, one cannot appear.

As it comes to embody all that cannot be seen, all that transcends the body, clothing, this fully intentional form, in a flash reveals itself as its opposite: mindless conformity, a “form” with no content. As an attempt to display singular value that would nonetheless be completely recognizable, to show one’s value by simply showing “value,” fashion becomes a kind of simulacrum: pure appearance, a making (*facere*) that makes nothing at all. In thematizing as its content the *act* of making intention appear, fashion, like poetry, reveals a troubling absence of at the heart of human substance.<sup>66</sup> Thoreau’s fashionable gentleman is an allegory for philosophy’s constant antagonist, the man without content: sometimes the poet, sometimes the sophist, forever the bearer of a pure rhetoric, a pure seeing (*theoria*), a pure making, language or vision or intention with no object.<sup>67</sup> And what goes missing, in this modern form of dressing or theorizing, is the capacity for genuine expression, the display of any actual meaning; instead of being “our

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<sup>66</sup> Poetry (*poiesis*), like fashion (*facere*), is a “making” that, making itself, makes nothing at all. I am indebted to Irad Kimhi for this last point.

<sup>67</sup> Nickolas Pappas gives an account of fashion’s place in philosophy in “Fashion Seen as Something Imitative and Foreign,” *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 48, no. 1 (2008). I draw here also on Hannah Arendt’s account of philosophy’s suspicion of visibility or appearance, and consequently of politics. “Socrates,” *The Promise of Politics* (New York: Schocken, 2005).

outermost cuticle,” expressive of our life, the objects through which we mediate ourselves become dead matter, closing off the capacity for society into a “nutshell of civility” (24, 5).

In this light, Thoreau’s fable about his townsmen’s covert theory of clothes – their protective cloak of theory – while recalling the romantic skepticism of a Hamlet who, protesting that his “trappings and suits,” the “inky cloak...customary suits” do not “denote him truly,” refers to “that within which passeth show,”<sup>68</sup> resonates as well with the resolutely public-facing jeremiad I described earlier in Bercovitch and Pease. (And also, quite literally, with the Puritan jeremiad itself, for which sumptuary excess was a constant and elaborately freighted theme). For Bercovitch, literature has functioned as a kind of social garment: not openly expressing national beliefs (ideology), but reifying expressiveness or the *capacity* to believe into the form of a theory, which therefore ceases to function as such. Rather than revealing the American as a subject, it turns him into an object, incapable of expressing anything but his own empty sameness.

Bercovitch’s allegory for the literary jeremiad, we will recall, is the suspiciously Germanic pamphlet that the eponymous, semi-autobiographical protagonist of Melville’s *Pierre* discovers. Printed on paper that the narrator repeatedly calls “sleazy” (a thin or flimsy fabric), this “metaphysical...and insufferable” theory, claiming to reconcile God’s truth with man’s, morality with the ways and things of this world, comes to Pierre at a crucial moment, when he has decided to give up his patrician privilege, leave his pasteboard aristocratic life in the Arcadian countryside, and move to the city where he

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<sup>68</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Cyrus Hoy (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992), 10.

will redeem his father's sins and become a novelist; a journey, presumably, from the fantasied to the real America, from a private, family romance to a national, public one.<sup>69</sup> The narrator (an ambiguously Melvillean voice) hints that the pamphlet's theory, correctly understood, might have saved Pierre from the impulsive, overly-idealistic decision which pits him against the world, and from his subsequent tragic (and a little absurd) fate: disgraced, insane, a criminal, with nothing to show but a worthless, unfinished, and intractably metaphysical novel of his own. But he cannot understand it, the narrator suggests, because to do so would be "himself to condemn himself" (209). The pamphlet contains his own condemnation, which, fully assimilated, would be his actual redemption; and it is the coincidence of the two that he could not bear. Pierre keeps re-reading it, studying it, but learns nothing from it; "puzzled" and intrigued, he finds himself nonetheless rebuffed by it, and shoves it into the pocket of his coat.

When in his subsequent trials Pierre looks to the pamphlet for guidance, he cannot find it and counts it lost, but we learn much later that it had fallen through the lining and been in his coat the whole time, covering him as he descends into a tragedy equally of his own making and beyond his control, a family disgrace that indicts a whole nation.<sup>70</sup> The narrator speculates that "this curious circumstance may in some sort illustrate his self-supposed non-understanding"; perhaps he also "carried about with him in his mind the thorough understanding of the book [i.e. the pamphlet]," all the while unaware of his own understanding and yet thereby all the more swayed by it (294). Bercovitch's thought

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<sup>69</sup> Herman Melville, *Pierre, or The Ambiguities*, ed. Harrison Hayford, G. Thomas Tanselle, and Hershel Parker (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 206-7.

<sup>70</sup> In addition to Bercovitch's quite brilliant reading in *Rites of Assent*, Michael Rogin's *Subversive Genealogy* is suggestive on how the links between family and national history, in this text and in Melville's own life (on which in writing it he drew), link literature and society.

about literature is analogous: its “self-supposed” innocence, its claim to escape from all the limitations and wrongs of the world, is exactly its complicity, the historical and theoretical work that it does. For Bercovitch it is as if literature contained or *covered* a philosophy – precisely a philosophy of clothes – that, hidden inside it, gave it its identity but that when exposed or *dis-covered* turned out to be nothing, indeed, to have covered, in its hiddenness, the nothing that covered it. Bercovitch hopes to avoid Pierre’s fate by seeing the latter’s actions and beliefs from the outside; thus, to learn from literature, not by inhabiting it, living within its “self-supposed non-understanding,” but by as it were casting it off and ripping it open, unveiling and thus dissolving the theory that, slipped into its lining, had interceded between thought and the world, the image of America and its true essence. He would have us follow Emerson in “Self-Reliance”: “Leave your theory, like Joseph his coat in the hands of the harlot, and flee.”<sup>71</sup>

But *Pierre* is not just, as Bercovitch sees it, a “scathing indictment” of the ambitions of literature.<sup>72</sup> The theory that it carries around within itself does not, when grasped, dissolve them both into thin air. The novel, and the theory, is also Pierre’s expression of literature’s ambitions, and thus his, and Melville’s, achievement of them, here and in the other novel, more famous, we can imagine its subject to have been writing. The coat is not “just” a coat: or rather, as the fact of form, it *is* yet a *form*. Pierre’s publishers – former tailors who, having in mind an “economical view” of “working up” the “shreds” from their former trade into the capital stock of a new one, fail to fully “transmute...themselves” into the language of their new profession – praise the

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<sup>71</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” in *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 33.

<sup>72</sup> “Pierre, Or The Ambiguities of American Literary History” 304.

“fine cut, the judicious fit” of Pierre’s juvenile writings and propose to publish his “pantaloon – productions, we mean” (*Pierre* 246-7).<sup>73</sup> When the mature novel he submits is returned, it is to an author addressed as a fraud, a “swindler” (356); the fruit of his private experience, brought to market, turns out to be rotten, his attempt to redeem his disavowed “genteel” writings and life an embarrassment (209). This collapse precipitates *Pierre*’s, which ends in an at once tragic and farcical murder-suicide; but the end does not reveal what was hiding inside. The genteel trappings of literature do not, in the book’s end, fall away: they are what *Pierre* is, or (Pierre) was, and what he publishes, what we have. The persistently strange content of Melville’s book – a mixture of silly gothic, lightning-powerful images, philosophical speculation, genuinely tragic *bildung*, and deep irony – is where Pierre ends up. The “self-supposed non-understanding” that Pierre carries around in his mind, and on his sleeve – his apperceptive self-opacity, the theory on which he acts, and what makes or allows him to write his book – is not nothing, but his life; and this life, though imaginative and imagined, is, like a coat or a theory, a book or “literature” itself, real. Stripped bare, Pierre shows his life as a second nature, a substantial body that, as Anne Cheng writes of modernism’s primitive corporeality, shows itself as fundamentally, *nakedly* discursive, a “play of abstraction”: an essence that can be neither fully possessed by a self nor completely alienated, thus that one can neither

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<sup>73</sup> The “pantaloon” or “productions” continue a thin sexual pun, a favorite of Melville’s; demanding publication (indeed achieving it phonically in the repetition of the ejective “p”), these private productions reveal their impotence. The link to Tommo’s injured leg, the condition of his lingering in Typee, and Ahab’s “dismasted” one, the traumatic event that animates the quest for Moby Dick, suggests a slightly different resonance in Thoreau’s joke, the perfect pantaloons perhaps masking a broken leg. See further discussion in chapter 1.

fully intend to be nor pretend to be innocent of.<sup>74</sup> If Pierre, in sacrificing himself, precisely fails to disown the fantasy that sustains him, our reading, in the distance it imagines, can never quite own it either. Pierre's failure to bear the truth of the pamphlet (to be able "himself to condemn himself") *is* his condemnation as well as his redemption, what turns him over into the realm of fiction; this knowledge is what, in his writing and in our reading, is born or published.

Pierre devotes his life to literature, as does Melville. Is it therefore lost? Did he, in Thoreau's terms, "labor under a mistake?" The very fact of our interest – and, and *as*, Pierre's, and Melville's – says otherwise. If *Pierre* is Melville's theory of or "inquiry into" himself,<sup>75</sup> the tragic failures and horrific deceptions that the novel depicts are not merely that content or truth to which the novel's form allows us to see through, but continuous with the achievement – or is it a failure? – that is his novel and Pierre's, *Pierre* and *Moby-Dick*, their writing and our reading. If both Pierre and Melville himself fail to separate the two, what they offer us, in and as literature, is the experience of that unity: of a readerly desire to discover or redeem oneself in an object, as itself an object, one that, in reading, we cannot fail to see as our own.

This object that we discover is both ourselves and something very different. Is it a new form, or just an old theory? Either way, where does it come from? These are the questions into which the literature and philosophy of clothes, of discovering form, insert us. When Thoreau goes to his tailoress, it is a little allegory of his writing and his life, and itself a projection of and tool for his reader's attempts to inhabit it.

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<sup>74</sup> Anne Anlin Cheng, "Skins, Tattoos, and Susceptibility," *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009), 114.

<sup>75</sup> Bercovitch, "*Pierre*, or the Ambiguities of American Literary History," 304.

When I ask for a garment of a particular form, my tailoress tells me gravely, “They do not make them so now,” not emphasizing the “They” at all, as if she quoted an authority as impersonal as the Fates, and I find it difficult to get made what I want, simply because she cannot believe that I mean what I say, that I am so rash (*Walden* 25).

Thoreau, presumably, has in mind something very specific: a garment of a “particular form.” It is interesting to note that, for all his supposed self-reliance, he cannot turn this image into a reality himself, but rather finds himself asking for this very specific thing – indeed, the first of the “true necessities of life,” those things which will bring us out of the savage state for good, that he aims to discover – from someone else: his tailoress. To borrow one of Melville’s favorite tropes we could call her a “weaver-God,” or goddess; certainly, this is a question of, in Carlyle’s terms, having the tailor retailored, asking of the creator or author something different from what they want to give us, to remake their process of making.

As he tries to get it realized, the creation Thoreau had in mind becomes more complex. The distance he remarks between the “particular form” he wants and what is on offer is between himself and “the ‘They’”; in this relation, the prospective creator of his garment stands as a mere transmitter of the “They,” and her creation, like fashion itself, as the realization of its shapeless ideological consensus. If she does not “emphasize the ‘They’ at all” it is partly because, as Thoreau is at pains to emphasize, it is hard to get this nebulous consensus into view. “In most books, the *I*, or first person is omitted; in this it will be retained,” (2) he begins his description of his enterprise in *Walden*, and this “I” is the difference that, in his book, he wants to introduce. The “I” is exactly what *can* be emphasized, be picked out as a “particular form” that bears one’s desires, allowing one to stand out in the crowd and come in to view against the shapeless “omission” of form. But

what initially strikes Thoreau as curious about this exchange is that the tailoress seems to imply, like Heidegger's *das Man* ("the They-self"), that by her saying that "they" do not make them, it actually determines what she will make; that, far from entailing an absence of form or regulative power, the They is in fact its very shape. Not picking out the word for emphasis, her articulation of this consensus denies that she has any say; yet, marking no difference between her words and her self, what she says is that they (the words) – coming, like the philosophy of clothes in Carlyle, from "Weissnichtwo," don't-know-where (is that utopia?) – are the form that determines what she does: as if her "I" is the very form of "what is done," already inhabiting the words and world it would predicate.

The tailoress' "They," then, makes visible something quite curious, something that in Thoreau's language had seemed invisible. If Thoreau had come seeking in the tailor a practical power, he finds instead a philosophical one. Though in content her reply is passive, it is in fact or in form a rejection of Thoreau's request; he has articulated a form and asked her to realize it. Her seeming passivity – I just do what They tell me – is in fact an active negation of the form Thoreau asks her to realize in the garment. "Not believing that I mean what I say," she implicitly accuses him of the same kind of disingenuousness in relation to his words that would seem to characterize "the They" – not to mention her own "self-supposed" relation to them. Isn't he also, to her, a "They"? What marks his form out as coming from the wrong kind of know-not-where? How, in other words, has she turned the omission of her "I" into an image, in the negative, of his? In rejecting his form, or denying its reality, she throws into confusion the contours of their exchange, turning Thoreau from the confident creator of a "particular form" to a confused reader of his own particularity, dependent on the tailoress – presumably a mere

reader of his form – for the knowledge of precisely what is particular about it, what separates it from “their” form, rendering it utopian in the wrong sense.

The meaning of her words is that Thoreau doesn't know what he's saying; their moral burden is to get him to see what he really should want, and thus to lead him back to the “I” that, coinciding with a “they,” can get it. The question for Thoreau then becomes: how would he read his own sense of non-conformity with *these* words, how recognize the “I” that, having been demanded of the tailoress as a realization of the “particular form” his words had imagined, is returned to him instead as the absence that her “They” shows? This little exchange is raising questions that, as Hannah Arendt has argued, have long troubled philosophy not only about fashion or opinion (“doxa”), but about itself.<sup>76</sup> Is the tailoress a creator or a mere transmitter of form, an author or reader? Who or what is this “They,” this consensus that, not appearing, yet determines what can appear: is it the actualization or the negation of the “I,” the truth of its desire or what, limiting that desire, destroys it? It is the tailoress' utterance that raises these questions, but they hit Thoreau as if they interrogated his own being. His attempt at getting his particular form realized has returned to him as a demand that he become a reader of a form beyond him; his attempt to stand out from the crowd has left him looking for it – *wanting* it – in his own words. The exchange throws him into at once a philosophical wonder and a comedy of philosophy.

When I hear this oracular sentence, I am for a moment absorbed in thought, emphasizing to myself each word separately that I may come at the meaning of it, that I may find out by what degree of consanguinity *They* are related to *me*, and by what authority they may have in an affair which affects me so nearly; and, finally, I am inclined to answer her with equal mystery, and without any more

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<sup>76</sup> See *The Human Condition* and “Socrates.”

emphasis of the “they” – “It is true, they did not make them so recently, but they do now” (25).

Thoreau is, as he will later describe the state of being in thought, “beside himself in a sane sense.” Or more exactly, he says there that “*with* thinking we may be beside ourselves in a sane sense” (145, emphasis added). This is a funny, rather awkward moment to imagine, not least because in it Thoreau is loosening his grip on his own pious way of presenting himself, being beside himself not only “in” his thought, as if covered by it, but also *with* it, publicly, as if they stand together, sanity and the self, frustration or disappointment and the curiosity it induces. The “extra – vagant” sense of his words carries him, in front of others, beyond himself. We could call what he does here a close reading of her words; but we should notice that this reading begins in a silent performance of his own. His confusion, his being beside himself, is somewhat theatrical. He is attempting to discover, or invent, some further meaning in her words, a meaning that, he feels, has some mysterious “authority” in his own affairs; but to reveal this mystery in her words he must produce it in his own person. If he is to understand, and to redirect, the mysterious power of “their” words, he must first imagine it in himself; must become, like the They, inscrutable to his own thought. And thus his “self-supposed non-understanding” of her words must mix with the fact that he knows exactly what she means, and the dandy who demands extravagantly that his garment be just so must merge with the philosopher thrown into confusion by his townsmen’s perfect pantaloons.

To “emphasize” each word, “separately,” “to himself,” is to try to discover the “I” in every word as it stands apart from him. Hearing this language of the They, he finds his own work – that of tailor, the publisher of private forms – happening outside him, and thus finds himself in the position of reader, wondering, not just who “they” are, but – *thus*

– who he is, what this consanguinity amounts to. Trying to get his own ideas, his “particular form,” realized, he runs up against the world, the They, which turns out to be his own self. He discovers two, related, things: that this resistance was just what he wanted, and that its discovery is its realization. He wants a garment, and a book, that will allow him to do his work: to appear to his neighbors as himself. And it is the tailor’s speech – “oracular” or literary perhaps only to his ear, but thereby funding an identical oracularity in his own language, one that, by noticing, we hear with just such an ear – that suggests to him the tropes, the “particular forms” that, in this passage, he creates. He ends the encounter with a characteristically Thoreauvian sentence: “It is true, they did not make them so recently, but they do now”: a sentence that, in being spoken, achieves the end that it imagines, realizes publicly the world that it pictures. This is what we can recognize as Thoreau’s particular form. It is a reading, or a theory, of itself, one that claims to discover itself beyond itself, in the world of the They. Does this hermeneutic trick work? Do “they” make them so now?

Thoreau breaks off with this mystery of his own. He doesn’t say if he ever gets his garment, or what it looks like, or how it serves him. Earlier he says that he offers his text to readers only in the hope that they will “accept such portions as apply to them,” and that he “trust[s] that none will stretch the seams in putting on the coat, for it may do good service to him whom it fits” (2). Perhaps we are being cautioned not to stretch our interpretation, to accept the text as it is and to judge it where we find it, from wherever we are, to whatever end it may thereby serve. But the use or end of Thoreau’s text, for himself and for his reader, is neither to hide nor to show its “seams” but to open them up; it is not to measure the “I” behind or in front of its words by their strengths or

weaknesses, but to reach across those words, throwing their measure into question.

Where the text ends and the interpretation begins is just what it does not know – which is not the same thing as rendering it undecidable. Thoreau doesn't ask us not to stretch the limits of the text, but writes it in "trust" that they won't stretch, that it can accommodate, can be of use. Whether that trust, in his text and his reader, is well-placed – whether it fits – is just what can't be said in advance; it is just the seam that he makes.

For Wittgenstein, the point or end of philosophy is to allow you to break off; "the real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to." In a sense I am arguing something similar for literary criticism: that what we can discover in literature is not a new thing ("form"), the one we have been seeking all along, but a recognition that our own desire for it, for a worldliness of meaning that is at once beyond us and our end, is what we sought. The reading discovers itself. For philosophy, this is an identity; to achieve this insight would be for the problem or object to "*completely* disappear," achieving for the self a stillness or rest.<sup>77</sup> In literary criticism we are left still with the object, with our "self-supposed non-understanding" and a curious consanguinity between "me" and "the They," my reading and a world of others. Is this identity achieved? Are "our" words made good, do "they" make them so now? What literary criticism would aim at is not an end to questioning, but the "trust," or the fact, that it remains open.

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<sup>77</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte, 4th ed. (John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 56-7.

## Discovering Form

The rest of my dissertation proceeds as follows. The first chapter begins by rethinking some foundational concepts for literary critique and American studies, focusing on the work of figuration in *Moby-Dick*. It asks what kind of object *Moby-Dick* is by looking at what it has been taken for. Interpretations of this most representative of American novels have often tried to grasp it by identifying with an interpretive style that, in the person of one of its two main characters, it is thought to exemplify. Whether as an Ishmaelite aestheticist or an Ahabian iconoclast, critics have looked for the key to their object in some special *way* of grasping the whale that is already represented inside it. Discovered, this form is then used to explain the relation of Melville's object to the world from which it would except itself. By attending instead to the formal work of the Melvillean trope, which typically arrives at its "spiritual" meaning by unexpectedly deflating its worldly referent, this chapter follows Melville's own doomed hunt for *Moby-Dick*. "The whale" itself – sublime biblical and political Leviathan, American *ur*-commodity – emerges in its mysterious power precisely as Melville's very real attempt at Americanist literary form. Neither Ishmael nor Ahab finally capture it; *Moby-Dick* reveals itself, an object figuring the desire beyond it, only in its ecstatic, apocalyptic ending, where, diving down forever, it opens into the world.

*Moby-Dick* both inaugurates and ends the exceptionalist moment of an Americanist discovering form, producing itself as a singular, fantasmatic object that can only be seen as it vanishes into the world. Edgar Allan Poe, fatalist and formalist, often seems to dwell in this exceptionalism's uncanny wake. My second chapter takes up his late writing to ask what kind of worldly hope the rigorous and closed work of aesthetic

form offers, in Poe, for the future. Reading *Eureka* (a poem describing the form of the cosmos) together with “Philosophy of Composition” (a cosmogony of the poem) I show how Poe transforms the ancient trope linking cosmos and poem. This trope imagines the two kinds of totalities (God’s and man’s, real and imaginary) as a reciprocal organic form, a transcendental capacity to actualize what cannot be defined conceptually. Poe’s texts work tirelessly to make perspicuous this Godlike creative capacity, what Poe calls “precisely that point out of sight,” revealing it as the key to scientific and literary logic. Recent critics interested in the relation between the environment and the humanities have seen in this organicism a promising alternative to the instrumental human reason that, unable to think its “externalities,” will (through anthropogenic climate change) ultimately destroy its own conditions of possibility. But a closer attention to how Poe stages this form shows his relevance for the present in a different light. *Eureka* “discovers” its poetic method by imaginatively borrowing it from a letter in a bottle, sent by a reformer in the twenty-first century named Pundita; her enthusiastic affirmation of her “progressive” world is Poe’s worst nightmare. Far from discovering – in the poem or the world, nineteenth-century literature or contemporary criticism – a new or prelapsarian exceptional form, Poe’s method returns us to an uncannily familiar one, imagining a capacity present in exactly that world that our words would overcome. The endgame of Poe’s aesthetic formalism, as in his tales and poems, stakes what he calls his transformative “effect,” or existence, on his words’ capacity to form a world – that of his readers – that cannot be his own.

Poe’s collapse of romantic expressivism imagines a (seemingly uninhabitable) world in which political desires coincide with scientific descriptions. My third chapter

asks what it might be like to belong to this world, by reading the work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a singularly Pundita-like reformer at the turn of the twentieth century. As against the comparatively heady formalism of American romanticism, this period's literature, and its politics, often imagined social problems as natural and biological questions, their solution directly guided by an organic logic immanent to society (and, increasingly, to the market). Though Walter Benn Michaels and others have argued that this literalist naturalism reflects a dangerous erasure of the imagination, and thus of the possibility of conceptual (and political) disagreement, Gilman's work reveals the surprising, and not at all settled, political power of aesthetic form after its collapse into the social. Forbidden absolutely from "working," the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" (Gilman's fictionalization of her own experience of a "rest cure") nevertheless keeps a diary; this diary is, supposedly, the text we read. Descending into the narrator's private madness, the text simultaneously escapes into Gilman's progressive social-scientific claim against the current medical discourse that caused it. Insisting that the crazy narrator is, literally, the reasonable and reformist author of the text, the story imagines its form as the embodiment of the tension (historical, moral and aesthetic) that it describes. Gilman's fiction, curiously imaginative and bluntly didactic, makes its utopian claim from the very heart of a world that cannot see it.

My final chapter follows the trajectory of literary and Americanist discovering form into a present where the forms of both the novel and the nation have come to seem precarious. Richard Powers' *Gain* (1998) narrates two histories, intercutting the limitless growth of a multinational chemical corporation with the excruciating attrition of a small-town everywoman dying of cancer near the company's headquarters. Powers' distinctive

free-indirect narration juxtaposes its two strands starkly while refusing any straightforward causal linkage between them. Critics have seen in this form new models of knowledge and action, ones appropriate to a postmodern present in which poetry and advertising, human capital and corporate speech, commodity and poison become impossible to separate cleanly. But I argue that the novel's refusal of causality, which allows its free-indirect voice to span the woman's private imaginary and the corporation's public discourse, insists instead, in its painful ironism, that there is nothing special to know; no words that, on their own, can say what we need to hear. Rather than a new subject-object relation, what *Gain* gives us to see is literature's power – to trope, as if on its own, our given condition towards a new world – as exactly that condition, what is *given*. My final chapter thus argues that literature's simultaneous identity with and inadequacy to its object – our world – teaches us, if we want, to leave them together.

My dissertation holds together a historical narrative and a formal claim. Historically, the chapters aim to elucidate and track the movement from mid-nineteenth century American romanticism to the historical present. Arcing from the first to last chapter is a transformation of the utopian aesthetic object, the universal solvent, from a natural one (whale oil) to an artificial one (Clare chemicals), from an external monstrosity (the white whale) to an internal one (cancer), and from a dualist vision of politics (liberalism) to a immanentist one (neoliberalism). The central two chapters trace a similar shift in the object or locus of theory, from the cosmos to the social, and from expression as act, with an end or completion (Poe's death, the achievement of the poem) to a self-sustaining and endless process (the "living" of naturalist writing, political reform). Most broadly, this narrative is one in which the Americanist aesthetic moves

from a discrete, regulative image that can be contrasted with the world to an increasingly immanent form that characterizes the historical world itself. Thus, from individual genius to mass affect; from discrete works of art to a worldly saturation with aesthetic form; from a politics of regulative publicity to one of expressive privacy; from the complementarity of the space of reasons and the space of explanations to a monistic world of behaviorist pragmatism; from liberalism to neoliberalism. This is a narrative of the collapse of “form” as an external force that structures worldly affairs, and it broadly tracks reigning intellectual-historical narratives of late modernity, from Adorno and Horkheimer and Arendt to Foucault and Lyotard and Cavell.

Simultaneously, and in tension with the notion of a historical trajectory, is a formal claim that aims to bring out the structure of the Americanist aesthetic, that of “discovering form,” that runs across the texts, and must be grasped by seeing them together. By tracing a formal continuity across these texts, I aim to show that the Americanist aesthetic that has structured this image/world dynamic is itself an image *of* that collapse. By showing how these texts represent their own literary form as their object – as what they would at the same time discover and realize, in the world – I challenge the historicist version of these narratives of late modernity that predominantly informs literary criticism. As Benjamin argued, such accounts, by understanding literature as a utopian image that guides the world – towards the good or away from the bad, relatively effectively or ineffectively – *ahistorically* posit form as an unworldly or “spooky” logic that achieves varying levels of actualization or influence in and across time, and against which the world can be measured. Against this, I show how the literary promise and

threat of a utopian form is not of anything further outside of it – does not project a new world – but of the collapse of its own difference from the world.

Though these two aspects of my dissertation are in tension, they aim at a common claim. If the broadly sketched historical trajectory shows the Americanist aesthetic's movement from a regulative form outside of the world (romanticism) to what we now grasp as the very shape of the world itself (neoliberalism), thus making a "formal" claim for the efficacy of "discovering form," the theoretical or formal claim, which argues that this form's power is just that of collapsing itself into the world, makes a "historical" point: insofar as we *do* grasp that form in literary criticism – as the aesthetic object, as something distinct – *it has not* actualized itself. This, to recall, is what I claim is the specificity of the Americanist aesthetic: whether by accident or design, the synthesis of these two utopian forms (one, we could say, historical, the other philosophical) both realizes and negates their reciprocal claims to realize themselves in a beyond of their form. What we can see in the Americanist aesthetic object is that this desire to get beyond ourselves, to discover normativity in an object, has been met: but we can see this because what we see is that that object just is our own desire for it. To the extent that this desire has been realized, the utopian form achieved, it is *thereby* incomplete.

By linking the historical and formal components of my argument, I aim to reveal the intersection of literary criticism's descriptive and normative aims in a new way. Though this intersection is in some sense the regulative ideal of humanistic criticism – a science of the human, and a human science – my claim is that by the very fact of our ability to conceive of such an intersection, we find ourselves there; but that, by the same lights, we cannot say whether such a thinking has realized its aims, whether it is true or

good. Criticism's task would then be not to search for an object whose perfect description could tell us what to do, nor to develop a critical language whose normativity could itself bring the world perfectly into view. Rather, it could tell us that we do not know what we are doing, and that this is what we wanted. To the extent that we do want to know what we are doing, and to change it, criticism can hold open the space and the time – literal and discursive, normative and historical – in which to ask such questions.

My dissertation aims at once to model and to perform such work. The work of tracing the Americanist aesthetic from the nineteenth century to the present would not be one of painting a picture of something external to it – of history or philosophical utopia, of America or the city of God – but of actualizing the formal possibility that it seeks to grasp. By tracing this possibility's persistence across the time of its realization, it would show that the question of whether it has been achieved is exactly what it cannot say. By letting go of the desire to say what literature is, it would aim to realize it.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THIS WHALING WORLD: FIGURING VALUE IN *MOBY-DICK* AND AMERICAN LITERARY CRITIQUE

Why do precisely these objects which we behold make a world?

-Thoreau, *Walden*

The enemy is the shape [*Gestalt*] of our own question.

-Carl Schmitt, *Ex Captivitate Salus*

#### Hunting the Symbol

Why go whaling? “Tied to counters, nailed to benches, clinched to desks”: the modern landsman, as Ishmael, *Moby-Dick*’s narrator, describes him in the opening passages of Melville’s novel, is bound to a life of splenetic ennui. Strolling around the “insular city of the Manhattoes” on a Sunday, one sees “thousands upon thousands” of these zombie-like “mortal men,” “posted,” “fixed,” “pacing,” compulsively searching for a way out of their earthbound condition (*Moby-Dick* 18-19). Ishmael – brooding, gloomy, restless, Hamletian – is one of them. This pallid world is inside him, “a damp, drizzly November in my soul” (18), and he sees it everywhere he looks.

*Moby-Dick* begins with this image of a nineteenth-century world that, mapped out and closed in, at once determines its observer from without and locks him into a disorienting internal depthlessness. Ennui and certainty, “fixed” men tied to fixed things, gray on gray: as subjects and objects both fade into the background, the world itself – the space for human inhabitation, what Hannah Arendt describes as “what lies between”

people and objects, allowing them, together, to appear<sup>1</sup> – comes forcefully, and unhappily, into view. When science and industry turn men and things into mere subjects and objects, the encounter between the two no longer promises anything new; no new paths to follow turns the journey into all there is, and thus into nothing. What we see in the opening of *Moby-Dick* is the world rendered as an object, the activity it supports so predictable that it becomes uncanny, a kind of living death. The mood that comes into view, this aimless melancholy, is simultaneously the loss of interest in the things of the world and an oppressive closeness to or identification with the world itself, a thickness of atmosphere that penetrates everything. This lonely island, even as it loses its pull, bounds its inhabitants in, holds them to itself, “fixes” them ever more tightly.<sup>2</sup> Though after its opening scenes *Moby-Dick* shows us little of it, this is also the world to which many of Melville’s later works will return: suffocating offices in which scribes lurk, factories in which sit “rows of blank-looking girls...blankly folding blank paper,” cold rooms where poor and desperate writers pace.<sup>3</sup> If this is the world of modern industry and commerce, the writer in his various guises – the copyist recording its transactions, the paper-pusher proliferating its blankness, the romancer plumbing its darkness – is, Melville in his later works will suggest, exemplarily bound to it. But he is also the one who imagines – like Bartleby and like Pierre – a resistance to it that begins in writing; and maybe, like Ishmael, its transformation into a “wonder-world.” Even as Melville is

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (Harcourt, 1968), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement*, ed. James Strachey, trans. Joan Riviere, The Standard Edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1990), 246-8.

<sup>3</sup> “Bartleby the Scrivener,” in *The Complete Stories of Herman Melville*, ed. Jay Leyda (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1951); “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids,” in *The Complete Stories of Herman Melville*, ed. Jay Leyda (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1951), 201; *Pierre*.

locked, as he complains to Hawthorne, “in a third-story room [in New York City], work[ing] and slav[ing] on my ‘Whale,’ ”<sup>4</sup> Ishmael, the one to whom *Moby-Dick* ascribes its writing, imagines an escape. Speaking, he claims, to the needs of “almost all men in their degree,” Ishmael proposes, as an alternative to the “philosophical flourish” with which Cato destroys the self, the abandonment of the world in which it is trapped: “quietly take to the ship” (*MD* 18). Though admitting to the owners of the *Pequod* that he personally “know[s] nothing at all” about the avocation he proposes to undertake, Ishmael, asked “what takes thee a-whaling,” turns this ignorance itself into a justification of his suitability for the voyage: “I want to see what whaling is. I want to see the world” (71).

To go whaling will be to push off from this eviscerated world in pursuit of something new, something unknown. But if the whale, in *Moby-Dick*, embodies a dizzying catalog of promises – adventure and knowledge, cash and revenge, life and death, national exception and cosmic order – to chase these promises, to abandon the soul’s drizzly November, will also be really to “see” that world, that sense of connectedness that is precisely what has become too visible, too obvious. To follow this object into the depths of the “watery part of the world” would be to grasp exactly that fixity which keeps us afloat on the surface – holds us, on land, in place – and somehow thereby to release it, to reactivate the power that, congealed in the whale, has fixed the world (18). The whale represents commodities, indeed perhaps the nineteenth century U.S.’s most exemplary; but his elusiveness portends a mystery beyond any other, and he figures, beyond any goal in particular, the romance of imperial commerce that animated

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<sup>4</sup> Herman Melville, *Correspondence*, ed. Lynn Horth (Northwestern University Press, 1993), 191.

the emergent American nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> An “unearthly” “apparition,” (*MD* 154) his body yet fuels those “other lights” that “enlighten the world,”<sup>6</sup> both providing content for and generating the material capacity to produce an emergent discourse of universal scientific knowledge. And though his is, “to the last,” an “unwritten life,” to pursue him is to find something worth writing about, that thing that Pierre the failed novelist, Bartleby the silent copyist, and the “blank” girls reproducing blank paper cannot quite reach (*MD* 218, 116). To “see what whaling is” will be to see in *this* world an object that trails in its wake the image of a new one.

What kind of object is this? Ishmael is not, of course, the only one who is curious to know. So is Ahab, and so are the members of the crew, each of whom, though swayed to their tyrannical captain’s purpose, have their own reasons for the chase. But this is also the question that Melville’s reader pursues. What is Moby Dick, this mysterious leviathan who, though embellished in the novel, in fact haunts the dreams of sailors across the globe?<sup>7</sup> What details – what sense of life, of travail and triumph, hardship and adventure

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<sup>5</sup> Though the whaling industry ranked, at its height in the mid-nineteenth century, only fifth in terms of gross output, sperm oil served as an enabling medium for many of the new, large-scale, industries representative of modern life: lamp oil to enable knowledge-production and work according to rhythms other than natural and diurnal; a lubricant for large-scale, high-speed industrial machinery; fat for soap and other surfactants; a fixative for cosmetics and perfumes. Furthermore, the rapid rise, aggressive tactics, and unquestioned dominance of the American whale fishery over other national whale fisheries made it a symbol of an emergent American economic hegemony. See Lance E. Davis, Robert E. Gallman, and Karin Gleiter, *In Pursuit of Leviathan: Technology, Institutions, Productivity, and Profits in American Whaling, 1816-1906* (University of Chicago Press, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> *MD* 98; Herman Melville, *Mardi: And a Voyage Thither*, ed. Harrison Hayford, G. Thomas Tanselle, and Hershel Parker (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 3.

<sup>7</sup> As has been widely discussed, *Moby-Dick* borrows from multiple well-known legends and accounts of malevolent sperm whales, including the albino whale known as “Mocha Dick” and the sperm whale that in 1820 apparently intentionally sank the *Essex*, whose

– from the frontiers of American commerce can Melville the handsome sailor relate? And what is *Moby-Dick*, this curious, overlong, metaphysically abstruse “intellectual chowder,” a book that was seen on publication to “justify a *writ de lunatico*,” and that now stands as synecdoche for a (perhaps lost) American high culture?<sup>8</sup>

This question about the whale, which animates the characters the novel represents as well as the readers it invites, has from the start taken the form of a question about this very connection: between *Moby Dick* and *Moby-Dick*, content and form, imagined character and imagining reader, literature and the world. Beginning with Melville’s own tortured, self-searching descriptions of his struggle with his “Whale,” to the novel’s belated critical canonization in the 1920s as a grand art object that gives the lie to a commercial America unable to grasp it, to the explicit attempts, in the 1970s and 80s, to discover in the text something that escapes coercive economic, political, and above all interpretive logics, and finally to recent attempts to see in Melville’s literary form itself a fascinating and productive evasiveness, readers have imagined their own encounter with the text in terms prefigured by its characters.<sup>9</sup>

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first mate, having survived weeks adrift in a small whale-boat and being forced to eat his crew mates, Melville met. See 549-574 in *MD*.

<sup>8</sup> Evert A. Duyckinck, “Review of *Moby-Dick*,” in *Herman Melville: The Contemporary Reviews*, eds. Higgins, Brian, and Hershel Parker (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 384; W.G. Simms “Review of *Moby-Dick*” in *Herman Melville: The Contemporary Reviews*, eds. Higgins, Brian, and Hershel Parker (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 412. Harold Bloom, *The Daemon Knows: Literary Greatness and the American Sublime* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> See Raymond Weaver’s *Mariner and Mystic* (New York: George H. Doran, 1921) for an example of this theme in the first wave of Melville criticism; Donald Pease’s series of articles from 1985-2012 on *Moby-Dick* and William Spanos’ *The Errant Art of Moby-Dick* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995) for examples of “New Americanist” readings; and the 2011 collection *Melville and Aesthetics*, edited by Geoffrey Sanborn

This link sets high stakes on the interpretive task. To understand *Moby-Dick's* characters will be to understand, in some sense, its readers; for readers to understand the novel's world will be for them to understand their own. But it also inserts its readers into the fatal difficulties faced by its characters. I argued in the introduction that American literature shows us our own desire to find in it an image of a new world. *Moby-Dick*, the most canonical example of this desire and thus at once the brightest image of it and the hardest to grasp, shows it to us at the knife edge of its interior and exterior, the impossible quest it yet *represents* and the impossible object it yet *is*. What we see is that this desire is already worldly, not new: the literal quest it depicts is precisely a quest for the symbol; the object that, in reading it, we interpret is precisely the attempt to find in an object something beyond it.

What *Moby-Dick* symbolizes, then, is not only the difficulty of disarticulating historical content and its literary formation, things of flesh and of word, the object (and the desire for it) *represented* by the text and the literary object that, *in* our desire for it, it *is*. At issue is not simply words' capacity to make worldly objects present – whether this presentation is a question of accuracy or creativity, of words conforming to things or, in a poetic genesis, originating them – but the capacity of an “object,” that which can be perceived by the senses, to refer to or be about something, to *make present* something other than itself. The mystery at the heart of *Moby-Dick* is not just about the relation *between* readers and characters, a world imagined and a world lived, words and things: beyond this, it is about how language itself, often understood to be the very form of subjectivity, can be an object, something that we experience, that, in being receiving from

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and Samuel Otter (New York: Palgrave, 2011) for recent formalist criticism. These and other approaches are discussed at greater length below.

outside, brings us out of ourselves; and by the same lights, about how objects can, while being a part of the world, transform, *re-present* it. Which also means that the questions about the whale that drive the narrative – what is the whale, how do I capture it, and why do I feel impelled, or compelled, to do so – do not simply *represent*, but *are* the formal questions about the text that drive its readers – what is *Moby-Dick*, how do we read it, what, insofar as we have come to it, do we want from it.

These questions can be collected under the notion of the *figure*, minimally defined as a discrete image whose meaning points, not merely incidentally or peripherally, but as it were intentionally and directly beyond its reference. But if literary criticism has tended to take the figure as the signature of literature as such<sup>10</sup> – the object whose form it is criticism’s special task to make visible – *Moby-Dick*, depicting this figurality already at work in the nineteenth-century world it narrates, explodes this form into the world beyond it. Sharon Cameron suggests that for *Moby-Dick*’s characters, the whale functions as an “emblem of the external world.”<sup>11</sup> If, in trying to interpret these characters’ desires and actions, to grasp that which is between them, we want to know what it would mean to imagine the world in an object, to read *Moby-Dick* is to see that this has already been done; the result is the novel we read.

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<sup>10</sup> This is rather obviously the founding gesture of the symbolic or, as I argue it can be called below, “Ishmaelite” strain of literary criticism, but it is important to emphasize that it grounds what I will call “Ahabian” or allegorical criticism as well. Paul de Man’s repeated assertion that he “would not hesitate to equate the rhetorical, figural potential of language with literature itself” (*Allegories of Reading* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979] 10) is also axiomatic for the New Americanist and historicist critics who, following in the wake of post-structuralism, maintained its emphasis on literature as the (historical) actualization of the deceptive powers of language, what they learn from someone like de Man to call “illusion.” See below.

<sup>11</sup> Sharon Cameron, *The Corporeal Self* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 5.

What I want to argue is that while this recursiveness, the insistent orientation of its figures toward what Paul de Man calls the metafigural, is what has made *Moby-Dick* so attractive to its readers, it is also what has made it deeply threatening to the enterprise of literary criticism as such. If the whale promises to all who chase it that it will unlock the secrets of the whole (literature, the natural world) of which it is a part, it has equally threatened with the thought that to grasp it will be to see this special form dissolve into thin air; that whatever it is we want to learn from the novel, it is exactly what the characters knew from the start, and what we learn is where that has led them: to the apocalypse that is *Moby-Dick*'s end. This "craving for reality, be it life or death," as Thoreau describes it in *Walden*, puts the reader, facing her real and represented capacity to image the world, "stand[ing] right fronting face to face with a fact[:] you will see the sun glimmer on both its surfaces, as if it were a cimeter, and feel its sweet edge dividing you through the heart and marrow, and so you will happily conclude your mortal career" (*Walden* 96). This sense of an ending, be it "happy" or merely what will happen, haunts *Moby-Dick*, within and without. The loomings and presentiments that plague Ishmael and Ahab, the words of the gnomic "prophet" who warns Ishmael and Queequeg of the voyage that "what's to be, will be; and then again, perhaps it won't be" (*MD* 88), open uneasily into the collapse of Melville's personal life after the ill-starred publication of his novel, and into a persistent sense among its readers that, as Eyal Peretz puts it, the disaster that *Moby-Dick* represents extends into its very form, threatening, in the wake of the twentieth century history of totalitarian disaster that it uncannily anticipates, the stability and authority "not only of literature itself," but "every discourse," even the

world itself.<sup>12</sup> In one scene to which critics have been repeatedly drawn, the cabin-boy Pip, who, left floating at sea during a whale hunt, has gone mad, watches as other crew members take turns looking at the gold doubloon Ahab has nailed to the ship's mast and promised as a reward to the first man to sight and call out the white whale. Pip soliloquizes: "here's the ship's navel, this doubloon here, and they are all on fire to unscrew it. But unscrew your navel, and what's the consequence?" (*MD* 335).<sup>13</sup> The crew members have been looking at the images represented on the surface of the gold coin, trying to divine in these images a logic that would hold the key to the whale's capture and thus unlock the value that, represented by the coin, also ties each of them to the world, to their origin ("navel"). To decode these images, to find their true reference, would be to "unscrew" the doubloon: to get behind what is merely represented on its surface to the medium that supports representation itself, and behind the object to the self-seeing substance that had been projected on it. "I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look," Pip says: looking at the other characters' attempts to see through the images to their true referent, Pip precipitates out the act of looking itself, alchemizing their particular viewpoints into a kind of grammar of perception. But if the gold medium supports the characters' conflicting views onto a common value that, in the form of the whale, they all desire, what Pip captures is not that value "itself," but its absence; his metainterpretive mantra, which, repeated over and over, wavers between an a priori

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<sup>12</sup> Eyal Peretz, *Literature, Disaster, and the Enigma of Power: A Reading of "Moby-Dick"* (Stanford University Press, 2013), 7-25. See also Arendt's various reflections on the "worldlessness," what she describes as the collapse of *sensus communis*, induced by the disasters of the twentieth century. *Men in Dark Times*, 3-32.

<sup>13</sup> As Sharon Cameron points out, the joke, current in the nineteenth century, is that your bottom comes off (*Corporeal Self*, 23). The fate of the *Pequod*, stove by the whale, literalizes this figure.

formal logic and a nonsensical, purely material sing-song, predicates the common meaning of the crews' varying interpretations on the inscrutability of its object. His pure grammar of looking depends on the absence of any predicate, any essential thing to hold the gaze and reflect the thought. What Pip knows is that it is this not-knowing, this mystery about what the whale, or the coin, really is that holds the together the crew, both in a common enterprise and individually; and that *this* self-knowledge, or self-mystification, the intentionality of their non-knowledge – their self-supposed non-understanding – is paradoxically the condition that constitutes them together, and which they cannot fully bear, on pain of madness. Capture the whale, and what's the consequence? The threat is that to “unscrew” this object, to grasp it, would be to unscrew the self, unleashing the power that, contained by desire, held both in place. But Pip's half-figurative, half-philosophical language – “man's insanity, [...] heaven's sense” (*MD* 322) – discovers this power already unscrewed, in the very act of looking that he observes. Linking his own mad thoughts with the sane sense of the crew, he pictures the unscrewed navel, the captured whale, not as the new achievement of his meta-interpretive, metafigural language, but as the condition of the quest, for the doubloon and the whale, that they share. The doubloon's occulted value, the whale's secret meaning, man's insanity and heaven's sense, are not on the other side of reading and whaling, but in their very form; and thus already circulate in the world, and in *this* language, both Pip's and *Moby-Dick's* own, beautifully precise and sublimely wild.

Pip's metainterpretation provides a model I'd like to follow. While it aims to mediate and transform critical investment in the object, it does so not by taking that investment itself as the 'real' object of whose meaning the 'apparent' object is only a

symptomatic expression, but by understanding critical investment *as* the object, one that is thereby open to transformation and fundamentally, perilously without guarantee. It thus resists what I want to show has been a prevalent method in *Moby-Dick* criticism, and more generally in the Americanist critique which the latter has exemplified, in which a depicted world's specificity or limitation – its form – recognized as such by the critic, authorizes the overcoming of that limitation in the world outside literature. Such critique has tended to see itself as distilling, out of the various concrete acts of figuration on the part of the novel's characters, the essence of some other thing – figurativeness, the property that, possessed by a thing (a book, a whale) allows it to lead beyond itself. If in the novel we see its characters hunting the symbol, in critique it has seemed possible to hold together the different figurations that, on the level of its content, the novel represents – as if its characters' various speculative investments (adventure, revenge, pleasure, capital) that must, on the level of content, take the merely partial form of psychic figurations of *Moby Dick* the object, are unified, on the level of form, into a single, universal, purely immaterial or literary figure that is adequate to the textual world and that, as *Moby-Dick* the text, we grasp. In this view, we can see the characters' attempts to “pile up” all their desires into the figure of the whale as itself the emblem of a broader quest, wrapped up in the particularities of nineteenth-century American imperial commerce, which can be described in Stanley Cavell's terms as the philosophical and romantic quest to bring the world itself into view.<sup>14</sup> Cameron argues that *Moby-Dick*, in the process of turning the whale into an “emblem of the external world,” transforms its “ostensible” question – “what is the self's relation to the world that lies outside it?” into a

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<sup>14</sup> Cameron, *Corporeal Self*, 5, Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 191-245.

foregone conclusion, “acknowledg[ing] that world only in the process of trying to appropriate it” (*Corporeal Self* 4-5). The symbol literalizes and “partializes” the world into an object, and therefore tries to turn it into something that can be metabolized, “taken into the body.” The world’s ineffability goes from a sustaining atmosphere to be cultivated to a reified quality to be appropriated. On this view, *Moby-Dick* in effect tries to produce itself as the answer to the question that haunts its characters. The Moby Dick they chase can never be captured, because as a symbol of the world as a whole, the background in which things as such can appear, it cannot itself appear; but by representing this impossibility as such (by “looking” at their “looking”), by itself “meaning” their quest, the novel can become the kind of thing that its characters could not find: its own object, a “symbol,” the whole in the part, the world as such brought into view. Turning Moby Dick into *Moby-Dick* and back again, the novel gives its readers the satisfaction that its characters cannot achieve. Whereas the narrative is *about* its characters’ doomed attempt to make the world itself into an object, to *invest* the whale with unlimited value, the novel itself will *be* such a symbol. Whereas its characters are wracked with doubt, haunted by failure, and threatened with destruction, its readers will transcend – at least *in* the act of interpretation – these threats by grasping them as the necessary counterparts of desire, achieving a view of both – thus of human limitation or conditionedness as a whole – that can orient them in their own lives.

But by trying to step out of the textual world held together by these specific desires, this view of the novel extends the logic that it attempts to contain. Trying to see what a formalist like Eric Hayot calls a “literary world,” the “formal expression” of the arrangement of the novel’s “representational content,” as itself an *object* grasped by

critique, it ends up borrowing this interior (i.e., non-representational) worldliness of its object for what a historicist pragmatist like David Damrosch calls a historical “mode” of reading in order to grasp itself, treating “literary worlds” as the public and universal objects of “world literature.”<sup>15</sup> Trying to close off the disappointments of desire by *representing* them as inevitable, such readings turn literature itself into the impossible, universal object that they wanted literature to, in delimiting as content, overcome. Cameron’s point is that this move toward textual transcendence is in fact what the novel *itself* – “deceptively” – does in relation to its characters (*Corporeal Self* 25). If, as I will try to show in a more extended fashion below, this is also a constant temptation for criticism, my argument, following readers of romanticism like Stanley Cavell, Anne-Lise François, and Fred Moten, is not that this is a bad thing for either literature or its critique to do, but rather that it is what, indeed, we *are* – *with* literature itself – already doing.<sup>16</sup> Critical attempts to transcend the imagined reality of the literary world tie themselves more firmly to it, precisely because they learn from it how to go beyond it. In *Moby-Dick*, characters try to reimagine the world in an object; their failure to capture their object and realize their world is not what, in our learning from them, is overcome, but how, in our identification with them, the reality of that world opens into ours. Far from what theorists have called a “characterological” reading, imagining our own world through that of the novel would be to inhabit the radical threat to, or opening of, the historically-constituted

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<sup>15</sup> Eric Hayot, “On Literary Worlds,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 72, no. 2 (June 1, 2011), 137; David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003), 5.

<sup>16</sup> Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (University of Chicago Press, 1988); Anne-Lise François, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007); Fred Moten, “Black Kant (Pronounced Chant)” (Kelly Writers House, University of Pennsylvania, February 27, 2007).

category of “person” that imaginary personhood – literary or otherwise – makes possible.<sup>17</sup> Seeing ourselves in *Moby-Dick*’s characters, and our world in its language, would be a direct transformation of the relation between person and representation, words and the world, and thus of both, together. To unscrew the coin of literary critique from the fictional world it holds together would be to find *Moby-Dick*’s value in the collapse, or the renewal, of our own.

With this in mind, I want to try to open up a new direction for *Moby-Dick*’s critique by showing how the two prevalent strands of interpretation have routed themselves more or less explicitly along pathways laid out by the novel’s two main characters, pathways that in turn limn the formal challenges of the novel itself. To put it in slightly reductive terms, which I will work to fill out, the Ishmaelite approach imagines *Moby-Dick*, a wondrously new form, as the domestication of Moby Dick, a threatening natural force; the Ahabian critique tries to appropriate leviathanic worldly power by piercing through the deceptive, malevolent image that contains it, *Moby-Dick*. The one takes figuration as a channel for reaching the world, the other as a screen that blocks it; both address the whale as at once threat and promise, constraint and release, thing and

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<sup>17</sup> See Vogler’s “The Moral of The Story,” *Critical Inquiry* 34, no. 1 (2007), discussed further below, for a critique of characterological readings, which can be cursorily summarized as taking literature to offer models or images of personhood, which, whether they are to be emulated or avoided, are either way to be learned from. My attempt to think character differently draws on Alex Woloch’s remarkable attempt to rehabilitate the study of character in *The One vs. The Many* (Princeton University Press, 2003), where he argues that narrative space emerges as the tension between the “infinite” nature of “implied human personalities” and the “definitively circumscribed form of a narrative” (Woloch 13). My understanding of literary personhood, while not the focus of this chapter, would begin rather from the claim that – at least for the American romantic novel – the “infinite” nature of personality, and the “definitively circumscribed” form of a literary world, are precisely at issue, rather than taken for granted. See chapter 4 below for a further discussion of the relation between imaginary personhood as it is *depicted* in the novel and as it is *realized* in the political forms of liberalism and neoliberalism.

idea. Seeing these together prepares an understanding of *Moby-Dick* not as a mediation of opposed types of figurative language, nor as a contest between the worldviews they reflect or the characters that embody them, but as their *immediacy*, their irremediably conflicted identity whose worldly and literary form does not harmonize or reconcile difference but inhabits and opens it. The second half of this chapter will develop this understanding of form, reading the formal features of Melville's figurative language towards a new interpretation of the world that it imagines and elucidating the relation between literary and literal or economic value that haunts the text and its history. This interpretation opens out in conclusion to some suggestions, pursued through the rest of this dissertation, about how the formal legacies of American literary romanticism diffuse into a post-romantic American world.

### **The Personified Impersonal**

Ahab is *Moby-Dick*'s biggest character, and it is his way of orienting himself to the whale that draws in readers from the start, beginning with Ishmael. Ahab's magnetism begins in his theatricality, his performance of his life as if on a stage. It is the world's fundamentally deceptive nature that animates his own deepest convictions; he understands his life as a tragedy, and his *hamartia* is that he must hit his mark. Richer than "the wealthiest Praetorians" and possessed of an absolute power over his domain, his very power and freedom points him only the more firmly toward a goal that only he can see, and thus that he can only understand as impossible (*MD* 360, 143). "Tasked" by his own sense of omnipotence, Ahab "keep[s] pushing, crowding, jamming" himself in the pursuit of an explanation for his own worldly condition, and the name he gives this condition is "Moby Dick." Moby Dick is the whale that has, reaping his leg, brought him

into this world in which he stands, and will be, as his ultimate and only goal, his end (406, 140, 156).<sup>18</sup> For Ahab, Moby Dick is the natural sign of an “unknown...inscrutable” power, lurking behind the world, which it simultaneously gives evidence of and renders forever unknowable (140). Moby Dick’s resistance to capture – active and portentous, yet dumb and physical – releases his power from the limits of his body, infecting, in Ahab’s mind, “all visible objects” and making him “ubiquitous and immortal,” at once impossible to grasp and forever “shoved near” the human agent. Moby Dick “heaps” Ahab into the mountainous man he is by showing the latter his own limits, and in doing so, “tasking” him with Moby Dick’s destruction. Because this power is both physically efficacious and unknowable (thus unmanageable) – an “inscrutable malice” – it metaphorically seeps out of itself, suffusing everything with its unlimited power of limitation until it literally becomes Ahab’s world, and thus *demand*s that Ahab destroy it not only as his life’s condition but even as its being. To be Ahab is to destroy Moby Dick; thus, for Ahab, Moby Dick is simply that object which Ahab must destroy. A towering presence, locked up in himself, Ahab’s singular acuity of perception gives him and him alone the capacity to see Moby Dick in his true form, which is to say, as at once the world itself and nothing, a mere specter. Moby Dick is for Ahab the “visible personification” of “the impersonal” and the name for a “speechless, placeless power; he

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<sup>18</sup> Though the analogy between Ahab’s “dismasting” in the jaws of the whale and castration is obvious, it bears emphasis both that this is a persistent theme for Melville (to take another example, in *Typee* it is “Tommo’s” mysterious leg injury that at once marks his entry into the Eden of Typee and, in refusing to heal, acts as a natural sign of his need to escape) and that the sense of incompleteness the dismasting produces is also the condition for Ahab’s standing in the world, the whale-bone leg which comes synechdochically to mean Ahab himself (we picture him fundamentally as his embodiment in this leg) and to incarnate his incompleteness as apart from him, prosthetically.

is the “pasteboard mask,” the monstrous image whose visibility reveals, as fundamentally hidden, its true form. In destroying it, Ahab will cleanse the world at once of the evil object and of the tragically limited self that it brings into being. If Ahab is the one who is fated to see this false image, and thus is tasked with its destruction, what separates him from others is that he must bear this capacity for worldliness himself, as if totally; its failure, in the form of Moby Dick, is visible only to him, and its redemption would thus be the destruction of both his object and himself, a selfless sacrifice whose fruits only he can enjoy. To destroy the whale will be to destroy the conditionedness that, arcing between himself and his object, stands between humanity and the world.

Ahab’s way of relating to Moby Dick – production by way of attack – can be called, broadly, the allegorical mode of reading. The object that such readings behold is fundamentally an *emblem*, in other words, a sign that refers to something beyond it that cannot itself be seen. What this visible sign refers to is its referent’s invisibility, to the *fact* that the signified is of a different, inassimilable order of being than the signifier. Piling up this chaotic, meaningless visibility in a kind of “strategic essentialism,” allegory can form and destroy, and thus merge with, the non-being that haunts it. This approach is given an influential formulation in the writing of Paul de Man, whose transition from collaborationist European war writer to American literary critic began with a translation of *Moby-Dick*, and whose work set the tone for a generation of scholarship in the U.S.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See Shoshana Felman’s “Paul de Man’s Silence,” *Critical Inquiry* 15, no. 4 (1989), and Michael Boyden’s “Allegories of War: Paul de Man’s *Moby-Dick* Translation,” *Leviathan* 16, no. 3 (2014). Felman makes an interesting case for the symbolic significance of this translation, and her reading of (the critical response to) the evidence of de Man’s collaborationist writings has affinities with the interpretation of *Moby-Dick*, and of its critique, that I work to develop below. Critiquing the idea that, in uncovering this damning evidence of de Man’s evil, we gain a sideways-on view of the unlimited

In an essay critiquing the prevalent organicism of his time and laying the groundwork for the post-structuralism that followed in his wake, de Man, quoting Walter Benjamin, defines allegory as “a void ‘that signifies precisely the non-being of what it represents’”.<sup>20</sup> This “void that separates intent from reality,” language from being, is the “origin” of literature, for de Man, and “the imagination takes its flight only after the void, the inauthenticity of the existential project, has been revealed.” (*Blindness and Insight* 34-5). De Man’s reading strategy is to hunt down scenes of rhetorical “seduction,” in which figurative language promises a synthesis of “inside and outside, time and space, container and content, part and whole, motion and stasis, self and understanding, writer and reader, metaphor and metonymy” – most broadly, of word and thing, sound and sense, rhetoric and logic (*Allegories of Reading* 72). Literary figures, according to de Man, promise to reconcile the split between language and world by harmonizing the grammatical or formal aspect of language with its materiality, hanging the meaning or reference of a linguistic unit on the resemblances among the images that constitutes it, their internal relation to each other qua representation. By seeming to imply that language’s *claim* to picture the world authorizes its meaning (the *truth* of its picture), the

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horrors of the Holocaust, she urges us to see de Man’s failures as an act that, in uncovering, we find ourselves implicated in. “Like Ishmael rejoining life by floating on a coffin, like Ahab struggling and forever tied up with the whale, de Man will bear witness, in his later writings, to the Leviathan of a historical complexity with which his testimony will remain forever wrestling, in an ongoing testimonial struggle to which, the writings testify, there is no end and from which, they tell us, there is no possible escape” (Felman 720).

<sup>20</sup> Paul De Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 35. One should note that de Man’s understanding of allegory, while indebted to Benjamin’s, is not identical to it; the post-1970s debate in the American humanistic academy about the role of theory in literary critique could usefully be tracked in the vexed relation between de Manian unmasking and Benjaminian messianism. See Doris Sommer, “Allegory and Dialectics: A Match Made in Romance,” *boundary 2*, (1991).

figure imagines, or writes, away the constitutive difference between representation and reality on which the concepts of both are predicated; it is as if, de Man argues, figurative language *showed* that its representations were true by *claiming* to be part of the world; whereas just this relation, between what we say and what exists, was at issue. For de Man, critique can expose the seduction of the rhetorical figure as the seduction of ontological naïveté (and perhaps more broadly, the dogmatism of idealism as that of empiricism), thus destroying both. It reveals the *appearance* of immediacy or worldhood – the occult, invisible, inarticulable, and ultimately dogmatic background in which these two orders are supposed to harmonize – as a naïve and ungrounded assumption, a “lie” or meaningless “void” that separates the orders of word and thing (*Allegories of Reading* 55, 72, *Blindness and Insight* 35).

Paradoxically, it is this “void,” in the shape of literature, that reveals something worth pursuing. As Anne-Lise François has argued, the aggressive iconoclasm (preferring allegory over symbol, the sublime over the beautiful, metonymy over metaphor) that marks the high theory of the 1970s and 1980s evinces a deep faith in the unrepresentability that images mask.<sup>21</sup> In the New Americanist readings that, in the 1990s and 2000s, first introduced this theoretical sophistication into the discourse surrounding American literature, this faith was placed in what lies behind not only literature, but (borrowing as well from the discipline of cultural studies emerging in the U.K.) culture itself, understood in the broadest sense as the ideological texture of the lifeworld. If for de Man it is the magic of literary language (“rhetoric”) that seduces, for New Americanist critics this threat circulates even more widely, in the sacrality of the American ordinary,

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<sup>21</sup> *Open Secrets* 48n.69. See also Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

of the day-to-day of American life itself. The task becomes even larger, appropriately Ahabian; the deceptions in literature open onto a rottenness everywhere. For these critics, if ideology deceives in its claim to disclose what is in the shape of what can be seen, to destroy the image publicly – to visibly *enact* its destruction – is to use the imagination, the capacity to delimit the world in representations, to reach through to that unrepresentable substance that tragically limits it. “Hark ye yet again,” Ahab urges: “the little lower layer.”

All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event – In the living act, the undoubted deed – there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning masks. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. (*MD* 140)

For the allegorist, to grasp literature is to treat it (and *thus* “all objects”) like Ahab treats *Moby Dick*: as something that signifies exactly what it hides. To grasp this thing is not to understand a *relation* between its worldly form and its essence, but to strike through that form, to kill it in its false vitality and release the substance, which is also that of the self, that it hides. *Moby-Dick* is the white whale of the American spirit: heaping and tasking the American reader with the knowledge of its own shimmering deceptiveness, this exemplary literary object reveals itself, and thus all literary and cultural objects, as ideological masks that hide the vital American “unseen thing” behind it.

In such readings, it is precisely the literary qualities of *Moby-Dick* – the promise of some substantive quality *in* language that would reveal a truth about the world beyond what it merely or explicitly represents of it – which, by being destroyed, can point the way toward the truth that they hide. A generation of critics dissatisfied with American

complicity in a bankrupt world order took *Moby-Dick* in this way. The text's literary qualities are associated with an American ideology that imagines itself as an end of ideology, taking its own belief-system not as a set of delimited, thus contestable, interests (a set of specific normative representations), but as a natural, infinitely capacious, thus uncontested power. It is this power that they aim, in the shape of the text, to define and to contest. As I described in the introduction, Sacvan Bercovitch traced this aesthetic ideology back to the Puritan jeremiad. New Americanist readers of *Moby-Dick* have called it the rhetoric of "Cold War consensus" (Donald Pease), the process of "American incarnation" (Myra Jehlen), an "empire of liberty" (Wai Chee Dimock) and a form of "psychological warfare" (Clare Spark).<sup>22</sup> Radical New Left movements in the 1960s and

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<sup>22</sup> See Bercovitch's *American Jeremiad and Rites of Assent*; Pease's "Moby-Dick and the Cold War" and "New Americanists: Revisionist Interventions into the Canon"; Jehlen's *American Incarnation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); Dimock's *Empire for Liberty*; and Spark's *Hunting Captain Ahab: Psychological Warfare and the Melville Revival* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2001). These critics, broadly unified under the polemical heading of "New Americanism" and New Historicism more generally, do not (always) explicitly identify with Ahab or take him as the text's "hero." It would be more accurate to say that they intend to reject as ideological the kind of characterological reading that identifies internal textual persons as representatives in a partisan debate in which the critic must choose sides. Thus, they also reject a notion of "allegory" along those lines. As Michael Rogin writes, "Those who see *Moby-Dick* as a political allegory choose one side or another in the political debates; *Moby-Dick* undercuts all. It points to no fixed political truth above and outside its own story. Allegorical interpretations devalue the possibility of meaning immanent in ordinary life; they bring transcendent meaning to it. Ahab performs that operation on life on the Pequod" (*Subversive Genealogy* 108). What I mean to show here is how New Americanist readings proceed by way of deconstructing such understandings of Ahab and allegory – and how these readings are therefore (in a way that, I am trying to show, is not merely self-contradicting) Ahabian and allegorical. See below for further discussion. Such accounts have important antecedents in the quasi-modernist allegorical readings of *Moby-Dick* inaugurated by the Melville revival of the 1920s, for example in Raymond Weaver's *Herman Melville, Mariner and Mystic* (see especially 25-32 and 330-2). See Spanos 12-36 for a genealogy of this critique.

70s named “America” itself their “white whale.”<sup>23</sup> For these readers, *Moby-Dick* – insofar as it *represents* American culture – is a deceptive ideological force that, like literary language itself, imagines its own specificity, its content (and thus its historicity) as completely universal and formal. By “transcrib[ing] everyday events into a form that ma[kes] them seem indistinguishable from the inspired words of the God of the revolutionary father” (Pease “*Moby-Dick* and the Cold War” 122), American aesthetic form produces the everyday world as a scene of ungraspable, immutable fate, the transcendent logos of the City of God fixed incarnate in the spectacular visibility of the United States.

For Ahab, it is not anything particular about the whale, but merely the biographical *fact* – or call it fate – that it is “he [who] tasks me,” who brought Ahab into being as the ferocious man who stands, on the whale, against the world, that makes him so representative. So too for the Americanist literary critic: it is the whole history of the American attempt to imagine an at once high and universally-accessible literary culture, embodied, by the middle of the twentieth century, in this object and in the professional critical discourse that authorizes it, that calls forth the attack. American culture’s apotheosis, and apocalypse, in *Moby-Dick* collects this false symbolic power into one object, a text that has been, as the historical role of American studies in U.S. politics demonstrates, simultaneously a material force, a powerful thing: and thereby assailable.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> I am indebted to Hadji Bakara’s discussion, in “Ahab After Evil: *Moby-Dick* and the New Left” (2014, unpublished), of New Left groups in the U.S. (including the Weathermen and the Black Panthers) and Germany, who allegorized *Moby-Dick* and identified with Ahab.

<sup>24</sup> See Bercovitch *Jeremiad* 3-30 and *Rites* 1-27, and Pease “New Americanist Interventions.” See also Nahum Chandler’s “Originary Displacement,” *boundary 2*, 27.3 249-283 (2000) for a suggestive alternative genealogy of this dynamic.

If what Pease calls the rhetoric of consensus, and what I will describe below as Ishmaelite reading, imagine the U.S. as that leviathanic nation that, as Carl Schmitt writes in a letter to Alexandre Kojève, “has no enemy because it has no form,”<sup>25</sup> for those who, finding themselves a part of it, nevertheless cannot agree with it, literature, by intentionally forming this formlessness into its own shape, makes such an enemy – precisely an organic, internal one – visible. For the professional literary critic, as for Ahab, to pursue such an enemy is to imagine the self as its own destruction. The critic freezes his object into language and “give[s] up the spear” only in tying himself fatally to that object (*MD* 426). In destroying the whale, one destroys that limitation internal to the self which held it together. Criticism inherits the properties of its object not by forming the self in accord with it, but by striking through its form as such, unleashing the true, illimitable substance that the object, in trying to contain, deceptively masked.

Thus, while such readings often focus on Ahab, they do not always identify him as the “hero” of *Moby-Dick*, and indeed they coalesce more strongly through the rejection of Ishmael, the narrator’s, implicit claim to present a true account of his relation to Ahab, and thus around the *failure* of *Moby-Dick* to be a coherent, self-sustaining object.<sup>26</sup> But it

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<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Petar Bojanic, “‘The USA has no enemy because it has no form (Gestalt)’: Enemy, Animal, and Animal Functions in Schmitt and Hegel,” Center for Modern Thought, University of Aberdeen (2006). In this letter from 1947 (seven years after Harvard’s American Studies program granted its first Ph.D.) Schmitt gives the quote from a “gifted young German who was at Harvard for three years.” Schmitt characterizes this as “an important problem” (Bojanic 9).

<sup>26</sup> See for example Pease’s framing of his argument as his “personal failure to remain persuaded” by the reading (discussed below) in which Ishmaelite narrative freedom triumphs over, by understanding, Ahabian will (“*Moby-Dick* and the Cold War” 113), and Dimock’s rejection of the Ishmaelite production, and thus mastery, of a false “constitutive polarity” internal to the text (Dimock 111). Clare Spark’s *Hunting Captain Ahab: Psychological Warfare and the Melville Revival* is a revealing exception to this rule; her more straightforward Ahabian partisanship, while critical of New Americanist

is precisely this Ahabian refusal to take *Moby-Dick* as it appears, at its word (as *representing*, and thus mediating, a total narrative world, one in which meaningful difference, say that between Ahab and Ishmael or object and subject, can truly appear) that paradoxically identifies such criticism with the hidden, true object that, like the whale itself, tasks it. The word of the text can be rendered visible as ideology – as precisely the non-coincidence of visible power and truth, *eidos* and *logos*, that, in the American “idea,” it hides. If, as Wai Chee Dimock argues, “Melville has every reason to call his book *Moby-Dick*...it will always resist the reader, it will triumph over him, because its transcendent freedom is also a kind of transcendent illegibility: it cannot be read, because it refers to nothing other than itself” (Dimock 113), this illegibility is precisely what the critic must, in reading, identify with, and thereby triumph over and destroy. Pease argues that “Melville does not exercise so much as he exposes the compulsion at work in the scene of cultural persuasion in his own time” (“*Moby-Dick* and the Cold War” 148). The interpretive force of Pease’s claim depends on a metonymic substitution, moving from Melville to his literary work to the thing itself, revealing the authorial meaning – and the work that publicizes it – as a literal force. What *Moby-Dick means* is Ahab’s reification of the evil (compulsion) of the world in which he moves into a physical entity, one whose force is precisely its ability to hide – in plain sight – its cultural or spiritual content. This meaning itself can only be brought to light by treating *Moby-Dick*, the textual sign of Ahab’s “undoubted deed,” as itself a Moby Dick-like object. While Pease values this exposure, it is ascribed not to Ahab, nor exactly to

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readings, shares with them important critical and political aspirations. I draw on Michael Colacurcio’s illuminating reading of this dynamic in ““Excessive and Organic III”: Melville, Evil, and the Question of Politics” (*Religion and Literature*, 34.3, 2002).

Melville, but to the object that, in imaginatively creating, they literally destroy or “expose.” For the critic, the value of the literary object is in the visible destruction of its form, its turning inside-out (“exposure”) of what Pease, though he does not cite de Man, follows the latter in calling the seductive “rhetoric,” nowhere more potent than in American romantic literature, of American exceptionalism. In its critical capture, the romance ends fatally, subject and object crashing into each other; in critique, the “libidinal drives” cultivated in and contained by the “American romance” can finally be, Pease hopes, released out of its literary form, into the “public world,” beyond literary critique’s disciplinary confinement to its object (Pease “New Americanists” 26). For Ahab to respond to the call of *Moby Dick* is to destroy him; for the critic to grasp *Moby-Dick* is to take Ahab both at his word and in spite of it, and strike through the literary text that reveals Ahab as himself a mask and thus, *through* Ahab, into *Moby Dick* himself, the real substance, the unseen thing that animates American life.

The New Americanist reading is Ahabian, then, to the extent that it imagines itself to strike through Ahab as an imaginary person; it takes literature as a model for the world by contradicting its claim to get the world into view. If literature, like the white whale, deceives by presenting itself as merely natural, as value-free and infinitely capacious rather than coercively shaping and “tasking” us, the Ahabian reading paradoxically maintains a deep commitment to literature as the promise of an “end” (perhaps an apocalypse) of ideology, to the overcoming of the limitations imposed by personality, by representation, by language as such. The critical identification with Ahab imagines the end of personhood’s limitation or containment by the image, and here – at the limit of such criticism’s particular commitment, and of its commitment to particularity – we can

begin to see, piercing through the Ahabian partisanship, a line into the Ishmaelite imaginary it opposes.

If Ahabian, allegorical readings frame a set of invisible forces as an object, and thereby use literature as inspiration for the destruction of a bankrupt world, Ishmaelite readings turn objects into infinitely pregnant ideas, and thus transform the world into literature, something worth just as much as you imagine. Where the Ahabian reading extracts the text's narrative *content* – the reification and pursuit of the whale – and then reasserts it as a formal strategy for the reification and destruction of textual determination, the Ishmaelite reading, identifying with the text's narrative *form*, tries to inhabit this form, turning it into the very sinews of a living world.

Ishmael, like Ahab, is obsessed with Moby Dick, and in a sense, the whale represents an equally fatal threat for him; to “quietly take to the ship” may be an alternative to “throw[ing] himself upon his sword,” but to live by the lance and the pen is to flirt, too, with the void (*MD* 18). In “Loomings,” examining his motivation for the whaling journey that is the subject matter of the ensuing narrative, he finds that the white whale, a “wild conceit...one grand hooded phantom” is the name for all the hidden “springs and motives” which the world “presented to me under various disguises” thereby “cajoling me into the delusion that [the whaling voyage] was a choice resulting from my own unbiased freewill” (22). But though Ishmael, Ahab-like, pictures the whale as a name for the collected deceptiveness of the visible world, cunningly determining human action to an unknown and unknowable purpose, he proposes a different relation to this object. “I am quick to perceive a horror, and could still be social with it,” he brags (22). The characteristically liberal and jocular tone of this claim – a particularly effective strain

of the Americanist humor associated with the tall tale<sup>27</sup> – defines a relation to the whale that does not deny its awesome power over him (it has, he is here suggesting, more or less determined his life, or at least that part of it which forms the subject of his narrative) but nevertheless claims an absolute freedom in relation to it. Rather than asserting a preference for the beautiful over the sublime, it domesticates the latter by turning it into a joke, staged for one’s own benefit, imagining threats to reason as invitations to aesthetic education. The whale may be the very shape, the “mystic sign,” of “the demonism in the world,” a “palsied universe” (164), but Ishmael “could still be social with it.” And indeed, this sociability is the enterprise of Ishmael’s narrative.

Ishmael, calling his technique a “careful disorderliness” (284), will form *Moby-Dick* – the massive object of his narrative pursuit – as something that is at once completely outside his powers of determination or even knowledge, and the very form of his being. “Call me Ishmael”: this self-creating act, opening the form for both the text of *Moby-Dick* and its implicated, diegetic narrator Ishmael, invokes an “I” whose being is the identity of his complete determination from outside – his being cast out of his natural-born place in the sovereign order, an Ishmaelite – and his naming of himself, an autonomy that forms outward appearance as a pure expression of volition. If “Ahab did not name himself” (78) and is therefore at once “forever Ahab” and *never* Ahab except in the act of destroying the object whose unbearable pressure brings him into being (418), Ishmael both receives his destiny from that most solid of textual objects, the Bible, and invents it out of thin air for himself. The formal space of his language, where optative and

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<sup>27</sup> See Constance Rourke’s canonical formulation in *American Humor* (New York: Doubleday, 1930); Pease makes a convincing case for the ideological work of this tone as revealed in Ishmael’s voice in “*Moby-Dick* and the Cold War” (136-8).

imperative are one, is in the shape of the object that, in imagining, he releases into the world. His autonomy hangs on nothing more than a rather brazen confidence in his own sociability: if Ishmael is to be so called – if he is to be the one that he claims to be – it will be publicly, *through* his readers, in their act of recognizing the Ishmaelite object, their participation in the space opened up by this “call.”

Ishmael is a “whale author”; his goal, to “put the living sperm whale before you,” is to expose both himself and his reader to the radical change that the whale represents (115). To say that the whale is a book is to say that, like the self that authors it, it is always on the move, transforming and being transformed by its environment. To write or to read, to look or to be found, is to be opened into the space of a risky and wonderful process: open-ended, collaborative, and ongoing. Though Ishmael, proliferating endless authoritative-sounding descriptions of the whale, seems to want to stabilize his object, in the shape of his book, into “the draught of a systematization of cetology,” this new whale science is, like everything in Ishmael’s universe, a kind of play. The concepts he invents, the “*FOLIO*,” “*OCTAVO*,” and “*DUODECIMO*” whale, are not new but borrowed ironically from literary history’s scholastic mode. The effect of this scientific reification is aesthetic, and it depends not on the knowledge it proclaims but on the literary excess it intimates through Ishmael’s ironic, conceptually inarticulable suggestion that what cetology contains is everything *but* “the living whale,” and that the latter’s specific “virtue” or essence lives in the mystery of its interior, in the same way that, as he writes elsewhere, the essence of “Shakespeare,” always outrunning his books, lurks inside our

folios, octavos, and duodecimos.<sup>28</sup> This suggestion must remain ironic, present in its non-articulation, because the quality he hunts – and which, he wagers, his reader wants too – is not that which is *outside* the word or the whale (thus perhaps merely as yet unsaid, undiscovered) but exactly what words and things cover, what in them calls out for *discovery* – for pursuit, for reading. Such essence is forever bounded inside the concept and the object, but infinitely open to our own liberation of it through the reading and inhabitation of its internal excesses. Only through this reading, only in the *sense of these* words, will this essence come to light, and it will become visible precisely as the uncapturable, invisible effect – at once mysteriously “swaying” the reader to unknown ends, and liberating him to pursue his “purpose” – that such objective, demystifying words have. So Ishmael intuits the whale (his “mystic symbol”), and so he “puts it before” the reader, to “read...if you can” (275): forever a “draught,” indeed a “draught of a draught” (125), calling out for revision, letting inspiration in through its “chinks and crannies” (25).

Ishmaelite reading can be called symbolic vision. Whereas Ahab, discovering in the object a transcendental cut between self and world, finds his fate in this “void” between word and thing, Ishmael spreads out, Whitman-like, into this space, guiding the self’s expansion by the lure of the object. The mysteriousness or unknowability of the object – and the reader’s own inability to pierce through that mystic surface – becomes not a tragic limitation (the external sign of internal fallenness), but the condition of possibility for both the object’s and the reader’s transformation. Where for Ahab, Moby

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<sup>28</sup> See Melville’s discussion of the difference between the true and indefinable “Shakespeare” and the mere person “Master William Shakespeare” in “Hawthorne and His Mosses” (524 in *Moby-Dick*).

Dick's mysteriousness – the sense that some absolute resistance to knowledge lurks behind the whale's visibility – demands that the subject pierce through the visible object, the thing's incompleteness, to end them both, for Ishmael, this mutual incompleteness is itself the concrete manifestation of a harmonious, shared form. In seeing this image of incompleteness, we see not form's falseness but its truth. In Ishmael's discourse, the "word becomes one with the thing," as F. O. Matthiessen, quoting Emerson to define the Americanist mode of writing, argues. "The act of seeing and the thing seen...the subject and the object are one" (Matthiessen 30-1), not because they are both self-identical, but because they are both incomplete, "draughts of draughts"; both object and subject "overrun" themselves, and it is this which constitutes what Emerson calls their "true romance," their passionate, infinite identity ("Experience" 267).

Ishmaelite reading is exemplified in the mid-twentieth-century school of Americanist criticism, one that can be mapped in broad outlines at the intersection of "myth and symbol" criticism and the broader emphasis on literary form characteristic of the "New Criticism" that emerged in the 1930s and 40s.<sup>29</sup> Such criticism, in emphasizing symbol over allegory, the beautiful over the sublime, and metaphor over metonym, identified with its object in a double sense: first, in its acceptance of the formal categories to which romantic texts explicitly subscribed, and second, in its affirmation of the object itself as the arbiter or formal authority for the critical and normative value to be gained from critique. When critics like Matthiessen privileged the symbol, they followed Ishmael himself, whose assertion that "of all these things...the Albino whale was the

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<sup>29</sup> see de Man's "Form and Intent in the American New Criticism," 20-36 in *Blindness and Insight*, and Pease's "New Americanists: Revisionist Interventions in the Canon" for incisive critical summaries of the new criticism and myth and symbol schools respectively. Relevant examples are discussed below.

symbol” and whose (irony-tinged) care to prevent the appearance of his text as a “hideous and intolerable allegory” (*MD* 165, 172) in turn follows the distinctions developed by romantic theorists like Coleridge, for whom, in contrast to the “unsubstantial” “shadow-fight” and “hollow abstraction” of allegory, symbols are “living educts of the imagination...harmonious in themselves, and consubstantial with the truths of which they are the conductors.”<sup>30</sup> Because the object, as symbol, is understood to participate materially in the “truth of which it is a conductor,” Ishmaelite readings take the inscrutability of the object, its meaning more than it says, its showing by way of hiding, as the *form* of the whole of which both the whale and its pursuer are a part. The whale’s resistance to capture, its unavailability to knowledge – the incompleteness that it presents as its essence – is seen not as a mask that blocks the reader from grasping the complete “truth” behind it, but as the very form of a totality that invites the reader to unite with it.

To pursue the object as symbol is to imagine a world in the affirmation, rather than the destruction, of what stands between it and the self. Coleridge’s organicist metaphor is itself significant, as *Moby-Dick* demonstrates; by *embodying* “the whole,” the symbol gives it life, in other words, spontaneity, the capacity for self-movement. The part reveals the whole by animating it in its own partiality; thus it turns its “representative” or secondary, derivative, and dependent nature into the very principle of the wholeness it expresses. To see, through whaling, the “watery part of the world,” will be to reanimate it as a whole, to open the “great flood-gates of the wonder world” (*MD* 18, 22). In the symbol we can see the possibility of a totality that is not fatally set in stone but plastic

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<sup>30</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Statesman’s Manual: Or, The Bible the Best Guide to Political Skill and Foresight: A Lay Sermon, Addressed to the Higher Classes of Society, with an Appendix, Containing Comments and Essays Connected with the Study of the Inspired Writings* (London: Gale and Fenn, 1816), 34-5.

and animated by the inflowing interaction, the fluidity of the parts that compose it; as the mark of literary form, it imagines a relation between words and the world, and between knowledge and experience, that is not one of mere static and derivative, thus fatal and privative, re-presentation of content but a synthetic, reciprocal animation or expressive actualization.<sup>31</sup>

For Ishmaelite critics, to read *Moby-Dick* is to share in the pursuit of this exemplary object, whose mysteriousness readers recognize as their own complexity ever outrunning them, ever improvising a form that includes exactly what it does not know. The endless cetologies and reveries, edenic days and hellish nights, freedom from care and fear for one's life: though these parts that Ishmael depicts do not resolve into any one "meaning" or moral truth, they thereby transmit to the reader, in and as the narrative's irresolution, Ishmael's experience both producing and responding to his own object, the open-endedness that is the form of both his life and *Moby-Dick*'s. Swimming through the vast ocean of Ishmael's narrative is this one elusive symbol, "the image of the

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<sup>31</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's *The Literary Absolute* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988) gives a genealogy of romantic literature along these lines. For Coleridge's organicism, see Abrams' *The Mirror and the Lamp* (Oxford University Press, 1958, 167-177). Coleridge is deeply indebted to the emergence of literary theory around the Schlegels' *Atheneum* circle that Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy chart, and in turn to post-Kantian discussions in Germany about aesthetic form and the emerging disciplines of the life sciences. For the latter, see Richards' *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe* (University of Chicago Press, 2002), Zammito's *The Genesis of Kant's Critique of Judgement* (University of Chicago Press, 1992, 214-263), and Pippin's "Avoiding German Idealism" for discussion of how the challenges the category of the aesthetic posed to the understanding of nature shaped the emergence of post-Kantian philosophy. This dynamic is described in more explicitly linguistic and structural terms by Foucault's *Order of Things* and Wellbery's *Lessing's Laocoon* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), both of which describe a shift, in the nineteenth century, from a notion of linguistic signs as representations of a pre-existing reality to expressive actualizations of a normatively-saturated worldliness. See also further discussion below and in chapters 2 and 4 of this dissertation.

ungraspable phantom of life”: that image which, like in “that story of Narcissus,” “we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans” (20). “We ourselves see,” and in this infinite act of self-seeing – as ungraspable and strange, even “a horror,” – criticism sees that which opposes it, that object and that self whose resistance and opacity compels it into activity, as an opening onto a different, expanded, though never-finished world.<sup>32</sup>

What Ishmaelite vision aspires to do, as Charles Olson first explicitly argued, is contain, and thus liberate, an Ahab. Whereas Ahab was locked inside himself, and thus fated by the incompleteness that compelled him, Ishmael is free precisely because he can be both Ahab and not, can feel compelled by him while also *seeing* this compulsion: and this incomplete (though in no ways hesitant or withholding) identification thus allows him to be at once *Ishmael* and not, at once himself and outside, “squeezed into” his fellows and into the universe (323). If Ishmael’s identification with Ahab is incomplete – if Ahab’s “quenchless feud” only “*seemed* mine” (152, emphasis added), it is precisely this seeming that constitutes being for Ishmael, who thinks “my shadow here on earth is my true substance” (45). Ishmael is not, Melville-like, Ahab’s creator only; this would picture him merely as another Ahab, staked completely on the simultaneous creation and overcoming of his own resistant object. He is also, according to Olson, “a chorus through whom Ahab is seen,” and what he tells is therefore “more than Ahab’s wicked story.” Ishmael’s *Moby-Dick* itself *is* the difference between Ishmael and Ahab, which is to say the difference between the worlds that their objects hold together: Ishmael “creates the *Moby-Dick* universe, in which the Ahab-world is, by the necessity of life – or the

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<sup>32</sup> Richard Poirier’s writing, for example in *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), is perhaps the most powerful example of this kind of criticism.

Declaration of Independence – included.”<sup>33</sup> Creating this “more,” Ishmael leaps out of the frame of his own self-creation, his determination by his own object, thus becoming, Olson claims, more even than “his [own] creator,” more than Melville (*Call Me Ishmael* 57). The reader, channeling the Ishmaelite voice from within Melville’s text, unites with him to transform *Moby-Dick* from a created object (a book) into a universe (a text), a world without end. If, inside the text, Ishmael can, by “including,” transform the determinateness of the Ahabian object into the freedom of creative form, the critic outside the text can, in a process that unites metonymy and metaphor, transform the Ishmaelite literary object (*Moby-Dick*) in a similar way. The critic – calling himself Ishmael – images a discursive universe in which *Moby-Dick* (the Ishmael-world) can be included, a universe that, in being pursued, opens the fundamentally recalcitrant objects of the literary imaginary into the infinitely capacious form of a polity: a free, pluralistic, but nevertheless united human whole. Literature’s *Moby Dick*-like mysterious power, its compulsive tasking of its readers, can be inherited as the very form of an undetermined but communal willing, the “unlimited orientation” of the Schillerian aesthetic state where “the necessity of life” and “the Declaration of Independence” are one.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Charles Olson, *Call Me Ishmael: A Study of Melville* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1947), 57-8.

<sup>34</sup> Frank Stella, *Working Space* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 35. Though the explicit nationalism of Olson’s approach has faded from critical favor after the powerful critiques of the Ahabian New Americanists, recent emphases on aesthetic form have articulated a more sophisticated Americanism that retains, if only implicitly, the analogy between literary and political form. Recent examples include the work of Branka Arsic, Paul Grimstad, and the volume *Melville and Aesthetics*, edited by Geoffrey Sanborn and Samuel Otter. Otter’s “An Aesthetics in All Things,” *Representations* 104.1, (2008) considers a passage from *Moby-Dick* in which Ishmael, analogizing the relative handsomeness of India-made Manilla and American hemp rope as the difference between, respectively, a “golden-haired Circassian” and “a dusky, dark sort of fellow,” asserts parenthetically that “there is an aesthetics in all things.” Otter’s claim is that, in

It is easy enough – thanks, partly, to the critical work of the Ahabians – to recognize, in the Ishmaelite voice channeled by someone like Olson, a distressing note of willful self-deception, that of a particular liberal ideology (Pease’s “Cold War consensus”) whose mark is its refusal to recognize its own shape; no harder, at least, than to see in the Ahabian iconoclasm that rejects the world as it appears a deeper faith in the image or text as such – the *eidos* or idea – as the bearer of an ultimate, unrepresentable truth, and thus a strange and cold rejection of the pleasures and hopes that books, and the world, might actually offer. But to describe *Moby-Dick* as the scene of these respective critical investments and failures – to see it hold together, for Olson, a polity with no center, and to guide, for Pease, by way of its falseness – is not to unite the two into a yet-more capacious formal representation of the human scene; nor is it to break that scene apart into a fundamental aporia, a de Manian “undecidability.” The whale, luring on and drawing out its characters and its readers, opens up a world that is not a mediation

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producing a tension between the historically legible racial ordering and its aesthetic correlate in the whale-line, this passage dramatizes “the extravagant relations between the formal and the historical” (120). The claim turns on understanding this “line” as simultaneously containing, as description, the tension between historical determination and formal transformation, and, as *Ishmael’s* line, transcending it, extending this textual line into the free *voice* of the text, which the critic can excavate as “the differences [literary texts] express: an excess that proceeds from but is not bound by their history” (124). One should note here similarities to the political style evoked by first generation Americanists like Matthiessen and Poirier, even if it is less explicit than that of Olson. Otter’s argument recapitulates the view that literary form is an act of liberating the historicity that it brings into visibility; he traces the transformation of (an essentially bad or threatening) content into a possibility that the reader is now freed to encounter as aesthetic pleasure: as if this is a difference produced (imagined) by Ishmael, and thus due to him. While I agree with Otter that historically determined content enters into a tension in its aesthetic representation, I am arguing that this tension is the concrete encounter with the impossibility of ascribing “difference” or “excess” to the “expressive” form of literature itself. My readings below of Queequeg, Ishmael, and Ahab’s aesthetic transformations of their objects shows how they try to inhabit this tension. See my critiques of Walter Benn Michaels and Michael Fried in the introduction and fourth chapter for a cognate argument.

between or within what is in tension in these two levels – thing and word, history and freedom, “man’s insanity” and “heaven’s sense” – but their immediacy, in the reality of an object that is at once desire and its concrete denial, a liberation into the creative space of human personality and its arbitrary restriction by the world it creates. The reader inevitably “identifies,” in ways modulated but not determined by any number of factors external to the text that might shape a reading, from the prevailing critical wind to the accidents of the reader’s birth to the time of day, with *Moby-Dick*’s characters: in this sense the narrative does function, as Alex Woloch argues (following a long line of theories of the work of art as a microcosm, and, for romanticism, as a political utopia), as a delimited space or world that, by representing subjects in relation to objects, allows both to appear (Woloch 13). We take pleasure, invest possibilities, and stake value in imagining ourselves moving through this world, in relation to this object, guided by these characters. But this does not make reading characterological in the sense that the reader predicates the reading’s value on the delimited coherence of these persons or their objects.<sup>35</sup> To see Ishmaelite and Ahabian readers repeat the strategies of their textual

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<sup>35</sup> This is the worry animating Candace Vogler’s incisive critique of certain philosophical accounts of literature which, aiming to use philosophy to define literary value, end up locating in literature some moral substance that would be otherwise unavailable to philosophy (“The Moral of the Story”). Vogler’s argument implies a more extended critique of liberalism’s understanding of personhood, in which the latter appears as the *representation* of an unlimited capacity for representation. I agree that literature does not give us special access to such special representations, and, further, I agree that certain philosophical accounts of literature (and more broadly, accounts that aim to defend the “value” of the humanities – see for example the debate in *The Humanities and Public Life*, ed. Brooks) hang on the claim that they do. My point here is to argue that while literature may invoke such identificatory desire in the reader, this is not itself the meaning or value of such readings: that to see this identificatory desire is to see personhood staged as *simultaneously* subjective and objective, represented and representing; the “value” it represents is neither to be extracted from the character nor created out of thin air by the reader, but thrown into question where the two meet.

representatives is to see instead that the value readers derive from their object depends on this reification of human subjectivity: that, *like and as* Ahab and Ishmael, they recognize their own claims, the desires and values that constitute them, as objects that, *like and as* Moby Dick and *Moby-Dick*, are at once real and elusive, historical and imaginary, fundamentally public and deeply intimate. To see what we have wanted from a text like *Moby-Dick* is also to learn from it anew.

In what follows, I want to try to inhabit this picture of the text's value anew by reframing the relation between the Ahabian destruction of the figurative object and its Ishmaelite redemption as a question of the relation between literary and economic form. This relation has perhaps attracted less attention than that between literary and political form, because the pursuit of the white whale, once Ahab gets it underway, is explicitly defined as non-, even anti-economic, and any question about or resistance to the quest becomes a question of political power rather than economic value,<sup>36</sup> and the relevant relation seems to be between political (Ahabian) and aesthetic (Ishmaelite) form.<sup>37</sup> While *Moby-Dick* could perhaps be described as "aestheticizing" the economic imperatives that frame the hunt into a contingent background against which the narrative quest gains meaning, the reason the narrative, in its form as well as its content, can appear as a kind of political allegory (whether explicitly for the Ahabian, as the contest over power, or implicitly for the Ishmaelite, as the unfolding of a discursive freedom from political

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<sup>36</sup> A seeming exception would be Starbuck's resistance, which tries to recall Ahab to the "way of the business we follow" (144); but his argument resolves ultimately into a liberal-political one. The crew has bound themselves together, in the form of a contract, in a common pursuit; economic gain happens to be the object, but it has binding force, in Starbuck's argument, only because they have voluntarily entered into it, and it is this agreement that, according to Starbuck, Ahab violates.

<sup>37</sup> For an important exception, see Casarino's *Modernity at Sea: Melville, Marx, Conrad in Crisis*.

compulsion) is that the possibility of politics, in the aftermath of industrialism and romanticism's emergence as spheres governed by the autonomous logics of economics and aesthetics, is now located precisely at the juncture of these two. When economics and aesthetics have split the world into two reflexive forms that reify relationality as such – exchange-value and aesthetic form, the hunt and its representation, the captain of industry and the artistic genius – the space in which these forms of relation can themselves be thought is thrown into question. As I argued in this dissertation's introduction, American romanticism promises the collapse of these two realms into a single form. As I argue in chapters 3 and 4, the neoliberal world of the twentieth and twenty-first century has made good on this promise, under the form of what Hannah Arendt has identified as “the rise of the social.”<sup>38</sup> But though this nineteenth-century concept aims to unify questions about individual desires with those about its supra-individual contexts into an organic, immanent logic that operates on the level of the species, what presses on the characters in *Moby-Dick*'s diegetic world (and what presses, in the book's form, on its readers) is not a technical question about adjudicating competing desires or optimizing their coordination (just as, for the readings I have described, it is not or not only a question of the relative admirability of characters, or of attaining a view that coordinates their respective motives). What haunts those who come to *Moby-Dick* is rather a genuine question, thus one that cannot be “solved,” about whether there is any room for what Hannah Arendt calls “the world,” a space in which the *relation* between men and things, desires and their

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<sup>38</sup> See Arendt's discussion in *The Human Condition*, especially the chapter entitled “The Rise of the Social” (38-50). See Foucault's *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Hardt and Negri's *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), and Angela Mitropoulis' *Contract and Contagion: From Biopolitics to Oikonomia* (London: Minor Compositions, 2012) for relevant analyses of this trajectory. I discuss these connections further in chapters 3 and, especially, 4.

objects, readers and literature, can appear as such: whether, in other words, this non-space, this pure logic of the social, that encompasses the two realms of aesthetics and economics, can become the subject of normative debate, can appear as such, and thus provide ground for differing investments and claims.

If, as Marx thinks, money is the form or “independent shape” of objects’ capacity, in a human-invested world, to be exchangeable, to “change their form,” the reification of this capacity into capital, that object whose value is its ability to “perform its own valorization process, an animated monster which begins to work” sounds a bit like what I’ve described as the transformation of a desiring capacity into imaginary persons, political aspiration into an imaginary world, and perhaps most broadly, the representational capacity of language into the figure, the linguistic image that represents precisely its own capacity to go “beyond” itself, beyond representation itself.<sup>39</sup> Both attempt to separate off this capacity for self-differentiation – call it life or imagination – into its own identity, “value” as such. To understand these forms would not be finally to achieve this; the rendering of Moby Dick and *Moby-Dick* would not finally unveil the secret that animates them. (As readers of Marx learn, the secret of capital, and *Capital*, is that there isn’t one; but that doesn’t mean that we haven’t gained anything by chasing it.) To seek a space between economic and aesthetic value, between Ishmael and Ahab, is neither to find something different from them, nor to find *them*, truly, but to experience and to think – and thus to maintain the possibility of – the world that, throwing into question, they share. By way of returning to Ishmael and Ahab, and to the aesthetic and economic object they seek, I want to suggest another approach to them through the

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<sup>39</sup> *Capital* 301, 212.

image, which neither of them can quite articulate but which grounds them both, of a primitive or God-like language, a kind of language that, identical with the thing it is about, would embody the exact value that it represents. What this primitivity, or its fantasy, shows us is that the language we ascribe to Melville, or Ishmael and Ahab, circulates more broadly in their world, and indeed grounds its value in precisely the kind of subjects, and objects, that they might be inclined to think of only as irrelevant or immaterial.

### **Melville His Mark**

Ishmael may, as he asserts, know nothing about whaling, but he has a knack for reading people, and at the Nantucket inn where he stays while looking for a whaling voyage, he makes fast friends with Queequeg, experienced harpooner and exiled royal.<sup>40</sup> This friendship is fortuitous; not only is it Queequeg who, calmly and philosophically anticipating his own death, builds the coffin that turns into a life-buoy for Ishmael at the narrative's apocalyptic end, but it is he who, again not by design but by a seeming fate, leads Ishmael into the adventure from which he will save him. Ishmael hopes to benefit from Queequeg's expertise in choosing a ship, but the latter leaves it up to "Yojo," his

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<sup>40</sup> It is interesting to note that while Ishmael must identify with his outcast status by proxy – in other words, has to call *himself* Ishmael (and thus speculatively ask us to do so), one who is cast out against his will, and thus take on a name that does not coincide with his identity (as self-outcast) precisely in order to coincide with it – Queequeg, according to Ishmael's telling, simply casts himself out, having decided as a young prince "to see something more of Christendom" than his island afforded and getting aboard a whaler (59). This savage's nobility, and thus his enviable self-identity, is visible precisely in his simple need for more than the "Christendom" into which he is cannibal-born makes available. As I try to show below, the deep irony that Ishmael's depiction of Queequeg displays does not limit itself to the liberal relativism that Ishmael valiantly attempts, but rather takes it as its object. See Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy* and Milder, *Exiled Royalties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) for readings of Melville in relation to questions of familial inheritance and sovereignty.

wooden idol, who, having already chosen a ship, promises that, without a word of direction, Ishmael will light upon it (*MD* 68).

With this in mind they find themselves onboard the *Pequod*. While the ship is still docked, the papers still unsigned, the voyage not yet in motion, we get the text's first representation of whaling, and from the start it is a question of both the extravagant power of figurative language and the necessity of locking the latter's economic value down, into the language of contract. As they approach, Peleg, one of the ship's owners, stops them: "he had not suspected my friend was a cannibal, and furthermore announc[ed] that he let no cannibals on board that craft, unless they previously produced their papers" (*MD* 83). In this, the first of many puns in this scene on the act of writing, the explicit meaning of Peleg's demand is that a non-European must prove his conversion to Christianity to be allowed on a Christian vessel such as the *Pequod*; and so Ishmael, trying out his lawyerly rhetorical skills that will later be put to use on the reader in chapters like "The Advocate" and "The Honor and Glory of Whaling," works to persuade Peleg and his evangelical co-owner Bildad of Queequeg's membership in "the First Congregational Church." Indeed, Ishmael argues, Queequeg is a "born member... a deacon himself." The owners, never having seen Queequeg at "Deacon Deuteronomy's meeting," and confused about this non-literal use of language, press him: "thou art skylarking... explain thyself, thou young Hittite." It comes out that Ishmael is referring to no church or sect in particular, but to "the great and everlasting First Congregation of this whole worshipping world; we all belong to that." Rejecting the owners' Hebraic emphasis on visible signs of the covenant, Ishmael, by showing them the true referents of their own discourse that its specificity hides, recalls them to the authentic Christian

brotherhood that they seek but to which, in their fear of Queequeg's difference from it, they have blinded themselves. Though the literal paper, the actual representation of his spiritual identity, is missing, Ishmael shows them how to interpret this absence – along with the visible difference that, in the form of Queequeg's person, had stirred their desire to fill it – as the true reference of the signs they had sought. This seems persuasive enough, and Peleg asks them to “come aboard; never mind about the papers.” But the real referent here – the question at bottom, for a commercial (though Christian) voyage such as the Pequod's, as well for Ishmael in his interest in an exotic and skilled islander such as Queequeg – is the whale, and Queequeg's unique skill at capturing it. Primed for excitement by Ishmael's “sermon,” Peleg looks with interest to Queequeg for verification of his abilities.

“I say, Quohog, or whatever your name is, did you ever stand in the head of a whale-boat? did you ever strike a fish?”

Without saying a word, Queequeg, in his wild sort of way, jumped upon the bulwarks, from thence into the bows of one of the whale-boats hanging to the side; and then bracing his left knee, and poising his harpoon, cried out in some such way as this: -

“Cap'ain, you see him small drop tar on water dere? You see him? Well, spose him one whale eye, well, den!” and taking sharp aim at it, he darted the iron right over old Bildad's broad brim, clean across the ship's decks, and struck the glistening tar spot out of sight.

“Now,” said Queequeg, quietly hauling in the line, “spos-ee him whale-e eye; why, dad whale dead.”

“Quick, Bildad,” said Peleg, to his partner, who, aghast at the close vicinity of the flying harpoon, had retreated toward the cabin gangway. “Quick, I say, you Bildad, and get the ship's papers. We must have Hedgehog there, I mean Quohog, in one of our boats.” (84)

There are many jokes here, as there are throughout the comedy of liberalism that makes up Ishmael's time on land with Queequeg, but the biggest is the almost physical one set

in motion through Queequeg's non-Christian appearance and Ishmael's non-literal language. Ishmael's rather secular oration, having elicited Peleg's appreciation ("I never heard a better sermon"), interests the latter in a verbal confirmation of the natural hunting abilities that Queequeg's appearance, now sufficiently mythologized, perhaps bring to mind. But "without a word" Queequeg sees what Peleg *really* wants, which indeed was what was being asked after in regards to his "papers" and what was the ground of Ishmael's non-literal response in the first place. Queequeg demonstrates his physical skill as a harpooneer by picking out a mark – "small drop tar" – and hitting it; but the *meaning* of this demonstration, and hence of this skill, is secured by the optative mode that it realizes, the "spose" that renders the "whale eye" visible in the mark and the whale's capture thinkable in his act. Queequeg's act ties together language and object into a promise, a future visible now in the imagination. His "spose" is a kind of metaphor, authorizing a conceptual linkage through language's capacity to bring to light a material resemblance, one that, here in the shape of the tar drop, puts us in mind not only of the whale but its value, as, like tar, a versatile marine commodity. This metaphor in turn authorizes a further figuration: the tar drop's natural resemblance to the absent object offers a happy target on which the two levels of Queequeg's performance of intention, verbal and physical, can converge. The act of taking possession, an arbitrary metonymy of value – of substitution by fiat and linkage by contiguity – can be imagined naturally; the desires in play (Queequeg's and Peleg's) and the prospective world they imagine (Queequeg included as an essential part of a successful venture) are as if anchored in the tar spot that in Queequeg's act is at once pinpointed exactly, struck "out of sight," and imaginatively transformed.

What Queequeg has made visible is the figurative force that, in linking – hypothetically – the whale to the whaling vessel links vessel with church and church with world; the force that, looked for in Queequeg’s “papers,” become visible in their absence, as their true reference. “Without saying a word,” this imaginative link is visible in Queequeg’s *way* of conducting himself; yet what we see is precisely the foundation, the reference, for the kind of language to which they all aspire. According to Ishmael, the language represented here is only “some such way” of speaking, or rather “crying out,” yet Queequeg’s action *is* the “way” of speaking that renders exactly this kind of speech efficacious, thus possible.

This is what the vessel needs, and Peleg is so excited by this prospect that he himself, carried away in a figurative flurry, almost loses his own object. Substituting “Quohog,” the provincially New England name for a kind of clam,<sup>41</sup> for Queequeg, he is then further led astray into “Hedgehog.” The metonymic force which Queequeg makes at once visible and effective moves right through Peleg into the sounds of the words that secure such links, moving metonymy into assonance, the quasi-material resemblance of sounds (“que” with “quo”); from here, by way of a further metonymic link between morphemes (“hog,” though the link is in fact merely by homophony), it re-enters, as if in an accident of language, a metonymy of concepts, linking one small animal with another and returning, sort of, to the idea of something that wields or is marked by a sharp lance. Unmooring “Queequeg” from reference to the person, Peleg follows him from the resemblance of words to resemblance of referents. What the scene circles around, as if in a game, is the simultaneous threat of losing the letter and thus missing that at which it

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<sup>41</sup> And thus, etymologically Amerindian. Oxford English Dictionary, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., s.v. “quahog.”

aims, and the knowledge that what is wanted is precisely this ability to achieve one's ends by a careful misdirection, a risky going outside of oneself that promises a productive return by giving up on its guarantee. To dart the lance or stake oneself on a metaphor is to run a risk, but Queequeg's natural "way" of talking and doing, figuring and whaling, figures an image of their mutual assurance, a "joint-stock world" in which "we cannibals must help these Christians," as Queequeg earlier "seemed to say to himself" (64). It is this image that holds together the comedy and danger, pleasure and historical richness that leak out of this scene; the promise of their reconciliation in an explicit, public form – the capture of the whale, its re-presentation as value – is what brings Peleg, in an optative mood, so far out of himself and towards the ship's "papers," the joint-stock enterprise of which the voyage will be the expression.

Rushing, out of his figurative flurry, to produce the contract, Peleg comes full circle: "the ship's papers," federating the whalers in their common purpose, with which "Quohog" is presented, stand at the end of a somewhat eccentric but still recognizable path to God's "papers," never presented, where the cannibal's Christianity secures that of the Christian's in a universal fellowship toward the good. Queequeg cannot write his name, so he is asked to "make [his] mark." Upon this request, Queequeg "looked no ways abashed; but taking the offered pen, copied upon the paper, in the proper place, an exact counterpart of a queer round figure which was tattooed upon his arm" (85). The contract is sealed with this "exact counterpart" of something that is, visibly, *part* of Queequeg's body; rather than an arbitrary "sign" that merely points to its referent but does not touch it, this mark exists at once "in" Queequeg's body and "in" the contract; his mark

simultaneously *is* him and *enacts* the contract, the link between himself and the ship (and thus between the ship and the whale).

The “signing” of the contract is the telos of this tableau of figuration, and of the novel’s inaugural representation of whaling, what gets the narrative, finally, off the ground and out to sea. As a figure for whaling and writing – and for the value to which they both aspire – Queequeg’s mark is an image, within the text’s world and as a representation of it, of what would be in these papers, God’s and the *Pequod*’s, if we could ever see them. In Queequeg’s speech the tar spot stands for the whale, and in the conceptual space of the vessel’s contract the “mark” stands for Queequeg; and what at once authorizes and is authorized by the optative mode in both of these metonyms, and the metaphoricity that unites them, is *this* literary and historical scene which *we* read, in which Queequeg – cannibal and primitive, dark double and bosom friend, imagined character and historical phenomenon – is equal to “his mark.” When Queequeg “makes his mark” he represents himself, physically; which is to say that his language is the manifestation at once of himself (Queequeg) and of his object (his mark). Queequeg is, as Ishmael says admiringly, “always equal to himself,” which makes him a philosopher, “though no doubt he had never heard there was such a thing as that” (55). The ineluctable arbitrariness, or freedom, which marks these three acts of signification – Queequeg’s selection of *this* tar spot, the *Pequod*’s contract with *this* cannibal, Melville’s depiction of *this* tableau – also constitutes the fundamental, even eternal identity of the objects (whale, Queequeg, *Moby-Dick*) to which they refer. What makes Queequeg equal to himself – a philosopher – is that he does not know *of* such a *thing*, as if it were different from him. What makes his speech primitive is that it does not *refer*, as if it were elsewhere, to any

“thing”; favoring nouns and displaying no knowledge of the copula, he can bring the whale to mind precisely by *calling* it something different from itself (tar spot – what, in a “philosophical” view loosely defined, one might say it is); and thus he can set in motion the capture of Moby Dick, that “ubiquitous” whale (154), by finding him absolutely anywhere.

We should recognize in Queequeg’s figurative act a kind of romantic fable of the origin of language, a fable which for the romantics was also a theory of their own practice. For Friedrich Schlegel, the novel, as opposed to the poem, was the exemplar of modern literary form (and indeed of that newly invented object, “literature”), because while poetry is properly the art of language, the novel is defined primarily by its *lack* of artistic or formal control; a novel is more like a “witty product of nature,” a “romantic book” (“*ein Roman is ein romantisch buch*”), an object whose value lies not in its embodiment of any particular intention, but its achievement of the quality of meaning what it is (*Dialogue on Poetry* 97-8). Prose fiction expresses a naturalized, and secularized, imaginary, a plausible recounting of worldly events that yet discovers a “wit” or a romance, an orientation beyond themselves – a capacity for self-differentiation, or self-valorization – in things as they merely are. The novel is less a crafted artifact than a particular, yet generalizable form through which modern life recognizes, and yet surprises, itself. For romantic theory, the fable of an origin of language is thus also, in fact and in imagination, an origin itself; to write and to read, imagine and discover are one. J.G. Herder, a founder of philology and thus an originator of the romantic project to fuse knowledge of culture with its expressive realization, produced one of the more

influential versions of this fable.<sup>42</sup> In Herder's telling, Adamic man, faced with an animal, "seeks a distinguishing mark."<sup>43</sup> Just as soon as man looks, the mark that he seeks – in Herder's image, a sheep's bleating, its non-signifying cry – "springs out" at him, and it is this simultaneity of activity on the part of the subject and object that results in the "invention" of language. It is by virtue of man's "reflecting" on the sheep's bleat that man utters his name – "the bleating one" – but this is also to say that the sheep, in bleating, literally "has its name on its tongue and introduces itself" (131). Man speaks this name and thereby invents language (invents himself, a speaking animal) while also *realizing* language's object, merging with, by finding, an animate world whose name, "on its tongue," is released into a univocal language and into the world. Primitive language, in this fable, at once captures the origin, the createdness, of an object by *receiving* its true name – from it, as if a sensation – and unleashes the object's potential or frees it by, in saying the name, *being* it. To speak this name is to "unscrew" the mystery of this object; to encounter this being is to say it; and to realize this is to gain the ability to bring the image of such a being to life at will. Herder's idea is that every thing has its right name; the correlate of this idea is a language in which every word is a name (a noun). In the world Herder imagines, every act of speech realizes its object.

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<sup>42</sup> See for example Guillory's account of the foundational role of philology in the German research university as a synthesis of *Naturwissenschaft* and *Geisteswissenschaft*, and its formative role in the emergence of the humanities as a modern scholarly discipline ("Literary study and the modern system of the disciplines" 26-37). See also the discussion of the genealogy of humanistic research in this dissertation's introduction. For Herder's direct influence on romantic concepts of literature, see Abrams, *Mirror and the Lamp*, 78-83. I draw below on Patchen Markell's incisive reading of this scene in *Bound By Recognition* (Princeton University Press, 2003, 47-55).

<sup>43</sup> Johann Gottfried Herder and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Origin of Language*, trans. John H. Moran and Alexander Gode (University of Chicago Press, 1986), 116-7.

Wittgenstein tells a version of this fable, asking his reader to imagine a tribe where the speech act that makes an object appear (for example, a house-builder asking for a slab) is rendered as the name for that object (“slab”). In such a language, the articulation of a goal is identical with its fulfillment (“slab”). We can see in this aspiration to a primitive language, discovered in the world and imagined out of thin air, the romanticism that the Ishmaelite inherits; it is the promise of such a language that motivates the Ishmaelite creative and critical act, a quest for an origin that is also a self-invention.<sup>44</sup> But such a language, were we to find it, would also spell the end of our own sovereignty over our speech; the idea of a language we could *discover*, a primitive language, is also, in Wittgenstein’s terms, “the idea of a language more primitive than ours,” a power constitutively beyond us.<sup>45</sup> This is the worry that drives the Ahabian critic. The primitive power of a language in which a *logos*, stripped of subject and predication, is identical with the reality of its object – in Wittgenstein’s fable, “Slab!” being at once the articulation of a desire and the sign of its achievement – resides in the picturing of this language, as of a thing, or a God. To *imagine* this possibility, which we could also call the possibility of figurative language, is, in other words, to *say* it, and thus to make it real. In this fable, a word’s effectivity – its *poetic*, creative potential – consists in its capacity to produce an image of its referent as powerful *on its own*: beyond the subject who speaks it. On the broadest level, what this fable pictures is an object-world that is self-valorizing, self-re-presenting: as an *oikonomia* and an ecology, a law and a logic of a home or world that welcomes us, that solicits our investment and returns to us value unbidden, beyond compensation, beyond what we could ever be adequate to. But this world of welcome is

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<sup>44</sup> Abrams 78-83, Matthiessen 30.

<sup>45</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* 6.

thereby deeply unsettling, uncanny. To recognize it is to see our own unraveling. The poetic figure is the bearer of a value that, growing beyond us, is the redemption, the end of our existence. The image of this world, in which, as Emerson writes, “the benefit overran the merit on the first day,” is an image of our own absolute collapse in the face of experience, our being in Emerson’s terms “overrun,” not indebted but evacuated, washed into the world (“Experience” 266).

Rather than seeing Ishmaelite aesthetics as opposed to the Ahabian “paranoid style” that imagines a mysterious intelligence behind the object’s alluring visibility, we might see them as common bearers of a language that, precisely *as* a fantasy, holds open the possibility of a common world.<sup>46</sup> In Wittgenstein’s example, the point is not that there is no primitive language, that we “cannot imagine” a tribe, such as the one he describes, who speak only names and for whom the name of a desire is identical with its realization – as if Wittgenstein’s goal were to demystify this merely false picture of a poetic-philosophical speech.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, what his reading of this fable does is imagine it; his point

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<sup>46</sup> See Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style In American Politics* (New York: Knopf, 1964), and Eve Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading” in *Novel Gazing* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997: 1-37).

<sup>47</sup> This is a persistent reading of Wittgenstein, exemplified for example by Kripke. Cavell’s *Claim of Reason* is a powerful rejoinder on which I draw, as is Conant and Diamond’s “On Reading the Tractatus Resolutely” (in *Wittgenstein’s Lasting Significance*, London: Routledge, 2010,) which argues against a distinction between two Wittgensteins, one an analytic, demystifying Fregean (in the *Tractatus*) and the other a quasi-mystic expressivist (in the *Investigations*). I mean my reading of Ahab and Ishmael to parallel this kind of re-reading of Wittgenstein (and indeed of competing analytic and continental strains of philosophy). Kant’s critique of “sensory perfection” and the attendant notion of man as an intuitive intellect (i.e. the possessor of a primitive language) foreshadows this dialectic in aesthetics. Kant, while refusing to credit the immediacy of sensation and thought, takes the “regulative idea” of such a coincidence as the ground for human progress and the form of aesthetic judgment, and it is this tension that, I am suggesting, constitutes *Moby-Dick*. See 28-33 and 268-297 in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.


is that this is what – in philosophizing and living, reflecting on language and using it – we *are* doing. In saying it – in performing explicitly this act of the imagination – he shows the primitive, yet never self-identical, power of language, at once his own (he says it) and that of a world (“Slab!”) that he cannot quite picture. The sense in which we “cannot” imagine such speakers is the sense in which we cannot see God; which is to say that what this “failure” pictures to us is not nothing, not merely the absence of a transcendent referent, but the immanence, the total presentness and the constitutive, resistant “incompleteness,” of reference itself. To pierce through the veil of this philosophical “picture” is not to dissolve the imagination, but to inhabit it; to expose the fantasy of a self-valorizing world is to open the image of such a world to our own investment in it. The fantasies that sustain the Ahabian and the Ishmaelite, their desires for this redemptive object, neither simply grasp the substance of a poetic or literary language nor destroy it, but, in imagining it, enact it. Though critique has inevitably imagined its own value through the identification with the imaginary persons that literature makes visible, this orientation does not – even if it *wants* to – abstract the value of literature (the work of criticism) into the objectivity of a moral concept that grounds human value. While I mean to have shown how Ahab and Ishmael have served critics as a kind of “Yojo,” an idol or “image” (*MD* 35) whose resemblance to a person, to a bearer of language, gives it the superhuman power to authorize human thought, in seeing this we should learn, too, how this God or fetish serves Queequeg, and how he is served by it: at once as a spiritual entity whose unknowable power has a real influence on his destiny, and as simply a piece of wood, an object like any other, to be “bagged again in his pocket...as carelessly as if

he were a sportsman bagging a dead woodcock,” already captured (35).<sup>48</sup> “We cannibals must help these Christians,” Ishmael imagines Queequeg thinking (64); and the difference between them has to do, not with whether one lives on bread alone, but how one predicates the substance through which one lives. What Queequeg, *Moby-Dick*’s quietist philosopher, shows is that poetic language at once forms and transforms the object it seeks, and thus that the history of this primitive and primitivist organicism both fates and unravels its own value. When Queequeg makes his mark, he captures conceptually an object (the whale) by simultaneously imagining its signifier (the tar spot) and making it disappear, at once subsumed into its object as a concept and dissolved into the world, a glistening eye struck “out of sight” (84) and back into the formless ocean. The figurative force of this speech-act, inseparable from the determined historical and political context in which, through Melville’s text, it appears, secures for Queequeg a bigger share of the ship’s profits “than ever was given to a harpooneer out of Nantucket” (85), while unleashing the unpredictable power of the whale on the world that the ship forms. In Melville’s book, the “exact counterpart” of the “queer round figure” on

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<sup>48</sup> This portrayal of primitive reification echoes that of the “taboo,” seemingly the only “rule or standard of conduct by which the commonality were governed in their intercourse with each other,” in the paradise of *Typee*. The narrative alternates between irony about this sacred logic’s “capricious operations,” and the lurking sense that the Taboo Groves are the space in which the sublime horrors of cannibalism hide. This link allegorizes the larger question about whether *Typee* is a paradise or inferno, and what it shows, like the Ahab-Ishmael link in *Moby-Dick*, is that these are not two distinct possibilities but the tension that forms the narrative itself; the pleasure of the narrator’s ironism about the taboo is animated by the threat that it hides, and yet this Ishmaelite irony does not sublimate its horror, but is rather constituted by it: it is what eventually motivates the narrator to leave the island and thus is the diegetic anchor that grounds his presence in the known world and thus *Typee*’s real and yet imaginary existence, Melville’s novel (*Typee* 200, 222).

Queequeg's body that he writes in the ship's papers to secure the deal is described as

Quohog.  
his  mark.

“standing something like this: –”<sup>49</sup>

As Melville's editors note, “the cross printed in the English and American editions in 1851 (and imitated here) is not ‘a queer round figure’ and was probably supplied by the original typesetter in place of the figure in the manuscript,” now lost.<sup>50</sup> The transition from self-identical authority to visible sign and back again – from God to *mundis* to fate – is not seamless, but nothing is *missing*; the “mark” made by Melville's hand means precisely *this* absence, this inscrutability rendered, perhaps accidentally but here not unmeaningfully, by the cross that is absent, so to speak, from Queequeg's soul. Though Queequeg is, in spite of how he goes down in the world's books, always equal to himself (like the God of the philosophers), he thereby opens, *by* determining, the meaning or shape of the marks he makes on the world. The marks on his body that he copies into the world were themselves copied onto him, “a complete theory of the heavens and the earth and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth” inscribed by a “departed prophet and seer,” and so he is at once at home in this form and “not even himself” able to read it, “though his own live heart beat” against it (366-7); it circulates, too, through the “poem,” or “little treatise on eternity,” or “skeleton dimensions” of the whale, that Ishmael has tattooed on his own body (346-7, 293). “So, in productive subjects, grow the chapters”: this productivity, in the figure of the whale, grows from Queequeg and Ishmael's world

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<sup>49</sup> *Moby-Dick, or: The Whale*, (New York: Harper Brothers, 1851), 100.

<sup>50</sup> n. 6 in the Norton edition (85). One might reasonably be skeptical of the implicit assertion that the cross was simply arbitrary chosen by a typesetter and had nothing to do with Melville's “intentions,” stated or otherwise made visible.

to Melville's, and ours. Are these figures or marks then legible to us? What, that is, do they produce, through our reading and in our world?

In conclusion, I want to suggest a way of reading the Melvillean figure by identifying its articulation across two moments in which the images of Ishmael and Ahab – as personalities and ways of encountering the world, as models for valuing literature and the world itself – are memorably sketched. In both of these moments Melville's figures picture the collapse of their own imaginary value into the world they depict; in seeing this we see, too, an opening onto Melville's literary, and economic, fate, which, ill-starred in his own life, grounds a fable for American literary history of the common redemption of these conflicting aspirations for literary and economic, imaginary and worldly value. To return to these figures is to imagine the possibility that this fable might, against itself, come true.

### **This Whaling World**

Ishmael justifies his "habit" of "going to the sea" to cure his aimlessness and find a purpose by emphasizing that he does not go as a passenger, instead preferring the activity of the sailor, because one pays and the other is paid, and "there is all the difference in the world between paying and being paid[;] the act of paying is perhaps the most uncomfortable affliction that the two orchard thieves entailed upon us" (*MD* 21). The legacy of desire, and thus of knowledge, is a debt, a void in the self that must itself be externalized, paid out, as labor for the object that will fill it. To overcome this "affliction," the need for objects and thus the necessity of the "act" of paying, one must, Ishmael suggests, paradoxically take it to the extreme, hiring out one's labor as a commodity and thus imagining the self as a valuable object. To pursue the whale under

the aegis of a purpose beyond your own is to regain your activity, your purpose, returning it to you as the money that you didn't need to have. Though in a sense Ishmael's logic, imagining a property in the self as an absence that calls forth the infinite, productive receptivity of "being paid," is a little parody of Locke, his irony here suggests a different, not merely parodic reception of the worldly logic that he aims to inhabit. The sense of the passage is on display in a figure whose structure we can also recognize as essentially Melville's, and the whale's: "To go as a passenger you must needs have a purse, and a purse is but a rag unless you have something inside it" (*MD* 20).

To get where you're going passively, as a passenger, you need a purse, some container that, as a figure for your work, holds the potency or value that will convert your desire into its object. But, Ishmael reminds us, this purse would itself be "just a rag," just a thing, except that it has "something" inside it, some solidity against which the form-giving force of your desire can reverse its intension and extend into the world. The word "purse" does not, on its own, do the work that it represents; indeed, insofar as it is *just a word* that you say – has nothing inside it, no *thing* behind it– it is empty, *just a rag*: just matter. To be more than a rag, a "purse" needs to *contain* more than itself. This more would be money, say coins; as if the difference between a purse and a rag is that a purse weighs more. The suggestion is that we could just stuff our purses with rags. And this indeed is what the metaphor does: equating a purse with a rag, it imagines a difference between them – "all the difference in the world" – that would consist in the value that fills the ground (purse) out with the figure (rag). But this value is the aesthetic value, the poetic power, inside the speaker who, in combining the two into an image, can transform mere matter (rag) into a figure, passivity into an act. Though the metaphor *means* that a

purse without money inside is worthless, the “sense” that constitutes its work is that money itself is worthless, if you want to go whaling. And though the guarantor of this sense is a power located somewhere inside the I who speaks, the subject that authorizes this equivalence, it is cashed out of its privacy in the unfolding – from purse to rag – of interior value into the material surface that represents him. Turning “purse” inside out, Ishmael tropes his own private, ironic stock of non-fungible value, his whaling and his writing, toward the general value that, in resisting, it authorized.

Something curious has happened. Cashing Ishmael’s metaphor in turns it inside out. Trying to convince the reader (and himself) that there is “all the difference in the world” between paying and being paid – i.e. the difference *of* the world, man’s separation from Edenic myth; between guilt and freedom, damnation and redemption – he stakes this difference in an image that collapses them. Does the whale pay, or must one pay for it? Is experience what we pay out of ourselves (*ex-peri*, a going-outside) or the return on our investment? Does work redeem our fallen condition or seal our fate? Ishmael attempts to correlate these two possibilities by showing us the fruits of his labor: his whaling and his words, an image saturated with the jaunty worldliness of the sailor. If this is what you get when you are paid, when you work, it is precisely *more* than payment: a purse containing untold and non-fungible riches, a private stock of spiritual value. The image is of a happy accident, poverty as a worldly condition that pays you immeasurably more – all the difference in the world – than what a paying passenger could imagine. But it turns out that these spiritual dividends of work, this difference that is supposed to be “paid” to him, is precisely what is in his purse. If for Ishmael the whale itself is what pays, its fated escape (and his “lay” along with it) in the book’s apocalypse

turns his quest inside out, back on his wits and paying out in public the private, unworldly difference his work accrued to purchase the very thing it was supposed to escape. Cast out of his inheritance, he finds himself, as Melville puts it, “forced to [writing] as other men are to sawing wood”:<sup>51</sup> the result is *Moby-Dick*, a purse that, exposed by Ishmael, turns out to be a rag.

When Melville worries, in the now-famous letter on the composition of *Moby-Dick*, written in the privacy of his relation with Hawthorne but destined against itself for literary history, that from the constant demands of writing for pay he “shall at last be worn out and perish, like an old nutmeg-grater, grated to pieces by the constant attrition of the wood, that is, the nutmeg,” he imagines the work of the writer, not as the technical formation of valuable objects by tools (spice by use of the grater, *bon mots* by that of the pencil), but as the linguistic transmutation of the writer into matter that, in being formed, transforms him. Though “banned” from what he feels “most moved to write” because it “will not pay[,]. . . write the *other* way I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches” (*Correspondence* 191). *Moby-Dick* happens in the world, or the “void,” between: a book that is a “botch,” a metaphor that is assonance, a romance fated to find only itself. Writing, a demand imposed from without but formed within, turns wood into nutmeg, experience into an object, payment into paying, and thus “grates” itself, turning the imagination into the (imperfectly) marketable marks of a pencil, an unpalatable mix of wood and writer, nutmeg and grater, material contiguity and representational abstraction. The result is not *just* the wearing out of the writer and the

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<sup>51</sup> Letter to Lemuel Shaw October 6, 1849, 138 in *Correspondence*. Compare also letter to Richard H. Dana Jr. during composition of *Moby-Dick*, May 1, 1850, 160 in *Correspondence*.

imperfection of the object, but their transformation into *Moby-Dick*: an object that led Melville, in his life, into financial debt, literary obscurity, and personal tragedy; that has since served as the ultimate reference point of a culture whose ideological self-exception from the world animates and justifies its domination of it; and that, for these very reasons but not explained by them, continues to fund and to trouble Americanism's accounts of both itself and the world.

The merge in this image of writerly ironic affirmation of literary labor with its readerly critical destruction links Ishmael not only with Melville the American exceptionalist, but, through Melville and the unforgivingly worldly reader that he both projects and inhabits, with Ahab the critic. Starting from different positions, the shock of their convergence is what defines both. Compared to Ishmael, Ahab finds himself in almost an opposite financial relation to the whale; where Ishmael sells the stuff of his labor to pay for his spiritual freedom (receiving, in the fore-castle-deck, the divine "head winds" before they are passed on as "second-hand" "atmosphere" to the captain on the quarterdeck [21]), allowing him to form the whale, his purpose, as he will, Ahab, agent of the ship's speculative investors, is the proleptic owner of the whale's value, and must pay out the contents that, in the form of Ahab's skill, it is already imagined to have. Ishmael must fill up his object with rags to turn it into a (metaphorical) purse, but Ahab is that man who already owns a literal purse (the whale), whose metaphoricity forces him to mortgage it, obliging him to pay its abstract value out of the reality for which, in his own being, he is responsible and whose mere raglike nothingness he must bear in his person.

Ahab, then, tries to reorient himself by changing not his mode of pursuit, but the nature of the thing pursued. In the quarter-deck scene, Ahab reinterprets the contract (the

ship's papers) that binds the crew together by pointing the ship away from the whale as promise of abstract value and towards Moby Dick, the whale as fateful substance. Starbuck, "held to knowledge" and bound to his Puritan and industrious conscience, balks, reminding Ahab of the worldly obligation to follow the letter of the contract, to remain in "the way of the business we follow" (102, 144). Killing Moby Dick will not capture the object that they have agreed to seek: "how many barrels will they vengeance yield thee even if thou gettest it, Captain Ahab? It will not fetch thee much in our Nantucket market" (139). For Starbuck, taking the capture as an end in itself fetishizes the whale, converting it at once into a shadowy idea and an overdetermined substance, thus failing to produce the real, relational and exchangeable value inside the object whose capture and render is their goal. By distinguishing between "the whale" and "Moby Dick," and then converting one into the other, Ahab has perverted the generalizing logic of the whale fishery, essentializing the whale's recalcitrance into a fixed essence rather than a convertible property; following this wayward path, Ahab leads his crew away from the place where their desires might be met in common, their value as whale proprietors jointly recognized. Refusing his own economic interest, he has in fact retreated into a private valuation whose non-fungible object will ruin them all. But Ahab refuses the distinction:

"Nantucket market! Hoot! But come closer, Starbuck; thou requirest a little lower layer. If money's to be the measurer, man, and the accountants have computed their great counting-house the globe, by girdling it with guineas, one to every three parts of an inch; then, let me tell thee, that my vengeance will fetch a great premium *here!*"

"He smites his chest," whispered Stubb, "what's that for? Methinks it rings most vast, but hollow." (139)

If Starbuck, thinking the object he shares with Ahab through the “lay” (share of the profits) or layer (say, the layer of fat that forms the whale’s surface) that defines his part of it, points to the market as the place to which the “way of the business we follow” leads and where this object can be seen in its true light, Ahab points him back to himself, arguing that he “requires” a “little lower layer.” Metaphorizing interpretative (layer) as economic (lay) value and thus converting the one into the other, Ahab, peeling back the economic, diminishes Starbuck’s “lay” while promising – and, *in* his (figurative) words, delivering – more of it, as if figurativeness or valueableness itself is what the interested self can truly live on. And indeed Starbuck’s own words seem to have required this conversion. Hitching his meaning to the business metonymy that intends by “barrel” a unit of value, he leads himself into a curious new figure, one that predicates the metonymy of the hunting business on a metaphor of moral economy. The figurativeness of “barrel” is almost unnoticeable because it refers to an identical one in the figure (money) that, in containing, it imagines; but this double metonymy, barrel and money both referring to their own capacity to convert themselves into something else, opens the way to a revealing grammatical ambiguity that Ahab will pursue. When Starbuck asks Ahab rhetorically “how many barrels” his vengeance will “yield,” to maintain the figurative sense of “value” for “barrel,” as that which gives the lie to a false equation of vengeance and value, he must answer himself that “it” will not fetch much. But if “it” here means vengeance, it must also mean barrels: if barrels contain value, the “not much” that vengeance will “yield” is what the image measures out in barrels. If he “gets” his vengeance, Starbuck reminds him, what he will have is mere oilcasks. The point here isn’t that a risk-adjusted Moby Dick, being only a bit larger, and much harder to capture,

than the average sperm whale, isn't worth "much" in a market imaginary (Ahab, of course, already knows this), and more that this *is* what his vengeance is worth: that it *will* be measured in barrels, even by Ahab. All things, even abstract ones, must ultimately be measured in material terms: this is not only what Starbuck's figure shows, but what it shows *as* figuration, as, in Coleridge's terms, the shining forth of value in the materiality of its worldly sign. It is not only vengeance, but "value" itself that is measured in barrels. But what then are Starbuck's barrels worth – what, indeed, is it that is inside *them*? Simultaneously Ahab's vengeance and the barrels of oil into which it has been wrought, Starbuck's "it" becomes rather uncanny. His attempt to show Ahab the uselessness of his quest in fact ends up with an image that, revealing the constitutive ambiguity of the figurativeness essential to the value to which he would redirect him, make at once plausible and deeply threatening the substitution of vengeance for whale oil, satisfaction for money. The barrels of "it" end up picturing exactly the possibility he aimed to deny: vengeance in a barrel, private satisfaction brought, in the white whale's death, into the visibility that the "market" figures. The picture is of a comic, or tragic, scene at the market-place: opening up the barrels, the various "its" inside – oil, cash, vengeance – vanish into each other, into "not much," a gleeful Ahab and a bankrupt world.

This image is what "requires," for Starbuck, the "lower layer," the true value, that Ahab will give him, as if as a gift, in his speech. If a "barrel," like a purse, can signify, without having to produce, what is *truly* inside it, then "money" (the implicit, necessarily invisible content of Starbuck's barrels) is just a "measure," just an amount of stuff rather than a reason to want it: like a purse is a rag. Ahab's point is that the barrel, as a figure for value, implies some previously unknown thing whose difference from it it makes

available; and that this difference, the thing it figures, is precisely the emptiness inside it. Accepting Starbuck's image of the "globe" as a "counting-house" – of the market as the world, the space in which value becomes visible – Ahab shows him, inside the words that contained his own values, what he pictured, the world inside a barrel: mere matter and pure value, and thus, together, nothing. Ahab shows Starbuck that this nothing is what the latter in fact imagines; in showing him this, he imagines his own self, the position from which he speaks, as a pure difference from this emptiness. While Starbuck points to "our Nantucket market," at once a place and a universal equivalence, a rag and a purse, Ahab points to himself, smiting the "vast, but hollow" circumference of his chest, his private marketplace, as valuable as the world. This ostensive definition, pointing inward as if by striking through, in fact unleashes the value of Ahab's vengeance and his interpretation outward, making explicit, in this ringing silence, the link between exterior visibility and inward value that Starbuck's "layer" had required. The wordless, worthless figurativeness of vengeance in the barrels Starbuck imagines finds its true reference in the emptiness of the barreled chest of its owner, as – and *because of* – the whale whose capture into oilcasks the *Pequod's* joint-stock company had speculatively guaranteed by something it imagines "in" Ahab, captain and hunter, the highest layer. Whatever Ahab might imagine inside this vast but hollow self, what he shows is its identity with the world Starbuck imagines, an identity that does not guarantee value but rather collapses the possibility of such a guarantee, and releases the question, and *its – possible –* value, into the world that, organized in the shape of this object, the share. Pointing inward to the privacy of his hollow chest, he points out, toward the concrete universality of Moby Dick, that natural, inscrutable power that, having "dismasted" him, forms the shape of his own desire, an

object, a “mast” to stand against and to turn second-hand wind into an engine powering him toward his goal. Ahab, “forever Ahab,” in exploding the whale’s false mask, bursts his own “hot heart’s shell,” and in “smiting his chest,” thereby strikes toward the whale that, as Starbuck exclaims, “smote thee,” merging the content of the barrels with the value of his vengeance and into the substance that had undergirded them both, the “great premium” that circulates as “Moby Dick.”

### **The Harpooners of This World**

Ishmael’s metaphors work out from rag to purse, using the figure to gesture toward a new universal measure; Ahab’s move in from barrel to vengeance, harnessing the mysteriousness of capital to redirect the ship. But extension and intension, literary form and diegetic content, get stuck in the whale, who they both work to rename Moby Dick, and who deserves, they would agree, the epithet with which Melville begins *Mardi*, his first attempt to produce a book that, as he rather immodestly describes it to his patron and father-in-law, is “said to fail” (*Correspondence* 139): the whale “whose brain enlightens the world” (*Mardi* 3). Moby Dick is the living or poetic barrel or purse; the value inside of him is at once “brain” and “sperm,” light and enlightenment, tall tale and nationalist force. He is the one being (other than God) that, like a “martyr” or a “misanthrope,” can be seen, or consumed, “by his own light.” (*MD* 326, 240). He is “said to fail,” in other words, said in order to fail: a concrete act of the imagination that, in its misrecognition by the world, shows what it is. He is the ground and the figure of the Melvillean trope, and he lives in the act of language that aims to destroy him; the incessant activity of his capture forms the book in his image.

Ishmael piles up his endless tableau-like chapters (“The Ship,” “The Chart,” “The Spirit-Spout,” “The Sphynx,” etc.), each circumscribing its content into an anecdote whose meaning it simultaneously releases through the metaphoricity of the name that forms it. Ahab, “pushing, and crowding, and jamming” himself (406), harnesses the crew into a fever of activity with his “speechless, placeless power” (382-3). Both, while forming their object, form themselves in the shape of it, as if against their will. Tacking mental lines of pursuit, Ahab’s “wrinkling brow” (361) mimics phrenologically the “mystic,” “knotted” “wrinkled” (274, 422, 408) lines of the whale’s brow concealing the “brain” that pulls him along; Ishmael “despairs” of “explaining myself” (159) as he struggles to explain the whale, frantically proliferating ever-more extravagant and elusive metaphors and analogies, hoping that these convertible units of speech will be enough to redeem the object of his efforts, and himself.

Both Ahab and Ishmael form *Moby Dick* by killing the whale, cutting him into an object that their forms contain and turning him into, in Cameron’s terms, an “emblem of the external world.” These activities, forming the matter of the text, are unthinkable outside of the historical forms that they prodigally, vengefully inherit – digestible images to nourish and pacify readers like “gingerbread” (*Correspondence* 193), and casks of oil to light up the world and the page in Promethean “artificial fire” (*MD* 328). Indeed, such forms power *Moby-Dick*, turning metaphors into cash and the whale into light; and Ahab and Ishmael, at once producing and consuming, forming and interpreting this object find themselves – to their horror and their pleasure – living “by their own light,” under their own power, *parts* of the form that they at once master and are mastered by. Recognizing ourselves as Ahab and Ishmael, we find ourselves at once exposed in their object and

opened into the world it makes. But to unscrew your navel is not to eat your own tail. Speaking this power, like Pip does, “unscrews” these two forms from their objects, and lets them leak into, screw each other. The “enlightenment” which is somehow “inside” the whale, as its “brain,” the inside or truth of modernity’s self-abstraction, leaks out like and as the oil in the Pequod’s hold, releasing its value into the ocean of the text and Ahab’s (“Let it leak! I’m all aleak myself”) into the ship of its narrative (362), into *Moby-Dick*. Aesthetic and economic, spiritual and material, private and public: the text does not “reconcile” these as if in a form that orients them toward some further goal, but discovers them together. *Moby-Dick* does not make, in the poetic power of its words, a new world; dissolving the sideways-on views of literature, and the American enterprise, that has been its context, it dissolves the idea of such a power into *this* world, the one that imagines it.<sup>52</sup> To imaginatively inhabit this world as a reader of *Moby-Dick* is to follow its inhabitants in their business – exhausted, disoriented, and exhilarated – and to find it as one’s own.

Moby Dick shows himself only at the end, 133 chapters into the book, with 30 pages left:

As they neared him, the ocean grew still more smooth; seemed drawing a carpet over its waves; seemed a noon-meadow, so serenely it spread. At length the breathless hunter came so nigh his seemingly unsuspecting prey, that his entire dazzling hump was distinctly visible, sliding along the sea as if an isolated thing,

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<sup>52</sup> For Hannah Arendt, artworks make visible the fact that human acts, by realizing themselves in a common world of objects, have a durability that exceeds any possible intended utility that brought them into being. Thus, “whatever has a shape at all and is seen cannot help being either beautiful, ugly, or something in-between. Everything that is, must appear, and nothing can appear without a shape of its own; hence there is in fact no thing that does not in some way transcend its functional use, and its transcendence, its beauty or ugliness, is identical with appearing publicly and being seen” (*Human Condition* 173). For Arendt this visibility, thematized in art, reveals the insufficiency of fetish concepts like the “invisible hand” or “world spirit,” reified images of a power beyond intentions, dissolving such images’ power into the world of the visible (185).

and continually set in a revolving ring of finest, fleecy, greenish foam. He saw the vast, involved wrinkles of the slightly projecting head beyond. Before it, far out on the soft Turkish-rugged waters, went the glistening white shadow from his broad, milky forehead, a musical rippling playfully accompanying the shade, and behind, the blue waters interchangeably flowed over into the moving valley of his steady wake; and on either hand bright bubbles arose and danced by his side.  
(408)

Emerging into view, the whale merges with his hunters into the pronominal chaos (“he” moving seamlessly between “hunter” and “prey”) and pantheist unity of one of Melville’s most ecstatic images. Predicating, in a characteristically Melvillean way, the beauty and control of language on the eruptive sense of a sublime power that, inspiring it, threatens to destroy it, the whale emerges into representation in a material mimesis of consonance. Sibilants and fricatives gather toward the onomatopoeic bursting of “bright bubbles,” a dancing world brought to speech by the breath of this “grand god” and silent genius (409, 274). Language becomes matter as the awful serpent abstracts into pure beauty, properties into pure names: “A gentle joyousness – a mighty mildness of repose in swiftness” (409). The harmonious predications of transcendental aesthetics – gentleness in passion, calmness in power, rest in movement – deify into pure names, the vital substance of *joyousness*, *mildness*, *swiftness*, each new-named in the whale’s entranced silence.<sup>53</sup> Almost immediately the world of the book collapses in a sublime carnage. Ahab “give[s] up the spear,” “voicelessly...bowstring[ing]” himself as the harpoon, in

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<sup>53</sup> Newton Arvin’s perceptive reading of Melville’s style was the first to emphasize Melville’s nominalization and verbification, pointing out that in *Moby-Dick*, “the distinction between verbs and nouns, substantives and modifier, becomes a half unreal one,” calling this “the prime characteristic of [Melville’s] language” (162-5). We might see this, I am arguing, less as a melting or harmonizing than a tension that, holding the book together, collapses in the process of being read or actualized. Thus, the structure of Melville’s titles, such as *Typee: a peep at Polynesian Life*; *Mardi: or, a voyage thither*; *Moby-Dick: or, the Whale*; *Pierre; or the Ambiguities*, set up a static referential relation between proper name and concept that the book proceeds not to explain or specify but ultimately dissolve.

finally hitting its mark, wraps around his neck; “‘still chasing thee, though tied to thee,’” Ahab fastens himself and disappears into the placeless power of the ocean, and the text (426). The *Pequod* and its crew are swallowed up by the ocean. Ishmael survives: the “coffin life-buoy,” built at Queequeg’s request and inscribed with the tattoos that mark his body, “liberated by reason of its cunning spring” (i.e., the hollow inside it) from the chaotic all-consuming vortex of Moby Dick’s vengeance, keeps him afloat (427). The esemplastic power of the “mark,” with which Queequeg had linked his body to the ship and the ship to the whale, circulates in the body of Ishmael’s text, opening the resistant absence of the literary mark into the sinking world of Melville’s book. Ishmael’s survival, in grasping desperately this now unliving mark, is not the triumph of “Ishmael” as a person or an attitude over “Ahab” or a politics, the final containment of the chaos he has witnessed into Melville’s living book; qua writer, Ishmael drowns into his object too, losing his Moby Dick in Ahab’s, and the crew’s. The “marks” with which the book ends – Queequeg’s coffin and the American flag, nailed, through the wing of a happily passing eagle, into the dismantled mast of the *Pequod* by Tashtego – trope its metaphors at once toward the literary and the national, redeemed and damned, deferring meaning and yet insisting on its monstrous reality. The quote from Job that frames the epilogue – “And I only am escaped alone to tell thee” (set off, importantly, from Ishmael’s narrative proper) – recalls us to the extracts at the beginning, and imagines the narrator not as an authoritative, prophetic voice but as an abject speaker, a transmitter at once of symbolic disaster and a groundless faith in the act of communication.<sup>54</sup> The speaker is not Job but a

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<sup>54</sup> Shoshana Felman (“Paul de Man’s Silence” 720) and Eyal Peretz (*Literature, Disaster, and the Enigma of Power*) argue that *Moby-Dick* exemplifies a Benjaminian mode of “witnessing” the historical disaster of modernity.

messenger, telling Job of the destruction of all of the property that had constituted the visible signs of God's blessing, and hence of his (Job's) world. This testimony does not give us any special object, is not "itself" Moby Dick; to read this book is to encounter neither a new bible, a visible word from above whose solidity can orient us, nor simply the impossibility of such signs, but their predication on the mundane, uncanny worldliness that imagines them. The poetic act that transforms the idea of the whale into Moby Dick and into *Moby-Dick*, combining subject and object into one name, releases the power of words and world into one another. Melville, fixed to his desk on the Isle of the Manhattoes, circumscribes his world under power of the whale, an image of the imagination and of American history that does not transcend or encompass the human world but, beautiful and monstrous, invites and forces us to form it.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THESE THINGS ARE IN THE FUTURE: POETIC INTENTION AND COSMIC EFFECT FROM *EUREKA* TO THE ANTHROPOCENE

For this shall never be proved, that the things that are not  
are; and do thou restrain thy thought from this way of inquiry.  
Nor let habit force thee to cast a wandering eye upon this  
devious track, or to turn thither thy resounding ear or thy  
tongue; but do thou judge the subtle refutation of their  
discourse uttered by me.

-Poem of Parmenides

In 1848, Edgar Allan Poe published his last major work, *Eureka: A Prose Poem*. Poe seemed to regard it as the summation and completion of his work, and his life: though his projected run of 50,000 copies went unrealized,<sup>1</sup> and the 500 copies that were printed received little attention,<sup>2</sup> he could still write, a year later and three months before his death, to his mother-in-law: “it *is* no use to reason with me *now*; I must die. I have no desire to live since I have done ‘Eureka.’ I could accomplish nothing more.”<sup>3</sup> Fittingly, *Eureka* is about, as Poe writes “with humility really unassumed – [...] with a sentiment even of awe,” nothing less than “the most solemn – the most comprehensive – the most difficult – the most august” of all conceivable subjects. “I design to speak,” he continues in the work’s third paragraph, “of the *Physical, Metaphysical and Mathematical – of the*

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<sup>1</sup> George P Putnam, “Leaves from a Publisher’s Letter-Book,” *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine of American Literature, Science and Art* Oct. 1869, 471.

<sup>2</sup> See Burton Pollin, “Contemporary Reviews of *Eureka: A Checklist*.” *Poe as Literary Cosmologer: Studies on Eureka: A Symposium*, ed. Richard Benton (Hartford: Transcendental Books, 1975), 26–30.

<sup>3</sup> Edgar Allan Poe to Mrs. Maria Clemm — July 7, 1849 (LTR-323). Collected at <http://www.eapoe.org/works/letters/p4907070.htm>. All italics in text are Poe’s, unless noted.

*Material and Spiritual Universe: - of its Essence, its Origin, its Creation, its Present Condition and its Destiny.*”<sup>4</sup>

It is no wonder Poe felt exhausted by *Eureka*; not just its content, but its style is weighty matter. The text engages closely, even tediously, with the most advanced science of its day. It has careful recountings of, and attempts to contribute to, Newtonian and Laplacian cosmology. Most of its 143 pages consists of a closely reasoned, speculative account of celestial mechanics, and its feel is dense, abstract, and unrelentingly discursive. A typical sentence looks like this:

To conclude this branch of the subject: – I am fully warranted in announcing that *the Law which we have been in the habit of calling Gravity exists on account of Matter's having been radiated, at its origin, atomically, into a limited ("Limited sphere" – A sphere is necessarily limited. I prefer tautology to a chance of misconception.) sphere of Space, from one, individual, unconditional, irrelative, and absolute Particle Proper, by the sole process in which it was possible to satisfy, at the same time, the two conditions, radiation, and equable distribution throughout the sphere – that is to say, by a force varying in direct proportion with the squares of the distances between the radiated atoms, respectively, and the Particular centre of Radiation (E 51-2).*

Poe’s account – moving from a metaphysical demonstration of the origin of matter, through a deduction of celestial mechanics, to an induction of the final return to unity and “*Inevitable Annihilation*” of all things (E 7) – is exhaustive and, indeed, a plausible interpretation of the cosmological science of his time.<sup>5</sup> But his ambition is not limited to

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<sup>44</sup> *Eureka*, eds. Stuart Levine and Susan Fleming Levine (University of Illinois Press, 2004), 7. Subsequent references in text are given by *E* followed by page number.

<sup>5</sup> The question of the validity and value of Poe’s science has been a recurrent topic of interest, with many Poe fans making claims for Poe’s discovery of the Big Bang and of special relativity (see Levine’s introduction to *Eureka* [xi-xxxiv] for a summary and evaluation of some of these claims as well as an evaluation of Poe’s familiarity with the science of his day). As I will suggest, the parallels enabling such claims are not irrelevant, but their value does not depend on their falsifiability. The relation Poe takes up with truth in its scientific form is more complex than such interest points towards.

scientific accuracy. He stops frequently, asking us to admire the beauty of the cosmos as he's described it, and makes liberal use of the mathematical sublime (E 80-8). But more fundamentally, Poe claims that the work of *Eureka* is essentially aesthetic. Previous cosmologies, like Alexander von Humboldt's, have only disclosed "the universality of material relation," the "law of *each* portion of the merely physical universe, as this law is related to the laws of *every other* portion of this merely physical universe" (E 8). But Poe will give us not only an accretion of mechanistic laws, but an "*individual* impression." He has, he says, structured his text so as to give us the best "view" or "prospect" (E 8) of the Universe; he wants us to feel the "effect" of this "individual impression" of it (E 7). If the work is successful, he says, it will communicate to us not merely a series of scientific truths, but "the poetical essence of the Universe" (E 97), using aesthetics to leap beyond physics into metaphysics, indeed into "the Heart Divine" (E 103). And it is not merely that, through rigid scientific reasoning, we should eventually arrive at an indescribably beautiful view of our object, as if on a long, boring drive to a scenic overlook. The text *itself*, Poe suggests – his words, the form of his discourse – should affect us aesthetically. In grasping his cosmology as a poem, we will grasp his poem as a cosmos. By the end of *Eureka*, we are to *feel* the cosmos as the "throbbings of the Heart Divine" by recognizing it as "our own," by experiencing the form of the cosmos in and as the perfection of Poe's plot. The isomorphism of cosmic with poetic form reveals the secrets of the universe not simply by describing, but by *being* it, by embodying its essence. But grasping this isomorphism requires a traversal. *Eureka* is subtitled "A Prose Poem," and in the preface, he addresses the work worriedly to those "few" who can receive "this Book of Truths, not in its character of Truth-Teller, but for the Beauty that abounds in its Truth; constituting it

true,” instructing us to judge *Eureka* as “a poem only...after I am dead.” We, somehow, are required to enact this ultimate unity.

Can we now, 150 years later, effect the necessary synthesis, and find the “beauty” in Poe’s “truths”? What would impel us to make the effort? It is not easy, as the brief summary above suggests, to be the kind of reader that Poe asks for. This is not any kind of poem that we can recognize. And as the timeliness of Poe’s scientific claims fades, they no longer give us a new conceptual picture of the universe; the technicity in Poe’s language now comes to the fore in all its rigidity. The problem becomes worse when we look at Poe’s carefully worked out, exacting criteria for poetry: *Eureka* is not short, not metrically structured, and contains no ladies, crimes, supernatural forces, or mysteries.<sup>6</sup> Rather, it is long, discursive, abstract, and, most damningly, provides a mostly mechanistic, deductive account of the lawlike behavior of everything it describes, instead of showing the organic interconnection that is the mark of good poetic form (*E* 62-3, *PC* 163-4). So Poe’s aim – seemingly, to heal this rift not merely by staking his claim on one side or the other, but by achieving poetic beauty and cosmological truth at one and the same time – appears hopelessly lost. Though Poe claims that his work is “a poem only,” its words, now more than ever, are undeniably, indeed insistently, prosaic. Poe can only imagine a reconciliation from a time when he has “no desire to live,” from death, where his work will finally be a “poem”; to be the readers he asks for, we ourselves, it seems, would need to inhabit the spectral realm he projects in his death.

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<sup>6</sup> “The Philosophy of Composition,” *Graham’s Magazine* (Apr. 1846). Subsequent citations in text as *PC*. “The Poetic Principle,” *The Works of the Late Edgar Allan Poe*, Vol. 3. (1850).

In what follows, I will try to suggest why, not in spite but because of this difficulty, we ought now to take seriously Poe's claims: about the vital necessity of thinking the relation between poetry and cosmos, and about the strange power that his words might have to effect such a unity in a future, our present, that he can only describe as the time "after I am dead," when the desire for life has ended. Such claims resonate first with a sense, powerful in both Poe's time and ours, that a technical rationality has effected a split, embodied in the distinction between "poetry" and "truth," between the human and the natural, and indeed *within* both the human and the natural, and that such a split is bad for both. Romanticism in Poe's time, and recent "new materialist" readings informed by discourse on the current climate crisis, both work to articulate a form or order beyond conceptual structure, a vital principle of natural and human creativity and life that might overcome the human/nature split, reorienting both towards a renewed harmony. Here, Poe's insistence that this reconciliation is of vital importance – literally, a matter of life and death – gains a further resonance, foreshadowing the political urgency with which such questions have been taken up recently, and reminding us of the urgency these questions had for nineteenth century Romanticism. Social scientific discourse on climate change, which tries to think the way in which human rational activity has become enmeshed in the very fabric of nature, has given new energy to debates in the humanities over the autonomy or complicity of aesthetic form in relation to ideological structure.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See for example Jane Bennet's *The Enchantment of Modern Life*; Pheng Cheah, "What Is a World? On World Literature as World-Making Activity," *Daedalus* 137.3 (2008); Lawrence Buell, "Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends," *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 19.2 (2011); Bruno Latour, "Waiting for Gaia: Composing the Common World through Art and Politics," French Institute, London, 2011; William Connolly, *The Fragility of Things: Self-Organizing Processes, Neoliberal Fantasies, and Democratic Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

The importance of climate change for recent thinking is given an influential formulation by Dipesh Chakrabarty. The specter of climate change, he argues, “saturates our sense of the present.” Because the empirical predictions of climate science force us to picture “a future without us” in which the human is absent from nature, we experience the present as a site of radical disruption. History grounds itself in an experience of the present as a continuity of human and nature from past through future; but now, “our historical sense of the present...has become deeply destructive of our general sense of history.”<sup>8</sup>

Experiencing the present means predicting a future cut off from this continuity, and opens us onto an experience of this continuity itself as leading to a collapse, a self-destruction of the historical and thus, of the nexus of thinking and nature that it supported. The way in which thinking has seeped into the world, creating a new geological era (“the Anthropocene”), reveals a kind of end-game for our current historical logic. For critics such as Timothy Morton, John Tresch, and Ian Baucom, the logic of aesthetics offers an alternative: if organic form can link aesthetics with cosmology and ecology, then literary works might really help to change the way human thinking determines the world it inhabits, and thus orient us away from the self-destructive teleology in which we find ourselves.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35.2 (2009), 197-8.

<sup>9</sup> Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); John Tresch, “Cosmologies Materialized: History of Science and History of Ideas,” *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Ian Baucom, “The Human Shore: Postcolonial Studies in an Age of Natural Science,” *History of the Present* 2.1 (2012).

This is the hope that grounds recent “new materialist” interest in nineteenth century cosmologies like *Eureka* and Humboldt’s *Cosmos*.<sup>10</sup> By thinking through the isomorphism of poem and cosmos, we might, it is suggested, arrive at an expanded form of thought, attentive to aesthetic resonances and natural purposes, that could in turn imagine a world different than the disharmonious universe our technical human reason has, inadvertently, constructed. And if we could see this reconciliation in a reconstructed nineteenth century discourse, the historical trajectory of modernization might become a scene of possibility and freedom rather than determinism and alienation. As John Tresch, an influential advocate of this reconstructed monism, suggests, instead of “reading this product of the early American nation [Poe] as a morbid prophet of industrial modernity, railing against the prisons of reason and its machines,” we might, “on closer inspection – or through the lenses of another era – see in Poe’s works a vision of science and technology as tools for artistic adaptation to a complex, engrossing, yet modifiable universe.”<sup>11</sup> Our pressing, historical need for a non-dualistic thinking gives us the energy to open up a new Poe, as a resource for our own era.

Such readings are on to something: *Eureka* is, as they suggest, aimed right at the heart of a complex of questions and desires that determine our twenty-first century

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<sup>10</sup> Recent attention to *Eureka* along these lines include John Tresch, “Estrangement of Vision - Edgar Allan Poe’s Optics,” *Observing Nature - Representing Experience, The Osmotic Dynamics of Romanticism, 1800-1850* (Berlin: Reimar Verlag, 2007), and Matthew A. Taylor, *Universes without Us: Posthuman Cosmologies in American Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); writings on Humboldt include John Tresch, *The Romantic Machine* (University of Chicago Press, 2012) and Laura Dassow Walls, *The Passage to Cosmos: Alexander von Humboldt and the Shaping of America*, (University of Chicago Press, 2009). See discussion below.

<sup>11</sup> Tresch, “Estrangement of Vision,” 157.

present. But Poe does not offer the kind of solution that such accounts want. Such accounts depend on the intuition that both aesthetics and cosmos are fundamentally oriented towards a spontaneous harmony, and if we could only follow this intuition, and thus *think* it, we might finally see the poem and the world aright, and thereby reorient ourselves and the world for the better. This is precisely the thought that Poe dissolves. It depends on getting ourselves into a position where we can see the beauty of the cosmos through the beauty of the poem. But in *Eureka*, the strangeness, the *failure* of the poem and the cosmos to provide such an orientation is what constitutes their identity. Though harmony (a book of truths constituted true in its beauty) is the telos of his question, to follow its trajectory is to find the question transformed, the telos annihilated. Rather than *resolving* the negativity that I have suggested is the difficulty of *Eureka*, Poe asks us to, somehow, inhabit it. So to think the isomorphism of poem and cosmos, to be the readers Poe requires, reconciling poem and truth, self and cosmos, we would need to do more than simply follow an intuitive thinking available in his time, or use him to invent one in our own. Poe enacts a realm in which his moment and ours can be felt together, not as harmonious vitality but as an uncannily persistent death. If Poe is a “tool” for “adaptation,” his use is, in fact, decidedly “morbid.”<sup>12</sup>

My hope is to show that this does not entail that we should abandon attempts to think nature and aesthetics together, or that such attempts merely repeat the logic of

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<sup>12</sup> I draw here and throughout on Matthew Taylor’s *Universes Without Us* and Timothy Morton’s *The Ecological Thought* and *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), Joan Dayan’s *Fables of Mind: An Inquiry into Poe’s Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), and Candace Vogler’s “Much of Madness and More of Sin: Compassion, for Ligeia,” in *Compassion*, ed. Lauren Berlant (New York; London: Routledge, 2004), 35-40; and “The Moral of the Story.”

technicity and thus do not have critical purchase and political value. Poe is not simply a fatalist or a nihilist (and certainly not a hard-headed mechanical empiricist); the value of thinking incoherence is not simply to prepare ourselves for the end. Poe dedicated his life to making poetry have what he calls “effects,” and he feels, in having written *Eureka*, that he has accomplished something profoundly valuable, that his life has arrived at its “end” in more than one sense. By following the process, in Poe’s aesthetic theory and cosmology, through which Poe enacts the unity in collapse of poem and cosmos, I will try to make present the possibility that Poe’s text holds out: to feel our identity with the external world as a true opening onto difference that cannot be predicted.<sup>13</sup>

I will track this process in four stages. I begin with a close reading of *Eureka*’s opening section, where Poe draws the boundaries of the cosmos by giving an account of his methodology. The self-limiting work of the imagination brings into view the dynamic shape of the cosmos, which in turn suggests the form for *Eureka*. This initial framework allows us to reopen the question of the value cosmology might have as an account of human imbrication in nature. Building off of Poe’s isomorphism of cosmos and imagination, the second section gives an expanded account of recent discourse on “the anthropocene” in the social sciences and the humanities, deepening the philosophical background of Poe’s isomorphism while putting pressure on recent interpretations of his work. This conjunction shows how the recent “new materialist” attempts at a reconciled, holistic account of human action in nature rely implicitly on a progressive temporal self-overcoming grounded in “the aesthetic.” With the demands of Poe’s text in mind, we can

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<sup>13</sup> Timothy Morton, “Romantic Disaster Ecology: Blake, Shelley, Wordsworth,” *Romantic Circles* Romanticism and Disaster (2012), <http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/disaster/HTML/praxis.2012.morton.html>.

see that such discourse is not adequate to its own requirements: it does not arrive at the break with technical logic that it implicitly requires. This inadequacy motivates, in the third section, a closer reading of Poe's theory of aesthetic effect in his "Philosophy of Composition." Comparing the latter text to *Eureka*, we see how, for Poe, the organic form linking cosmos and poem points, in the end, towards negation, not beneficent self-organization. Organic form is not the "solution," but rather the *question* to be inhabited. Poe thus opens us onto a different aesthetics and a different cosmology than that implicit in "new materialist" accounts of the anthropocene. The "effect" that poetry enacts, a felt identity with and imbrication in the cosmos, does not secure an infinitely progressive teleology of harmonious self-modification, but an instantaneous collapse. The end of the chapter will open out to a view of the place of aesthetic and cosmic collapse in Poe's work more broadly, to suggest how Poe might open us to a different sense of the power of the cosmological poem.

### **The Merest of Words**

Poe begins his "prose poem" with a worry about its method. Acknowledging the difficulty of his subject, he wonders: "what terms shall I find" that could serve "for the mere enunciation of my theme?" (*E* 7). Such a theme – the "*Physical, Metaphysical and Mathematical – [...] the Material and Spiritual Universe*" – cannot, in fact, be enunciated, in the sense of encompassed satisfactorily by words. No conceptual apparatus could ever be adequate to it. What one must do instead, Poe says, is to "suggest" a "ruling idea," an idea which the text will continually "illustrate" (*E* 7)

What we need, to illustrate and thus realize this idea, is what Poe calls "an individual impression" of the Universe. (*E* 7) Poe suggests what he calls "a mental

gyration on the heel.” Standing on top of a mountain, surveying the inexhaustible wonders of the natural world, we tend to become absorbed in the “*extent* and *diversity* of the scene,” a kind of endless, accretive cataloguing; to “comprehend the panorama in the sublimity of its *oneness*,” (E 7) we must instead disorient ourselves, affecting our visual field with “so rapid a revolution of all things about the central point of sight” that some one ruling feeling, abstracted from all “merely physical” data, emerges as the correlate of the “uniqueness of the prospect” (E 8). Poe proposes in *Eureka* the “mental” equivalent of such a “gyration of the heel,” as if indeed taking the observations and theories of the scientists he engages (Humboldt, Kepler, Newton, Laplace), as part of the content that, abstracted into a “suggestive” ruling “idea,” will appear as an “impression,” as *effect*.

Why do we need an “*individual*” impression, a “*unique*” prospect? Poe does not think this is a matter of preference or taste, but of necessity. The “ruling idea which...I shall be continually endeavoring to suggest” as the principle of the universe is precisely “about” this uniqueness: “*In the Original Unity of the First Thing lies the Secondary Cause of All Things, with the Germ of their Inevitable Annihilation*,” Poe asserts (E 7). So “uniqueness,” singularity, must be the origin, and the end, of the diverse set of empirical facts (“All Things”) to be explained. To grasp the multiplicity of the universe, we must first grasp its singularity. And yet, as suggested both by Poe’s initial worry about his subject’s excessiveness to “mere enunciation,” and by his subsequent analogical description of his method as a “mental gyration on the heel” amidst empirical diversity, this unity somehow derives from a fundamentally primitive, irreducible multiplicity. The “uniqueness” of the *impression* of the universe comes out of the confusion of all its

identifiable empirical features; the “unity” governing the “idea” of it is a response to the impossibility of its “mere enunciation.”

This correlation-in-multiplicity is not exactly a virtuous circle. The mountain from which Poe’s Humboldtian figure contemplates empirical diversity is Mt. Aetna, Europe’s largest and most notoriously active volcano. It is perhaps unsurprising that “on the summit of Aetna, *no* man has thought of whirling on his heel” (*E* 7); Poe’s suggestion that we attempt the “mental” equivalent is in equal parts ridiculous and scary, a subtle but caustic parody of the aestheticizing cosmologist lost in abstraction while sinking into molten lava, and a rather dark suggestion that we complete the circle and *be* that “*no* man,” and so *feel*, thus *think*, from the fiery void.

Poe’s ruling idea comes, as it were, out of this nothingness, or more precisely, out of the failure to really think it. The “mental gyration of the heel” in contemplating knowledge of the universe, the abstraction of all merely contingent observation, leads him to begin with “that merest of words, ‘Infinity’” (*E* 17). This is not out of line with the orthodoxy of Poe’s time, which generally understood the universe to be an infinite space governed by mechanical rules, set in motion by a watchmaker God.<sup>14</sup> Thus to begin with this, the merest of words, would be to begin where God began, enacting God’s cosmogony in the poetic enunciation. But Poe finds right away that the word leads nowhere. The relevant and primitive sense of “infinity” is infinity of space, of the field in which created matter occurs. Consensus, Poe says, suggests that the idea of the infinity of space is ““admitted on account of the greater difficulty which attends the conception of a

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<sup>14</sup> Alexandre Koyre, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1968).

limit” (E 18). Poe argues that what such claims really boil down to is that “the mind admits the idea of limitless, through the greater *impossibility* of entertaining that of limited space.” As in Kant’s “Antinomy of Pure Reason,” both a limitation to space, and its infinitude, can be shown to be impossible to conceive.<sup>15</sup> But something is either impossible or possible; there are no gradations of possibility, (E 13-4) and so the distinction is useless: “the choice is *not* made between two difficulties; – it is merely *fancied* to be made between two impossibilities.” But the problem runs even deeper. If we try to think about the origin of the universe, we have the converse failure.

“The mind is impelled,” say the theologians and others, “to admit a *First Cause*, by the superior difficulty it experiences in conceiving cause beyond cause without end.” And what is a First Cause? An ultimate termination of causes. And what is an ultimate termination of causes? Finitude – the Finite (E 19)

Again the antinomy: either the Humean thought of infinite causal regress is a priori impossible, or it is a priori possible; both its possibility and its impossibility can be deduced; thus we cannot say either that there is or that there is not a first cause, a singular divine act at the origin of the universe.<sup>16</sup> Thus our ordinary conceptions of both the finitude of the original divine act, and the infinitude of the created universe, which are supposed to follow from each other and give meaning to a finite word like infinity, in fact

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<sup>15</sup> See section V of “The Antinomy of Pure Reason” in *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 508-510. Poe does not quote Kant here, and indeed makes fun of him elsewhere, but as I hope to show in this essay, the relationship is more complex than one of identity or disagreement. Glen Omans has a good overview in “‘Intellect, Taste, and the Moral Sense’: Poe’s Debt to Immanuel Kant,” *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1980). Poe is engaged with the Kantian problematic of the mind-world correlation, and his work could be seen as an attempt at a transformation of it. See Stanley Cavell’s “Being Odd, Getting Even (Descartes, Emerson, Poe)” (105-149 in *In Quest of the Ordinary*); see also discussion of Cavell below.

<sup>16</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 508-510.

amount to an “identical nothing,” and we have made no progress in understanding the idea of creation, the reality of the created, or the mode of their relation.

Poe goes through the skeptical demonstration not to “contend for the absolute impossibility of *that* which we attempt to convey in the word ‘Infinity,’” but merely to show the inadequacy of “any such blundering ratiocination as that which is ordinarily employed.” (*E* 19) Poe shows us how we don’t, in fact, have a grasp of the concepts that orient our common thinking about the universe. But what’s especially disorienting in this “mental gyration on the heel” (which is indeed an intended confusion, a common trope of Poe’s) is that it seems to dissolve right away the ground that Poe was preparing for his “ruling idea,” which was to be the correlation of the “unity of the first thing” and the secondary, empirical diversity of “all things.” In other words, our first “impression,” spun out from the “merest of words,” is that of the skeptic’s nothingness. How could this orient us towards, “suggest” to us, Poe’s “ruling idea”? How do we arrive at an explanation of all things from nothing?

But maybe we are getting somewhere. There is, Poe suggests, another way of taking the word “infinity.” This merest of words is not, in fact, “the expression of an idea – but of an effort at one. It stands for the possible attempt at an impossible conception.” It is “the representative” of a “*thought of a thought*” (*E* 17-8).<sup>17</sup> The problem with the cosmological arguments for an infinite universe and a finite cause is that they reify words: they take the specificity of a “ruling idea” (origination, unity) as a determinate

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<sup>17</sup> See Poe’s discussion of his attempt to capture these “thoughts of a thought” in the writing process in “Marginalia 150,” *The Brevities*, ed. Burton Pollin (New York: Gordian Press, 1984). Poe’s suggestion there that this is the ground of poetic composition helps to illustrate (though not, exactly, to clarify) the link in his work between the cosmology (and cosmogony) of *Eureka* and the poetics of human composition.

concept (first cause), and the unendingness of a “prospect” or “impression” (the inexhaustible diversity of things in space) as a constitutive principle (infinite space).<sup>18</sup> A thought of the cosmos should be less of a concept and more of a metaphor; not a determination, but a troping, a “directing” of what Poe calls “mental vision toward some given point, in the intellectual firmament, where lies a nebula never to be solved” (*E* 20). The “ruling idea” and the “individual impression” are mutually constitutive precisely because both refuse to “entertain a conception.” *Eureka* will strive to exist within this “thought of a thought” by orienting itself towards this “nebula,” the cosmos, a specular “infinitude” of space and “point” of causality. “It will now be understood that, in using the phrase, ‘Infinity of Space,’ I make no call upon the reader to entertain the impossible conception of an *absolute* infinity.” Such could never be the object of a thought. “I refer simply to the ‘*utmost conceivable expanse*’ of space – a shadowy and fluctuating domain, now shrinking, now swelling, with the vacillating energies of the imagination.” (*E* 21). The cosmos is isomorphic with the imagination: not as an identical limitation, but as a vital, changeable relation. This is the principle that allows us to think the cosmos, and that inaugurates the work of Poe’s writing, of his composition of *Eureka*.<sup>19</sup>

The reciprocal formation of poem and cosmos can now begin. Poe’s initial troping of infinity, his inaugural utterance of “the merest of words,” brings into being his poem, and his cosmos. Beginning with the *human idea* of God – “the Incomprehensible,” i.e. an “effort” at a conception of the impossible “actual” infinite, the “thought of a thought” – Poe argues that this idea points inevitably toward the conclusion that God’s

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<sup>18</sup> See Section VII of “The Antinomy of Pure Reason” in Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 514-20.

<sup>19</sup> “Marginalia,” 150.

original creation was “Matter in its utmost conceivable state of –what? – of *Simplicity*.” From this initial human poetic act, a single, unified actuality comes into view. This “*first thing*” (E 7), the actualization of God’s idea (in other words, of the idea of God), is then “forced,” by God’s volition, into “the abnormal condition of *Many*.” (E 23) God’s actuality, the Universe, is set into motion by God’s will. The original act brings being into existence. Because this act is not the actualization of an “absolute” infinitude (God), but our “thought of a thought” of it (poetic troping, the effort at a notion of God), this first act must be at the same time a self-differentiation. “God” becomes “the Incomprehensible” (E 22), and so the “*One*” becomes, instantly, “the *Many*.” Through our effort at a thought of the infinite, the cosmos comes into view as a finite actualization of self-difference.

The universe, then, exists as a self-dispersion of the one, a vast theater of distinct, interrelating particles. Each particle acts on every other particle: all are animated by their original intention, that is, by their original unity (E 23-5). Gravitation, or “*Attraction*” (E 28), is the principle of matter’s self-relation. Since matter, the original particle, was created as an actualization of God’s infinitude, its actuality as self-dispersion, as the Many – the actuality of our *thought* of infinity – contains a fundamental orientation towards return to unity. This is gravity: matter’s orientation towards unity as an expression of divine actuality.

But why doesn’t everything return immediately to the one? (E 26). This is an important question, since when matter “sink[s] into Unity, it will sink at once into...Nothingness,” “*annihilation*.” (103, 23). The return to unity is the progressive collapse of the world, and so whatever holds matter apart holds the universe together. The

answer should already be clear: the imagination. Because the cosmos exists precisely insofar as we can picture it, and as Poe's Kantian antinomies showed, just as we cannot picture absolute infinitude (call it a "oneness of the Many") we cannot picture an absolute singularity, perfect unity, therefore the cosmos exists, and it exists as multiplicity. Divine actuality is not absolute: we bootstrap up to it in our asymptotic attempts to think it. And this is what prevents the catastrophic immediate return to "absolute oneness" (E 26). This "diffusive principle" has been called electricity, heat, and magnetism, but for Poe it is obvious that we should really call it "vitality, consciousness and *Thought*" (E 28). While the imagination directs itself towards the "infinite" "point" of a "nebula never to be solved," poetic cosmology and the cosmos itself both proceed by way of "thought," of concrete, determinate relation. A "thought of a thought" orients the discourse and inaugurates the cosmos, but what it produces is thoughts, concepts, atoms: relation-in-difference among concrete elements.

If Poe begins his prose poem with a worry over reconciling two incommensurate realms – poetry and science, the desire to speak about the cosmos and the necessarily limited concepts available to him – *Eureka* seems to be making progress. By thinking the difficulties of his discourse and his object together, Poe can trope them toward each other. Rather than asking how limited human thought could ever grasp or represent the infinitude of the cosmos (as intention or actuality), we can reflect on the infinitude of our *desire* for such a representation, which, we can now see, is what grounds this "infinite" in the first place. The imagination can then become an engine for determining its and the cosmos' infinitude in the cosmological poem. Poetic discourse – discourse that proceeds out of a "thought of a thought" – can then become the form, the container, for

determinate, scientific thoughts (words in their mereeness) that are nevertheless oriented, poetically, beyond themselves, just as the cosmos contains and informs dispersed and determinate matter towards an ultimate unity. The act of speaking the merest of words – the articulation of mere thoughts – is imbricated in the cosmic fabric; as the principle of differentiation, it holds the universe together in a changeable, organic unity. The poetic troping of “infinity” into infinity, which Poe enacts, opens out onto a universe determined by change and receptive to finite, intentional human activity. Our whirling about in the void seems to have brought into view a point that, though indefinite, could serve to guide us.

### **New Materialist Cosmology in the Anthropocene**

The picture that Poe draws, in *Eureka*, of a cosmos at once vivified and grasped by human thought in an actual, determinate, changeable nexus of finite perception and conception, seems thus to offer, as Tresch suggests, “tools” for today, by redrawing our picture of thinking in the nineteenth century. Poe’s account of the cosmos departs significantly from the standard picture of the human/nature relation in the nineteenth century. In the standard picture, a modern, industrialized world comes in to being by separating itself into two incommensurable spheres. On the one hand, there are matters of spirit – the inner, intentional content of human experience in religious, political, sentimental and affective life. These are shunted into increasingly restricted cultural forms, such as poetry, literature, and family life. These cultural forms acquire a new intensity and overdetermination, and as their most discursive and reflexive instantiation, literature and aesthetic criticism become the carriers of an increasingly ineffable and rarefied realm of spirit, now understood not as a lived practice but an abstraction. On the

other side of this split are matters of matter: the physical facts of the world, as described in the newly-authoritative discourses of empirical science (“truth”) in the nineteenth century. These become the paradigm for the technical organization of economic and political life, and the investigation and domination of nature. The world of matter becomes deterministic, a series of mechanical happenings, as human agency and thinking – and the divine of which it is (perhaps) a part – are isolated in the increasingly immaterial and inexplicable realms of art. The possibility of intentional action – practical, collective, human agency in the realm of things – becomes increasingly difficult to imagine as word and thing move into different, incommensurable worlds.<sup>20</sup>

But new materialism suggests a different account is possible of the nineteenth century world, this crucial moment in the history of rationality’s actualization. Drawing on writers such as Poe, Thoreau, Emerson, and the British Romantics, as well as scientists such as Humboldt, Goethe, Comte, and Darwin, recent critics suggest that this “two cultures” bifurcation, this split between truth and poetry, has in fact never been as clean as we might think.<sup>21</sup> The stakes, for such critics, are high: if we can see the nineteenth century differently, we could subsequently find resources to respond to the

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<sup>20</sup> See for example C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures* (Cambridge: International Society for Science and Religion, 1969). See Tresch’s thorough account of the way this split has been maintained, theorized, and rethought in intellectual history in “Cosmologies Materialized.” See also his account in *The Romantic Machine*, 1-4.

<sup>21</sup> For Poe, Humboldt, and Comte, see Tresch, “Estrangement of Vision” and *The Romantic Machine*; for Humboldt and American transcendentalism, see Walls, *Passage to Cosmos* and *Seeing New Worlds: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Natural Science* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995); for the British Romantics see Morton, *The Ecological Thought* and “Romantic Disaster Ecology”; for Goethe see Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*; for Darwin, see Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

fact of “the Anthropocene.” The anthropocene is both a material and a theoretical crisis: using technical reason grounded on a categorical dualism, our intentions (energy-intensive industrialization to create a flourishing human habitus) in fact “accidentally” modified the world towards a fundamental inhospitability to the human. The “unconscious” of our dualistic reasoning returned, in climate change, as the repressed of nature, orienting the very success of technical reasoning towards an ultimate failure.<sup>22</sup> So if we could arrive at a thinking that overcomes this dualism, we could both see the world more accurately (since dualistic rationality is revealed as lacking when it cannot think its “negative externalities”), and align ourselves with a more holistic purposiveness, changing the world and ourselves for the better. As with Poe, we begin with the pressure of a dualism that threatens to split us, and precisely this pressure motivates the search for a reconciliation.

According to these critics, we can see a wide swath of nineteenth-century practices –Tresch’s examples include Ampère’s experiments with electricity, the daguerreotype, Poe’s literary works, and Saint-Simon’s politics – as, in Tresch’s terms, “cosmograms.” These are determinate, material, self-organizing processes; neither theory nor thing, but rather “concrete and specific means through which actors presented the order of the cosmos to themselves and to their fellows.”<sup>23</sup> It is not merely that humans use objects to represent a discursive framework: rather, humans and objects (and objects “artificial” and “natural”) combine in concrete, “democratic” assemblages, which, in

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<sup>22</sup> Fabien Locher and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz show that this attempt at a non-dualistic thinking of nature has in fact been ongoing since the eighteenth century, in other words, that it emerges immanently with the “dualism” in question. “Modernity’s Frail Climate: A Climate History of Environmental Reflexivity,” *Critical Inquiry* 38.3 (2012).

<sup>23</sup> Tresch, *The Romantic Machine* 6.

Bruno Latour's phrasing, are "actants," complexly evincing and realizing intention in the world.<sup>24</sup> Like Queequeg – or his mark – actants, in going beyond themselves, are neither subjects nor objects, representations or things, intentions or effects; rather, they are discrete but endlessly relating, forever changing practices.

Here Poe is useful because he helps us see how literary and scientific discourse can be at once the principle of a practice, its representation as intention, and its effect or actuality. Beginning with the problem of nineteenth-century dualistic logic (beauty and truth, poetry and science), Poe, on this account, arrives at a solution through cosmology. The cosmological poem is an exemplary – indeed, one is tempted, against new materialism's "ontological democratism," to say *the most* exemplary – "cosmogram" or assemblage, because it both reflexively theorizes the identity of representation (poem) and thing (cosmos) as changeable organic form, and at the exact same time *enacts* it. Intention and effect, word and thing, are, in the cosmological poem, perfectly immanent. If we could see this, we would see how *everything* is like the cosmological poem; and we might thereby arrive at a new logic beyond the limiting, debilitating one of cause and effect, word and thing, and build thereby a world beyond the "two cultures" of poetry and science, spirit and matter, human and nature.

This is the claim of a prevalent version of new materialism. It is also, as I have been arguing throughout this dissertation, a trope that defines the Americanist canon.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. (Oxford University Press, 2005). See also Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> Claiming to speak out of the strange identity of the material and the ideal – from a place, as Hawthorne described it in the preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, "somewhere

But something curious happens here. Just as we seem to have found a solution to the dualisms of beauty and truth, human and nature with which both Poe and the new materialists began, we start to see an uncanny parallel with the logic that had generated the problem in the first place. The “dualism” which new materialism is supposed to be overcoming seems, if we look at it closely, to be predicated on precisely this overcoming. Chakrabarty’s essay on climate change brings this into relief in his account of the historicism that leads to, and collapses in, the specter of a “future without us.” New materialism wants to think from the present towards a better future, by thinking the imbrication between nature and the human. But as Chakrabarty’s account shows, this imbrication is precisely what has grounded the historicist thinking that has led to our present, a present that now both demands that we imagine a new future, and dissolves our capacity to do so. A closer sense of this historicist logic will show us how new materialism arrives at precisely the orientation it means to leave behind.

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between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other” – is a characteristic move in American romantic literature, and has defined, in Americanist criticism, the attempt to see American aesthetic production as a uniquely critical and spontaneous voice with the capacity to cause historical change, as a natural symbol, “the word made one with the thing,” that might spread out into the world to transform it. *The Scarlet Letter* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), 35. The trope in Americanist criticism stretches from D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, ed. Ezra Greenspan, Lindeth Vasey, and John Worthen (Cambridge University Press, 2003), through “first generation” American studies texts such as Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance* and Richard Poirier’s *A World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature* (Oxford Univ Press, 1966), through second-generation Marxist-inflected approaches such as Bercovitch’s *Rites of Assent*, as well as “New Americanist” critiques such as Donald E. Pease’s “New Americanists,” and recent “aesthetic” critiques of these, such as Samuel Otter’s “An Aesthetics in All Things.”

## The Nature and Aesthetics of Historicism

Chakrabarty argues that historiography (and implicitly, the human sciences generally) grounds itself in a fundamental distinction between two kinds of things that make up the world: objects of natural and of human history. This is the fundamental dualism said to dominate the nineteenth century. Nature “has no ‘inside’”; natural history consists merely of a series of happenings, which can be *explained* in a more or less satisfactory manner. By contrast, human history is a series of actions, of intentions actualized in the world; “the historian’s job is ‘to think himself into [an] action to discern the thought of an agent.’”<sup>26</sup>

So the truth of the scientist is very different from the normative claim of the historian. The scientist does not ask, e.g., for what purpose the earth’s atmosphere contains a certain mixture of gases, but merely seeks to explain how it came to be that way. The historian, conversely, does not simply collect data on, e.g., how certain objects referred to as people caused other objects called steam engines, but asks about the purpose, the intention, of such subjects as it is reflected in such objects, clarifying their reasons and making them available for evaluation, and thus modification. These would seem to be two incommensurable realms: explanation and intention, things and thoughts, whose paths do not cross.<sup>27</sup>

But as Chakrabarty suggests, this distinction, if thought through, collapses, or rather, folds in on itself. Idealism (which is what this is) does not split the world into two halves, one of which we can know and change and the other of which we merely explain.

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<sup>26</sup> Chakrabarty, 202-3. Subsequent citations in text.

<sup>27</sup> Wilfrid Sellars gives an influential formulation of this distinction in *Science and Metaphysics: Variations on Kantian Themes* (New York: Humanities Press, 1968).

Rather it makes this distinction in order to show a relation. The distinction works to justify historiography, in other words, to make possible the record of human events as a subject of normative debate and a mode of intentional, collective action *in the world*. As Kant initially showed, and Hegel and Marx (the two most important antecedents for the methodology Chakrabarty discusses) specified, the objects of the natural sciences cannot be a kind of mere “given” whose immediate impingement on us guarantees the radically external reality of a “Nature” of which it is part.<sup>28</sup> The fact that such givens, the objects of natural science, are received by us at all entails that they display a kind of structure, such that they can be possible objects of our representation. This structure *must* be the same structure as that of thought. Humean association, fortuitous and contingent “patterns,” not only do not justify but fail even to account for the law-likeness of nature that we *do* in fact perceive. There must, then, be an “act,” what Kant calls a synthesis, at the bottom of every perception, scientific no less than moral, on analogy with the intentional actions that are the objects of the human sciences.<sup>29</sup> The natural world *does*, upon reflection, display intentionality, insofar as we recognize that conceptual structures account for its visibility. Consciousness *holds together* representations; thus, in a strong sense, holds together the world. As Chakrabarty puts it, historiography “enfold[s] human history and nature,” both, into a single concept of “purposive human action,” of which historiography – the study of *human* history – has a unique view.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Harvard University Press, 1996). See especially 3-65.

<sup>29</sup> The sense in which such an “act” of synthesis should be described as “intentional” is very much at issue. An interpretation of this question can be usefully described as Cavell’s fundamental project; see specifically 93-100 in *The Senses of Walden*.

<sup>30</sup> Chakrabarty, 203. See also Baucom for a suggestion about how to refigure this “enfolding” in the light of the anthropocene. Though Baucom helps us to see the way the

Does this mean that everything appears transparently to the eye of the historian? Do our words give unmediated access to everything that exists? Not at all. Though nature is inflected by the same structures as discursive, human life (history), neither nature nor history will ever be fully transparent, fully self-identical. This is important to emphasize, because the limitation that blocks immediate, infinite knowledge is – as in Poe – precisely what enables the unified knowledge that we do have, of a natural world imbricated with human thinking. As human language is discursive and finite, human intentions are actualized concretely. Marx expressed this thought as: “men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please.”<sup>31</sup> The fact that the world comes into view by way of a human act, a collective, meaning-making process, does not mean that the world (i.e., that that “act”) is transparent to us. Historicism offers a view of the human-imbricated cosmos that can account for self-difference – in other words, for change. To account for difference is to see the ways in which the form of this act or synthesis changes. Whereas the natural sciences as such can only describe the mechanistic working of laws (which, though they manifest “in” time, do not develop, do not, as laws, come into being and pass away), historicism offers an account – under terms like ideology, zeitgeist, world-view, form of life, episteme, discourse – of the emergence and development of lawlikeness itself, and thus provides for the possibility of its

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new paradigm effected by the anthropocene relates to and modifies historicism, he is insufficiently attentive to the transcendental grounding of historicism and so, like the new materialists, insists too strongly on the newness of this “blending” of “empirical concept[s] from the natural sciences” and “philosophical concept[s] from the humanities,” (9) as if these are were not fundamentally interdependent.

<sup>31</sup> Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 595.

modification.<sup>32</sup> The very fact that human activity, history, is *not* complete, that it emerges fundamentally *as* time, makes it possible as a self-authorizing totality, a world held together in its opacity, and a history not yet written.

But a strange surplus now accrues to the natural object. Methodologically, the historicist emphasizes the *humanness* or conceptual imbrication of the world as ground for the critique and thus transformation of “world-views.” Difference is in the contradiction and incompleteness that can be shown in an ideology, in thought. But this difference or incompleteness, located in historical-discursive structures, in some mysterious way *depends* on the objects of the natural world, *in their thingliness*.<sup>33</sup> It is as though the natural world displays a kind of active inertness, a dumb, lurking presence that charges human activity with the resistance it needs to coerce nature into speech, into visibility. Precisely insofar as objects do *not* depend on the collective act of conceptual holding-together (i.e., in a way that precisely cannot be described), they display such structure’s incompleteness, hence its possibility. Nature, the realm excluded from intentionality and causality in idealism’s opening move, regains its sovereignty precisely by virtue of its being folded back in to the one world that idealism posits. If, as Chakrabarty suggests, quoting Croce’s influential Hegelianism, “all material objects [are]

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<sup>32</sup> The two major forms of this view as they have influenced literary criticism are Marxism and Foucaultian historicism, both of which initially saw their task as purely demystificatory or scientific, though increasingly came to try to think the work of change that their theory must entail. Althusser is a reference point for the Marxist form as it appeared in English-language criticism. “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus,” *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001). Foucault’s earlier work (see e.g. *The Order of Things*) focuses on the descriptive project of getting ideology into view, but his later work (see especially “What Is Enlightenment?” and “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *The Foucault Reader*, New York: Pantheon, 1984) increasingly theorizes what he calls “an aesthetics of existence.”

<sup>33</sup> See Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (2001).

subsumed into human thought,” and thus “no rocks, for example, exist... in themselves[;]...apart from human concern and language, they neither exist nor do not exist, since ‘exist’ is a human concept,” (203) one starts to wonder: what *are* they doing, if neither “existing” or “not-existing”? (This is the sort of question to which Poe is repeatedly drawn.<sup>34</sup>) What is still missing or wrong in our concept of “exist” that allows us to wonder what the rock does when we aren’t looking? (And this is precisely the question that “new materialism” sees itself inhabiting.) Nature, in this picture, appears as an uncanny and mysterious agent, showing us the negative image of our own power; if we could only speak from this mysterious identity, we might reach our goal, reach the end of history in the ends of Nature. Idealism no less than materialism feels the pull of this thought: Kant’s noble blade of grass and Lacan’s enjoying oyster dream together with Bennett’s happy omega-3s and Michel Callon’s canny scallops.<sup>35</sup>

It is here, at this return to nature crucial to the historicist-idealist not less than the new materialist, that the epistemological and ontological project unfolds into the poetic or

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<sup>34</sup> See, for example, tales such as “Berenice,” “How to Write a Blackwood Article,” “Loss of Breath,” “The Man That Was Used Up,” “Mesmeric Revelation” (discussed below), as well as *Eureka*, all of which propose a window onto the secret lives of objects. The fact this question comes up as a kind of joke, “hoax,” or delirium in many of these works (including *Eureka*) should be seen, I will suggest, not as the question’s negation but as its necessary mode of being.

<sup>35</sup> Kant: “For it is quite certain that we can never adequately come to know the organized beings and their internal possibility in accordance with merely mechanical principles of nature, let alone explain them; and indeed this is so certain that we can boldly say that it would be absurd for humans even to make such an attempt or 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; rather, we must absolutely deny this insight to human beings,” *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 270-1; Lacan, *The other side of psychoanalysis* 177; Bennett *Vibrant Matter* 39-52; Michel Callon, “Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of St Brieuc Bay,” *Power, Action and Belief: A New Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986).

aesthetic.<sup>36</sup> It is not a coincidence that Chakrabarty's central figure for the historicist tradition, Benedetto Croce, is best known for his aesthetic theory.<sup>37</sup> If history, the "space of reasons," folds nature, the realm of explanations, into itself only to return to nature as the touchstone of reason's historicity, this third move, the immanent, synthetic grasp of nature and history as together a dynamic whole, is consistently figured as a poetic act, a troping. Neither a dryly moral law of reason, nor a merely animal affection from the environment, the poetic act of naming is, in this account, a receptive/creative speaking of the world's excessiveness to language. *Every* thought, on this account, can and indeed should be seen as fundamentally a "thought of a thought." And every object, in turn, is fundamentally aesthetic.<sup>38</sup> Poetic speech does not presume to speak the unspeakable, but rather speaks wonder at the identity of the incompleteness of language and the

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<sup>36</sup> This teleology is the subject of much discussion about the relation between Idealism and Romanticism. See Pippin, "Avoiding German Idealism." Pippin argues that the third critique is taken up as offering a possible "way out" once one has "entered" the "unavoidable" field of the Kantian project (129-30). See also Foucault's "What is Enlightenment?" where he tries to reconstruct the Enlightenment as "an exit, a way out," through a reading of Kant with Baudelaire; Benjamin ("On the Concept of History" in *Selected writings Vol. 4.*, ed. Michael William Jennings and Howard Eiland, Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2004) and Hayden White (*The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009). For discussion of this question in Americanist criticism, see Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*; Bercovitch, *Rites of Assent*; Michael Denning, "'The Special American Conditions': Marxism and American Studies," *American Quarterly* 38.3 (1986), and Pease, "New Americanists."

<sup>37</sup> See his *The Aesthetic as the Science of Expression and of the Linguistic in General*, trans. Colin Lyas (Cambridge University Press, 1992 [1902]). Gerald Bruns interestingly contrasts Croce's immanentist theory of aesthetic world-making with Poe's dualistic poetic cosmos (in which a poetic, Godlike speech act creates a world fundamentally distinct from it) in "Poetry as Reality: The Orpheus Myth and Its Modern Counterparts," *ELH* 37.2 (1970), 268-71. This contrast is instructive, but it misses how, as I have been suggesting, "dualism" collapses into aesthetic monism, and further falls short in taking Poe as a philosopher, not a poet, reading the theoretical claims embedded in his work as, simply, truth claims rather than as what Poe would call "effects."

<sup>38</sup> This is Sandra Macpherson's gloss on Timothy Morton's new materialism. "A Little Formalism," *ELH* 82, no. 2 (2015), 398.

inexhaustibility of the world. Ideology critique acquires its highest form by “giving voice,” from within, to the feeling of ideology’s incompleteness as something to be overcome, something that thereby *can* be overcome.<sup>39</sup> This history-grounding, paradigmatically human speech replaces God’s cosmos-creating “I am” by redefining the creative speech act as fundamentally incomplete. This speaking of incompleteness is a kind of proleptic synthesis, a spontaneity creating its own futurity, lurching ahead of itself, even out of itself, in time to produce the worldly-mystical excess that is the condition for change.<sup>40</sup> The poetic act opens the future not as more of the same, as empty, homogeneous time, but as a kind of leap out of itself that is yet the condition of the continuity on which time depends.<sup>41</sup> Here we can see how the historicist project Chakrabarty critiques opens out onto the new history he hopes to make possible: the poetic act of world-opening is the making of a fissure in the fabric of the world, an ever-present exit.<sup>42</sup> Focusing on this act is historicist logic’s internal attempt to transcend itself.

The parallel with *Eureka*, and the new materialist interpretation of it, is clear.

Cosmology starts with a worry about dualism and a corresponding inadequacy of word to

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<sup>39</sup> Theodor Adorno, “Lyric Poetry and Society,” *Notes to Literature*, ed. Tiedemann and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 43.

<sup>40</sup> This conception of the out-of-time futurity of the aesthetic is crucial to a certain strain of affect theory. See Brian Massumi on “the missing half-second,” by way of which he explains the concept of “the virtual.” *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Duke University Press Books, 2002), 28-30, and Bennett’s *The Enchantment of Modern Life*.

<sup>41</sup> Benjamin “On the Concept of History.” See also Baucom, “The Human Shore,” 10-1.

<sup>42</sup> Heidegger’s influence on Chakrabarty is suggestive here. See Part II of Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 112-255, especially 237-255. See also Baucom’s response to Chakrabarty in “The Human Shore,” which divides into a theoretical discussion of the relation between the sciences and the humanities and a reading of Coetzee’s novel *The Life And Times of Michael K*.

thing; it proceeds by turning this “inadequacy” or non-identity into the ground of a relation. Historicism begins with an analytic distinction between the discursive or intentional and the material or actual, and a corresponding privilege of the discursive, and reflexively arrives at a claim to their immanence that grounds and gives meaning to progressive change. The inadequacies with which these narratives begin (of word for cosmology and of thing for historicism) resolve into a harmonious engine of difference that allows the finite, inadequate term to open on to an infinite, systemic process of self-adequation. Both start from a sense of incommensurability, and move reflexively to a final vision of poetic troping as a vital force of the human-imbricated world’s immanent capacity for intentional change.

Though it claims an opposite tack, “new materialism” can thus be seen as a development within this historicist trajectory, the sublation and redemption of its antinomies. If omega 3’s and scallops, or books and telescopes, have something to say – and this is the premise of any writing that wants to talk about them – they speak in the language of the poet.

But this parallel between historicism and new materialism does not point toward their mutual success. We need to remember where we began: with Poe’s claim that the poem/cosmos, beauty/truth reconciliation that his work demands can only be something he intends or represents “after I am dead,” and with new materialism’s similar effort to respond to the challenge of the anthropocene, as the specter of our own, somehow self-intended death. The “problem” of dualism or technical reasoning – the historicist problem – comes into view only and exactly when we imagine our own non-existence as its *necessary* end, its consequence: the effect of its intention. And the “solution” of

processural self-overcoming must, by its own lights, itself be immanent to this thought. The leap out of the *mere* technical thought – Poe’s impossible “thought of a thought,” – is precisely a leap *into* an unthinkable death, not organic life. The overcoming of “mere words” and finite, technical reasoning leads not to infinite futural harmony; rather it enacts, “at once,” Poe shows, “*inevitable annihilation*” (E 103, 23). Dualism’s excluded middle, the fissure that modernity opens and that the new materialist wants to speak, is not the realm of life, but of death.

This is the challenge that Chakrabarty shows the anthropocene to pose: to experience our present as a place of possible agency, we must *necessarily* “insert ourselves into a ‘future without us,’” a future in which *experience* as such is impossible (197-8, 220-2). Poetic troping cannot be the solution to the historicist paradox; it cannot be a set of tools or practices or assemblages oriented towards the world’s harmonious self-modification. Historicism’s “self-overcoming” *is* exactly this paradox, made immediate, and actual. Poe does not offer us a “new vitalism,” a way of thinking that tropes the deadly inadequacies of dualism towards a holistic, organic new beginning. The aesthetic “leap,” Poe shows, is a leap *into* the incoherence of our present, not out of it. Poe tries to make it. What kind of experience could this be: what form could it have? And how, finally, could we want it, intend it?

### **From Bad Poem to Dead Cosmos**

Poe’s cosmology proceeds by trying to *enact* the poem/cosmos isomorphism in his poem. I want to turn now to his theory of poetic and aesthetic “effect,” developed in his essays but recurring in *Eureka*, to suggest how this form of instantaneous collapse could take shape, and how we might, finally, reapproach *Eureka* from the “aesthetic”

perspective Poe demands. For even if *Eureka*, on the account outlined above, suggests how scientific claims can open on to an infinite poetic intentionality, such an account, as I have tried to show, remains inadequate. We cannot yet say how to take these claims themselves poetically: how as “mere words,” scientific concepts, they might represent their object such that we can receive it in its infinitude. We still have not felt *Eureka*’s cosmological claim as itself a poem. The poetic intention, the object of the historicist, the new materialist, and of Poe too, has not yet had its effect.

In *Eureka*, we follow the creation of the cosmos by inhabiting the relation between ruling idea and individual impression, thought of the infinite and experience of finitude. This gives us a picture whose scientific truth, or actuality, can, as it proceeds, progressively express or gesture towards the unrepresentable infinite, the “beautiful.” In Poe’s “Philosophy of Composition,” Poe describes, conversely, the creation of the poem: the process of materializing an intention.

What kind of intention does the poet have? Just as *Eureka*’s concrete “impressions” coincided with its infinite “ruling idea,” here “intention” weirdly coincides with “effect.” In creating poetry, we begin at the end: “it is only with the *dénouement* constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention” (PC 163). We begin, in other words, with “the consideration of an *effect*.” What sort of effect? The answer is obvious: the effect of beauty. “Beauty is the sole legitimate province of the poem,” Poe says. But beauty, the intended effect of the poem, is “not a quality, as is supposed” (not an absolute infinity), “but an effect[...]that intense and pure elevation of *soul* – [...]which is experienced in

contemplating ‘the beautiful.’” (PC 164) Notice again the recursiveness here: beauty is what happens when we contemplate the beautiful. The intention, the idea, that makes beauty possible, and that originates the poem, does not “exist” outside the poem, but rather emerges as we try to feel it. If “infinity” is the “thought of a thought” (E 18), beauty is something like the effect of an effect. What we intend in intending the poem is “effect,” as such. The poem’s goal is to have created, at its end, a poem.<sup>43</sup> But, as before, this recursive immediacy must be materialized concretely, in time. If *Eureka*’s poet-God must realize itself, not in immediate achievement of its divine intention in return to Unity, but through discursive, human, scientific thought, the Godlike poet of “Philosophy of Composition” will also take us through the “construction” of “The Raven” “step by step...with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem” (PC 163). To get to our effect (poetry), we must proceed, again, through its opposite (discursive logic).

From the one “ruling idea,” the “idea” of effect, Poe proceeds, as in *Eureka*, to deduce and induce the entire poem. What is “effect”? As is by now clear, it is unity of impression; since humans experience the world successively in time, the poem must be short. What object is most beautiful, most ‘effective’? Woman, the object of all objects<sup>44</sup>; since effect is “about” its own impossibility, its articulation through absence in time, “the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical of all topics.” How can this effect be intensified without disrupting unity? Through the repetition of this absence

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<sup>43</sup> Shoshana Felman, “On Reading Poetry,” *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, ed. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 154.

<sup>44</sup> See Colin Dayan, “Amorous Bondage: Poe, Ladies, and Slaves,” *American Literature* 66.2 (1994).

in time; thus the refrain of “Nevermore” is the correct way to heighten and unify effect (PC 164-6).

And so Poe guides us through what is now revealed as an intricate machine for the production of effect, i.e., of affect.<sup>45</sup> Poe delights in demystifying the watery romanticism that imagines a poet composing in a “fine frenzy — an ecstatic intuition” and a universe sprawling out in an infinite extension of a finite God’s power. He gives us instead an “engineering manual”<sup>46</sup> detailing the “wheels and pinions” that materialize poetic intention as atmosphere, giving “plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention” (PC 163). As in *Eureka*, precise, limited “thought,” as opposed to “accident” or inchoate “intuition,” holds everything in productive tension, thought’s current advancing narrative “mathematically” to its “fulfillment” and “End” (*E* 88). The dynamic correlation in time between thought and matter, repulsion and attraction, poem and cosmos, generates a movement from “ruling idea” to “unique impression,” poem to cosmos, man to God.

But as we near the poem’s end, we return to the problem of its beginning. The seeming success of the finite poetic troping of “the merest of words,” “Infinity,” which allowed discursive and temporal progress, comes back to haunt itself. Poetic effect, or unity, is achieved through what Poe calls “reciprocity of adaptation.”<sup>47</sup> This is the “rule”

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<sup>45</sup> Jonathan Elmer, “The Jingle Man: Trauma and the Aesthetic,” in *Fission and Fusions*, ed. Lesley Marx, Loes Nas, and Dunwell (Cape Town, South Africa: University of the Western Cape Press, 1997), 131–45.

<sup>46</sup> Tresch, “Estrangement of Vision,” 149.

<sup>47</sup> *Eureka* 61-2, 88-90; “Marginalia 18” in *Brevities*, 127-8.

that accounts for both the “pleasure” of the poem in the “Philosophy of Composition” (PC 164) and the “principle of the Cosmogony” Poe “suggests” in *Eureka* (E 62). Effect occurs insofar as each “incident” “tend[s]...to the development of the intention,” giving the poem the “*air*” of causation or intention (PC 163). Intention is displayed precisely as “effect,” the two thus becoming identical, immediate. Intention and effect *occur* in the “direct ratio of the *approach* to this species of reciprocity” between them. Similarly, “*each law of Nature is dependent at all points upon all other laws,*” thus “all are but consequences of one primary exercise of the Divine Volition” (E 62); the cosmos as such *is* insofar as multiplicity speaks Unity out of itself. Each end is its own beginning. This is the logic we have been tracking. But if intention and effect can only manifest in the difference that holds them apart, it is difficult to see how this perfect “reciprocity” that gives them meaning – that gives intention its object and effect its normativity, its form – could be thought: in other words, how it could *occur*.

Poe sees this difficulty, and hurries us to his proposed solution. In “Philosophy of Composition” he tracks the intricately reciprocal relations of his poetic theater, bringing us to the point, when “the poem, in its obvious phase, that of a simple narrative,” i.e., an unpoetic discourse, “may be said to have its completion” (PC 166). The speaker of “The Raven” comes to a kind of self-recognition by finally articulating the question which has been the ruling idea of the poem, the question which the Raven’s “Nevermore” can now be seen proleptically to answer: whether in “the distant Aidenn” he “shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore –.”<sup>48</sup> The ruling idea of that most poetical of topics, the death of a beautiful woman, finally achieves its effect, in the speaker’s

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<sup>48</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Raven,” *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe, Vol. 1: Poems*, ed. T. O. Mabbott (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 368.

confrontation with the reality of absence that had up to now been psychically cathected onto the meaninglessness of the raven's speech. So far so good: "so far, every thing is within the limits of the accountable — of the real," Poe says. As the poem's "construction" can be described in "mathematical" "steps," its meaning, or rather effect, can be understood (rather, deconstructed), by way of psychological symptoms. But "in subjects so handled, however skillfully, or with however vivid an array of incident, there is always a certain hardness or nakedness, which repels the artistical eye" (PC 167). As soon as this complex reciprocity of adaptation has been *realized*, i.e. has achieved its reciprocity or unity, realizing "intention" by creating "effect," its "poetic" character vanishes, indeed becomes perverse: it "repels the artistical eye." As soon as we can *tell* where it ends — as soon as we can perceive its "effect" — the "effect" vanishes. In *Eureka*, similarly, as soon as we arrive at the intellectual "comprehension" of "the insulation of our Universe" (E 76), in other words, as soon as we can *understand* the Universe as a "perfect" "plot of God" (E 89) insofar as we ourselves imaginatively hold together this perfection, we find ourselves "leaning," "longing" for something more (E 77). The wheels and pinions of the affect-machine grind to a halt, and we are left embarrassed at their and our definiteness and mere-ness. The poem "ends," but it is therefore incomplete: the "unity" is the unity of mechanism, not organism. The current of "thought," reaching its destination, no longer enlivens the matter of the poetic and cosmic imaginary.

Here, Poe suggests, is where the true poet swoops in. Poe "adds" two concluding stanzas to "The Raven," which impart an "under-current" that "pervade[s] all the

narrative which has preceded” these lines, (PC 167) breathing life into the mechanism, giving it a “breath of faery.”<sup>49</sup> Poe quotes his poem:

“Take thy beak from out *my heart*, and take thy form from off my door!  
Quoth the Raven “Nevermore!”

Poe’s added critical emphasis on “my heart” points out “the first metaphorical expression of the poem.” For Poe, this is the key to what he calls elsewhere “a definitiveness of vague and therefore of spiritual *effect*.”<sup>50</sup> Metaphor, the truly poetic language, backforms the discursive content of the poem, giving “vagueness” a “definitiveness” and thus giving it effect, making it effective. Whereas laymen and philosophers-so-called believe in poems of “ecstatic intuition” and orbs of “infinite sublimity endlessly multiplied by the infinitely sublime,” (PC 163, *E* 90),

now and then a philosopher proper – one whose phrenzy takes a very determinate turn...enables us to see *precisely* that point out of sight at which the revolutionary processes do, and of right ought to, come to an end. (*E* 90)  
Achieving this *definitiveness* of vagueness, this “right,” “depends absolutely on the hardihood of that imagination which ventures to claim the right.” (*E* 77) The poet-cosmographer can show exactly how everything depends on inexactness, and can thereby enact it. *Eureka* can now crescendo in Poe’s spinning-out of his “*fancy*...that there does exist a limitless succession of Universes,” showing us the “end” that is “*precisely*...out of sight,” precisely infinite, the endless “novelty” of “absolutely infinite” “Self-Diffusion” of the Godhead that is precisely ourselves (PC 164, *E* 77, 105, 103).

This is Poe’s final “effect,” and the kernel, the trick, of his compositional “philosophy,” his magician’s touch.<sup>51</sup> We shouldn’t be deceived. To look again at his

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<sup>49</sup> “Marginalia 44,” *Brevities*, 153.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> See Elmer’s discussion of Emerson’s epithet for Poe, “the jingle man.”

definition of poetic and cosmic form: “In the construction of *plot*...in fictitious literature, we should aim at so arranging the points, or incidents, that *we cannot distinctly see* [emphasis added], in respect to any one of them, whether that one depends from any one other, or upholds it.”<sup>52</sup> Poetic effect is effective insofar as it shows, like the cosmos, a divine intention. The difference between a merely correct complication of plot and a fully artistic one – the “idiosyncrasy” that “stamps it” as divine adaptation rather than “merely human constructiveness” (E 88) – is precisely this “inability to tell.” Poetic effect arises in “the ratio of *the approach* to this species of reciprocity.” But the problem is that divine intention, cosmic effect, was itself grounded in *human* poetic effect. Poetic troping was where we started. Poe’s two philosophies of creation claim to overcome unartistic, merely mechanical construction, the “naked” wheels and pinions they enumerate, in the critical trick of troping, metaphoricity: but we thereby *see* metaphor as precisely the “one” element on which every other depends. The cosmos ends when we are “*enabled to see* [emphasis added] *precisely* that point out of sight” (E 90) from which we started our “mental gyration”; the poem when in “the very last line of the very last stanza,[...]the intention of making [the raven] emblematical of *Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance is permitted distinctly to be seen* [emphasis added].” (PC 167). The full “intention,” which, as we surely remember, was “effect,” permits itself to be seen as soon as the truly poetic element enters; but as soon as the *cause* (the “intention”) is “seen” as such, it ceases to have effect, to *be* “effect.” We cannot *but* tell that on which everything depends, as Poe gleefully shows. We do not “approach” divine adaptation, poetic effect: they *depend* on their absence. We do not reach poetic eternity in linear history; there is no

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<sup>52</sup> Originally in “Marginalia 18” (*Brevities*, 127-8) borrowed subsequently for *Eureka* (89).

passage to cosmos, and *Eureka*'s "unpoetic" elements can now be seen as precisely their essence. The poem collapses, and with it, the cosmos it held together. As soon as the raven's dumb, mechanical speech acquires poetic, tropic force, the poem ends: the meaning is "Nevermore."

### **The Imperfect**

What kind of effect, then, does the "poetic" have on the questions with which we began? Poe's aesthetics and cosmology achieve reciprocity of adaptation as collapse; and so he brings us back to the vision with which we began, an impossible vision, projected by Poe and now enacted in the impossible experience of the present in the anthropocene. To read Poe, to feel his intended effect, I suggested earlier, we should not see him as providing "resources" for a future era, as an untapped experience that could resituate our sense of the present and reorient it toward a differently-intended future. The collapse that Poe's aesthetics and cosmology effect opens not onto a continuity but a radically disorienting instantaneity. If Tresch thinks that we should borrow from Poe, Poe – insofar as his work has reached us – borrows from us.

How does he do this? Poe's real trick to get *Eureka* off the ground is to ground his claims in an imagined future. Even before the "merest of words" that inaugurates his "legitimate thesis," Poe begins with the aesthetic leap that will be his end. Though the "legitimate thesis" is held together by tropic poetic force, its content is thereby meant to be, as he says in the preface, a series of scientific "truths"; but before we can get to them, before they can be as the preface says "constituted true," Poe inserts "an extract or two from a somewhat remarkable letter," "whose "date...I confess, surprises me even more particularly than its contents; for it seems to have been written in the year *two thousand*

eight hundred and forty-eight” (E 9). In this letter, the writer, “addressing, no doubt, a contemporary,” explains how long ago, “in the night of Time,” people knew only two roads to truth, deduction and induction. It was only “eight or nine hundred years ago” that “the repression of imagination” (E 11) ceased enough so that the “theorist” (E 16) was able to leap ahead to the insight that real insight, real advances in knowledge, were made by “guessing,” “imagining,” (E 15) in other words, by “intuitive leaps” (E 10).

Poe leaves this “somewhat remarkable” yet “very unaccountable” (E 16) letter “without comment,” that is, without accounting for his inclusion, his remarking, of it, and “proceeds” immediately to his “legitimate thesis, *The Universe*,” and thus the “merest of words, ‘Infinity.’” (E 16-7). But we should stop, and now notice that he has in fact accounted for its inclusion, or rather will, in his “legitimate thesis.” Poe borrows his methodology from this letter. *Eureka*’s critique of “absolute infinity” (discussed earlier), which allowed the rereading of “infinity” as a regulative ideal of Unity-in-Multiplicity correlating poem and cosmos in time, is in fact not Poe’s, but his correspondent’s, who gives its substance in a critique of John Stuart Mill (E 12-4). Having shown how induction and deduction self-contradict and thus do not reach their objects, the correspondent proceeds to the infinitely better doctrine of “intuitive leaps.”

Thus *Eureka*’s basis, the “irresistible, although inexpressible” “intuition” (E 22) of the “poetical essence of the Universe,” (E 96) the “great *Truth* which I have advanced – *the truth of Original Unity as the source*” of multiplicity and difference (E 35), is itself achieved through an “intuitive leap” on Poe’s part, a leap into the imaginative, where can be spoken the one part of his discourse that *he* cannot utter. To be able to *make* an intuitive leap, he must first *have* an intuitive leap. So where does that get him? Weirdly, it

is the future, a mere extension of linear historical time: 2848. And, as we see in the full version of this episode (written before *Eureka*, thus “borrowed” for it, although published after<sup>53</sup>) it is not a good future, for Poe: democracy is triumphant and philosophy is conducted by women – the correspondent calls herself “Pundita” – flying around in hot air balloons.<sup>54</sup> Nor is it changeable: the full letter in its published form is entitled “Mellonta Tauta”: as he translates it, these things are in the future.<sup>55</sup> This future is the rote, self-sustaining extension of the present. To seal the connection between “intention” and “effect,” one must borrow the regulative ideal of infinity precisely from the homogenously discursive, unending futurity that this connection is meant to overcome, to, in traversing, leap out of. To think his present as a space for intention, Poe must project himself into a future whose “effect” is his own destruction. The imaginary, the

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<sup>53</sup> See n. 11 in *E* 119; see “Mellonta Tauta” in *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe - Vol 3: Tales and Sketches* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978).

<sup>54</sup> See Poe’s originally untitled “news item” in the April 13, 1844 *New York Sun*, subsequently referred to as “The Balloon Hoax,” for Poe’s identification of balloon travel with unthinking, technophilic progressivism (1063-1088 in *Collected Works Vol. 3*).

For the female philosopher as an embodiment of the deep political ambivalence structuring Poe’s thought, see Poe’s revenant ladies (particularly “Ligeia” and “Morella”) and Dayan’s (“Poe, Ladies, and Slaves” esp. 243, 256-9) and Vogler’s commentary (Much of Madness and More of Sin”). *Eureka* here parallels Parmenides’ transcription of his astral interview with “the goddess Truth,” whose relation to Poe can be made more interesting if we put it next to the oeuvre-spanning dialogue Poe holds with himself on the subject of the feminine. *Eureka* is Poe’s speech from his own death, where he can finally understand and merge with the women (Lenore, Ligeia, Morella, Virginia) whose beauty, in his tales and in their death, voiced the truth that Poe fantasizes. But Pundita, here, is the inverse of Poe’s regular spectral lady: a woman of decidedly un-ethereal personality who boringly gives us the poetic essence of the universe, she embodies the uncanny connection between the poetic-cosmic and the frustratingly mundane. We should not see all this as merely a symptom of Poe’s sexual politics, his personal or historical failure to exit from ideology.

<sup>55</sup> Poe also uses this phrase, credited to Sophocles’ *Antigone*, as the epigraph for “The Colloquy of Monos and Una,” the most explicitly predictive of Poe’s three dialogues among post-apocalyptic angels. (In *Tales and Sketches, Vol. 2*, ed. Thomas O. Mabbot, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

world, which gives Poe his “illimitable intuition,” (E 14) as the self-transcending act of poetic and cosmic unity, is itself the world of deduction and induction, of thinking that alternates between two paths – “one of creeping and the other of crawling” – to nowhere (E 14). The “infinity” with which Poe inaugurates *Eureka*’s “legitimate thesis” comes to have a strange identity with the endless scientific progress that Poe constantly mocks, as for example in his newspaper notice on “The Daguerreotype” from 1840, where the device is “the most extraordinary triumph of modern science” because it is “infinitely (we use the term advisedly) is *infinitely* more accurate in its representation than any painting by human hands.” Continuously zooming in on objects, the new worlds that the daguerreotypist finds, like those of Humboldt and the historicist, are endless replications of the same. Science’s great insight is that “it is the unforeseen upon which we must calculate most largely.”<sup>56</sup> This calculable unforeseen, a known unknown, is precisely what Poe thinks his calculating world has foreseen. The intuitive leap *occurs*, but it is not out of Poe’s present future – the daguerreotypist’s and the historicist’s infinite approach to an infinite object – but into it. But things do not continue as before. What Poe sees, in this impossible proleptic return of the poem to itself, is death. The endlessness of troped difference, of the externality of reason turned into its principle, returns our present to us as oppressively, vividly, dead. Here is where poetic form finds its foundational identity with cosmic truth: not in a virtuous cycle of reciprocal imperfection, but as horrific identity. From this dead eternal present, Poe can speak the poem and the cosmos together as, finally, a “poem only.” In this instant, the poem is complete, present; and the cosmos, the world, is *gone*, “*Annihilat[ed]*” (E 7).

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<sup>56</sup> “The Daguerreotype,” *Alexander’s Weekly Messenger*, January 15, 1840.

## The Form of Death

The poem and the cosmos end in death: the self-cancellation of a world of infinite poetic troping of externality into intention and towards effect.<sup>57</sup> But in Poe, as I have been suggesting, death is not itself an end, not in the right way: it is not the reality of finitude, an end or limitation that gives orientation and form to life. When in the crucial moment towards the end of “The Raven” the speaker asks the bird, as it were rhetorically, whether an eternity exists in which for him to meet the angel-called “Lenore,” he is supposed finally to take up, as the principle of his existence, the meaningless, repetitive word of the raven: there is no beyond, no absolute infinity, he will now have told himself; after death there is not eternity but only nothingness, and therefore his melancholy does not give fantasmatic access to eternity but shows the human condition as one of finitude, a kind of brute meaningless facticity that nevertheless must be affirmed existentially as the condition of meaning. But as Poe says, *this* “death,” this end, is precisely “unartistical.” The frictionlessness with which the speaker can assume the “nevermore” as his self-externality is itself uncanny: in becoming – as it were *immediately* – a projection of the speaker’s speech, the raven no longer emblemizes a limitation or finitude, but illimitation. It is in fact the *impossibility* of this existentialist kind of death

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<sup>57</sup> Alex Link (“Laughing Androids, Weeping Zombies, and Edgar Allan Poe,” *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 58.3, 2013) and Matthew Taylor have both thought about death in Poe as a figure for an aporia of the human or humanism. I take my reading here to be broadly in line with their arguments, but for both of them, as for Vogler (“Compassion, for Ligeia) and Cavell (“Being Odd, Getting Even [Descartes, Emerson, Poe]”), the figure of “the human” is tied to a specific historical picture of the “individual.” I am trying to suggest, by way of the connection with the prospect of “species death,” that Poe’s “I” is much more interestingly thought as the transcendental I; in other words, that thinking the relation of the transcendental subject to itself, i.e. to the world with which it is identified, brings us closer to the power of Poe’s work than thinking the relation between the “individual subject” and the universal.

that makes the speaker endlessly insane, and finally poetic, speaking now with the poem's "first metaphorical expression." "Take thy beak from out my heart": rather than dialectically sublating, and demystifying, the raven as his own externalized unconscious, the speaker now, losing himself, allows himself to be spoken as the material effect of an "emblem." The raven, become "emblematic" of "mournful remembrance," has spoken, as if by stabbing, the speaker's heart with its beak, turning the site of what had been the speaker's romantic interiority (his "heart") into a mortally material *effect* of this now-meaningful speech, the raven's merest of words. His "soul" is now stuck in a material-spiritual limbo, "never lifted," weighed down by the "floating" "shadow" of a "demon." Death is not the end of the poem as plot, but the poem's instantaneity. The "distant Aidenn" is overcome not for a finite, individual being-towards death gesturing towards an infinite human futurity, but for a material, instantaneous unendingness: the "never-lifted" weight of the "region of the shadows."<sup>58</sup> The death, the return to the inorganic, that is the "end" of so many of Poe's narratives, is not the "life everlasting" of "Truth," (*E 7*) of history redeemed, but it is not "just" nothing: Poe speaks it.<sup>59</sup> As in Poe's macabre piece "Loss of Breath," we find that there is still a lot to say in this dream of death, when our "breath of faery" has vanished.

Poe's trick in his "philosophy" is to turn the impossibility of not-knowing (on what "everything depends") into the conditions of possibility for poetic and cosmic form. In saying that we should not be deceived, I did not mean that we should disenchant Poe's aesthetic theory and cosmology. He has already done that: and this is precisely the magic

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<sup>58</sup> "Mesmeric Revelation," in *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe - Vol 3: Tales and Sketches*, ed. T. O. Mabbott (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 1040.

<sup>59</sup> Peter Brooks, "Freud's Masterplot," *Yale French Studies* 55/56 (1977).

of his effect. The end of disenchantment is death, but it is not an affectless one: precisely the opposite. The failure of poem and cosmos as organic form reanimates it into being. The eternal life of “Aidenn” is denied precisely to recur as the “nevermore” of the region of shadows, of daguerreotypes: a world in which difference’s *failure* to appear is what returns to haunt us.<sup>60</sup> In *Eureka*, the “*Original Unity*” returns to itself as “*Inevitable Annihilation*” (E 7), and it is from this imaginary – the scene of death that repeats uncannily in so many of Poe’s tales – that a strangely incoherent totality takes place. Thus in “Mesmeric Revelation,” a tale written four years before *Eureka*, a man, mesmerized on his deathbed, propounds a cosmology like that of *Eureka*, detailing a monistic, hylozoic universe in which man will eventually reach the “truly *substantive* vastness of infinity” of a unlimited Godhead. He describes this absoluteness of the infinite as the converse of poetic effect or organic form: the correlate in “the inorganic beings – the angels” of “the perception, in thinking beings, of the adaptation of matter to their organization.” But when he completes his discourses, detailing how “the mesmeric state” most nearly resembles this ultimate life, which itself is achieved only “at death,” and the narrator releases him from his mesmeric influence, the narrator finds that his subject is in fact already dead, entering immediately the rigid inorganicness of rigor

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<sup>60</sup> See Dayan “Poe, Ladies, and Slaves” and Maurice Lee, *Slavery, Philosophy, and American Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 39-51. Lee thinks that “unconscious production is a consciously theorized aspect of Poe’s art,” (45) and sees Poe as in line with a broadly discursive, progressive understanding of reason, with aesthetics as a middle ground, externalizing the unconscious – e.g., racial prejudice – which is subsequently thought. I’ve been arguing that this is not quite right, but Lee’s conclusion is, I think, important: the fact that Poe can hold racist and sexist views while achieving a deep understanding (and, in some sense, an affirmation of) of a transcendental-universalist dialectic of reason reminds us that “perversity is never too far from reason and that racism retains a stubborn relation to more humane aspects of civilized thought.” (50)

mortis. Has he been addressing us “from out the region of the shadows?”<sup>61</sup> The question is important. If he was speaking from the dead, his words perhaps hint at the identity between organic and inorganic (in other words, their *effect* coincides with their content, achieves their intention); but then, since this is the realm of the “unorganized,” how can we feel his words’ effect, since they must, to type forth the “plots of God,” strike us as perfectly alive, organic? A theory that holds the universe together in a living totality has its correlate, and its effectiveness, in the poetic or mesmeric: but we can only see it, the effect only occurs, in *death*, in collapse. Indeed in “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,” a later tale that closely parallels “Mesmeric Revelation,” the mesmeric subject turns out to be even more dead: as soon as he is released from the mesmeric state, his corpse collapses immediately into “a nearly liquid mass of loathsome – of detestable putridity.”<sup>62</sup> The “truly *substantive* vastness of infinity,” the fantasmatic supernal real that serves to orient its “worldly” correlate, finds its empirical identity, its *fact*, in a putrefied corpse, the perverse reanimation of the body in death. The tales’ “effect,” i.e. the effect of “the beautiful,” (PC 163) is inextricably bound to this disgust. We see the same dynamic repeated again and again in Poe: the raven, the revenant ladies, Poe’s final “poetic” utterance of *Eureka*. One is always at once too dead, and not quite dead enough, to be truly poetic. The harmonious order we perceive in the cosmos, the poetical remembrance of the beautiful woman, finds an identity with the absoluteness of infinity, the reality of putrefaction, precisely insofar as both, organic life and inorganic death, refuse to be fully thought. Poe’s work is to show that this impossibility is not a

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<sup>61</sup> “Mesmeric Revelation.”

<sup>62</sup> “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,” in *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe - Vol 3: Tales and Sketches*, ed. T. O. Mabbott (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 1244.

falsification of the “supernal” reconciliation that the poetic promises, and to speak, instead, from its place in the present.

Chakrabarty’s “Four Theses” on the Anthropocene ends with a challenge. The historicist thinking underwriting modernity has led us to a present in which this very thinking demands that we imagine our self-negation in the collapse of the world we have built. To think our present we must project ourselves into an experience that is precisely impossible, into the collapse of experience. We must think a form of universality that cannot be thought: “a universal that arises from a shared sense of a catastrophe.” This would entail, in turn, “a global approach to politics without the myth of a global identity, for, unlike a Hegelian universal, it cannot subsume particularities.” (222)

Can literary works offer such a vision? Some of the most careful and imaginative responses to Chakrabarty’s challenge have suggested they might.<sup>63</sup> Poe’s work, I have been arguing, is deeply engaged with this question. Poe does not offer an answer, or even, exactly, a hope: not because it is not the place of an aesthetic work to do so, but because the question itself, Poe gives us to feel, is not the kind of thing that gets an answer. We cannot “imagine,” much less think, a new world to inhabit. What the imaginary does, in Poe, is open onto this discontinuity. If the present of the anthropocene demands an impossible experience, an imagining of a future where we are gone, the aesthetic, in Poe, holds out an experience of this demand as normative in a form for which we cannot account.

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<sup>63</sup> For example, Morton’s *Ecology Without Nature*, and Baucom’s “The Human Shore.”

## CHAPTER THREE

### EVERYWHERE AND NOWHERE: BIOPOLITICS AND AESTHETICS IN THE REFORM UTOPIAN FICTION OF EDWARD BELLAMY AND CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN

Laputa is everywhere or nowhere, my dear friend; without an act of our freedom and imagination we are inside it.

-A. W. Schlegel, "Letter on the Novel"

Everything will be as it is now, just a little different.

-Walter Benjamin

#### The Strangest Part

A nineteenth century man of leisure wakes up to the sound of voices he does not recognize. Julian West, a wealthy American "occupied only with the pursuit of the pleasures and refinements of life," has the habit, on account of an anxious state of mind caused by the "disturbances of industry" which prevent the construction of his future home, of being mesmerized each evening in order to fall asleep.<sup>1</sup> But instead of the expected voice of his loyal manservant (the only person able to rouse him from his nightly, death-like trances), he encounters Dr. Leete, an amiable scientist who informs him that he has awoken to the dawn of the twenty-first century.

So begins Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward 2000-1887*, published in the year to which it ostensibly imagines a return. In what follows, West's introduction into the world to which he has awoken serves equally as a didactic account for the reader of the socialist utopia Bellamy predicts. Economic competition, social antagonism, and general

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward 2000-1887* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 95-6, 100, 106.

unhappiness have been replaced by a frictionless social organicism, in which each individual works voluntarily for the good of all in a “vast industrial partnership” (154, 167). Instead of competitive private capital’s “dissipation of energy,” there is the “limitless” (280), thus non-historical, co-operative growth of humanity: a “golden future” at the end of a “logical evolution” (126). The book tracks the transformation of the nineteenth century towards and by the twentieth: the louche, decadent West re-educated by the calm, forgiving technocracy of Dr. Leete.

As imagined by Bellamy, West’s vision – mesmeric or post-, it is difficult to say, since West’s mesmerist-manservant has vanished silently with the old world – enjoyed immense popularity at the turn of the century. Bellamy’s book was possibly the second-best-selling novel of the nineteenth century, behind only that earlier reformist text, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.<sup>2</sup> His picture of a rational utopia inspired the first large-scale socialist movement in the United States. Mostly middle-class reformers founded “Nationalist” clubs across the country; within a year of the book’s publication, there were 165 of these political clubs in 27 states.<sup>3</sup> Such clubs reflect the broad popularity, in late nineteenth century U.S. industrial society, of naturalistic and evolutionary accounts of human existence, especially Spencer’s holistic and grandiosely metaphysical social organicism.

The emphasis in such discourse, as Mark Pittenger has shown, falls less on an

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<sup>2</sup> See Jonathan Auerbach, “‘The Nation Organized’: Utopian Impotence in Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*,” *American Literary History* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1994), 42.n1. for an analysis of claims for the book’s best-seller status.

<sup>3</sup> See Arthur Lipow, *Authoritarian Socialism in America: Edward Bellamy & the Nationalist Movement* (University of California Press, 1982), 120. See also John L. Thomas’ introduction to *Looking Backward* (1-88) for discussion of the book’s reception and the creation of the Bellamyite “Nationalist” movement, and Mark Van Wienen, “A Rose By Any Other Name: Charlotte Perkins Stetson (Gilman) and the Case for American Reform Socialism,” *American Quarterly* 55.4 (2003), 604-6, for discussion of Bellamy in the context of reform socialism more generally.

antagonistic “social Darwinism” in which “the unfit” are ruthlessly eliminated by the invisible hand of nature than on the harmonious, inclusive self-regulation of the social organism as a whole.<sup>4</sup> This naturalistic, reform socialism brings out what for critics has been a curiously persistent, peculiarly “American” utopian logic, from the Puritans through Brook Farm to the 1960s, one for which the friction of social difference, conflict, and negativity, rather than portending the breakdown of the law or the social compact, instead expresses the authentic, infinitely capacious form of “America” itself. If a Marxian or revolutionary socialism takes irreducible antagonism or difference at the level of the social-material to be the engine of change and the locus of theory, for this Americanist reform socialism, it is not only the utopia on the other side of history that is unmarked by conflict; the process by which society achieves this ahistorical totality is itself conflict-free.<sup>5</sup>

Such logic is the essence of Bellamy’s vision. “Social reform,” the transformation of human existence as a shared totality, proceeds non-dialectically both on the level of the internal self-organization of its parts and in the progressive achievement of its final formal character. If a Marxist might call this evolution the “logic of capital,” such a phrase would be incoherent, or perhaps redundant, to reformist thought, since it implies the speaker’s possession of a different and more complete logic, whose external

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<sup>4</sup> Mark A. Pittenger, *American Socialists and Evolutionary Thought, 1870-1920* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 25-6.

<sup>5</sup> On the link between reform socialism and a broader, non-dialectical Americanist logic, see Daniel E. Bender, “Perils of Degeneration: Reform, the Savage Immigrant, and the Survival of the Unfit,” *Journal of Social History* 42, no. 1 (2008). On this “Americanist” logic, see Bercovitch, *American Jeremiad*, and Pease, “New Americanists”; for its relation to socialism more broadly, see also Brian Lloyd, *Left Out* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997) and Denning, “Special American Conditions.” These critics are broadly in agreement in lamenting that this Americanist logic has captured or deformed any truly revolutionary energy the American experience might generate.

normative power redeems the merely partial logic of “capital.”<sup>6</sup> Industrialization, imperialism, monopolization, competition: all the complex phenomena that produce the late nineteenth century world in a linked and worryingly uneven teleology reveal themselves, for this fin-de-siècle Americanist logic, in their “true significance as a [single] process which only needed to complete its logical evolution” (*Looking Backward* 126). This utopia, in other words, is so fundamentally on the model of already existing industrial capitalism that it is hardly a change at all. As Dr. Leete explains it,

it was not necessary for society to solve the riddle [of “the labor question”] at all. It may be said to have solved itself. The solution came as the result of a process of industrial evolution which could not have terminated otherwise. All that society had to do was to recognize and cooperate with that evolution, when its tendency had become unmistakable. (122)

Not only was there no conflict in bringing about utopia; no *action* was needed at all. If “all that society had to do” was “recognize and co-operate,” one doubts if even this self-knowledge and self-alignment was “necessary” in any meaningful sense, since the whole process is guided by a natural “tendency” that became “unmistakable”; there was “no more possibility of opposing it by force than by argument” (127). The great riddle of history turns out to be nothing, a wind-egg. The antagonism that seemed so intractable to the nineteenth century was in fact the sign of an inevitable and ultimate harmony lurking just around the corner, just beneath the surface.

If this rather deterministic account of historical process is pointedly unappealing to contemporary critical sensibilities concerned, in one way or another, with historical

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<sup>6</sup> The claim that capitalism is an incomplete or irrational rationality, which is made most explicit in Sigfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, trans. Thomas Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) and Max Horkheimer, “Traditional And Critical Theory,” in *Critical Theory* (New York: Continuum, 1972) is broadly important to Marxist critique insofar as it understands itself as a science or metascience.

breaks, even more disturbing, for the contemporary reader no less than for Marx in his critiques of the rational utopias of a Comte and a Fourier (both of whom were key sources for American reform socialism), is the total regimentation and stasis— the “absolute inevitableness” (131) – that characterizes the society thus imagined.<sup>7</sup> The frictionless historical logic that brought utopia about is also the form of the society that is its fruit.

Everyone, in the new city, devotes themselves completely to an occupation in service of the social good. Work and life are therefore organized according to “the principle of universal military service, as it was understood in [the nineteenth century]” (131). This jingoistic discipline is itself, the text explains, to be understood in a way now disturbingly familiar from the most paranoid of Foucauldian accounts of biopolitical self-surveillance: an individual is perfectly free to take up any occupation whatsoever “in accordance with his natural aptitude, the utmost pains being taken to enable him to find out what his natural aptitude really is,” subsequently committing to his term of “industrial service” that is “so absolutely natural and reasonable” that “to speak of [it] being compulsory would be a weak way to state its absolute inevitableness” (133, 132, 131).<sup>8</sup> Consumers choose between goods of endless variety and write petitions when “an article not before produced is demanded” (213-4). Culture flourishes as authors and artists compete for “merit ribbons” (200-1) for works of art interesting primarily on account of

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<sup>7</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “The Communist Manifesto” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 497-9. For the influence of Fourier and Comte on Bellamyite nationalism and American utopian socialism more generally, see Carl Guarneri, “Importing Fourierism to America,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 43.4 (1982).

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Peyser, in *Utopia and Cosmopolis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), reads Bellamy, and turn of the century reform utopian literature more generally, as insidiously disciplinary in this way (85).

what they “leave out” (205); politics is unnecessary beyond mere bureaucratic rubber-stamping since “authority” is a “machine...so logical in its principles and direct and simple in its workings, that it all but runs itself” (212). In sum, since every aspect of life is “guaranteed” by “the nation,” itself the immediate expression of the material-spiritual needs of each citizen, “no man any more has any care for the morrow, either for himself or his children” (149, 127, 149). Social, political, human life is a kind of weightless repose: not the harmonious tension of the ideal state where, in Schiller’s terms, “all the diversity of individual subjects strive to unite” (*On the Aesthetic Education of Man* 43), but a frictionless sameness, a regimented “industrial army”; less the vital self-maintenance of the organism oriented towards an ever-better future than the perpetual peace of a death-driven desire for the inorganic.<sup>9</sup> If modern political and social life, as it originated in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, is often understood, under the notion of “biopolitics,” to be organized on the model of the organism, a vital, self-organizing and self-authorizing changefulness, Bellamy’s rational utopia would seem to offer the horrific negative image that gives biopolitics the lie. Without normative conflict, without meaningful differences, the animus that brings men into active life has disappeared. In this world, the utopian-democratic absence of “sovereignty,” a power external to the members of the polis that authorizes and regulates their being, seems not to have liberated men to find their own, undetermined but “suitable ends” in a common sociality,<sup>10</sup> but rather compelled them into a meaningless “bare life,” a homogeneous,

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<sup>9</sup> See Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1951).

<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 99.

fossilized immortality of the human species that looks more like death than anything else.<sup>11</sup>

The strangest thing, though, is that this entire logic of uncanny sameness, on the level of historical activity and social content, also functions as the literary conceit that sets the text apart from the world to which it addresses its utopian claim. According to the text, the historical “difference” between Bellamy’s 1887 non-utopian present and the twenty-first century future it anticipates is precisely the text’s fictional element: *Looking Backward* is doubly framed by a “Preface,” dated December 26, 2000, purporting to explain the primary frame story of West’s mesmeric utopian vision as itself an imaginative and pedagogical tool to defamiliarize the twenty-first century “reader.” “This book is written,” the preface instructs, “for the express purpose of inducing the reader to forget” that the society depicted is his own (93-4). It will thus allow him to find it again in its strangeness, through the eyes of the nineteenth century. If, absent this preface, Bellamy’s reader would presumably take the utopian retrospective as the imaginative form of the text’s discursive, programmatic content, this “explanatory” doubling internal to the fictional frame introduces an uncanny realism. Literature defamiliarizes, but what it must make strange is literature itself: Bellamy’s reader is inserted into a world whose fictional difference is that we need fiction to see the difference between the nineteenth century and utopia. Without this book, the book claims, we would “forget” that we are inside it; thus we need it to forget our own forgetfulness. *Looking Backward*’s preface therefore inverts the framing trope of the classical, and collapses that of the romantic, preface. In the classical preface (for

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<sup>11</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998) and Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 18-21.

example, Richardson or Swift)<sup>12</sup>, a claim to editorship opens the rhetorical and linguistic space for the free play of an “interesting” imaginative language that is non-identical with the speaking I. In the Romantic preface (for example, Hawthorne), the author introduces himself as the actual origin and exemplary bearer of this distinct imaginative space – the builder of a “house made of materials long in use for constructing castles in the air” – and thus produces himself and his work as a constitutive tension between or traversal of the actual and imaginary.<sup>13</sup> Here, on the contrary, a claim to fictionality “explains” itself in asserting the complete identity of literary and social/historical space. The imaginative space that the preface opens up is precisely the space of “the imagination” – which is therefore identically the space of the actual. As soon as we accept the literary conceit of Bellamy’s text, we cancel its difference; as soon as we imagine this world, we are already inside it. Indeed, Bellamy himself describes his inspiration in these terms: upon rereading what initially was “a mere literary fantasy...a cloud-palace for an ideal humanity,” he realized the predictive, political value of his text, and rewrote it in the more realistic form he presents to the reader.<sup>14</sup> Rereading his own text, he transforms it from “a mere fairy tale of social perfection [into] the vehicle of a definite scheme of industrial

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<sup>12</sup> Ian Watt’s discussion of narratorial epistemology throughout *The Rise of the Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957) is relevant here; see especially 112-7.

<sup>13</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of Seven Gables* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 3. Though the editorship claim persists in many exemplary romantic texts (e.g. Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*, Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*, and Melville’s *Moby-Dick*) Hawthorne’s prefaces highlight an important structural change in the relation imagined between the author as “editor” or publisher and the text itself, whose autonomy as an object is now linked to the imaginative autonomy of the writer in his exemplary difference from the social. Ishmael, so-called, captures this implication-by-way-of-difference when he apostrophizes the “sub-sub librarian,” himself imagined as the editor of the text’s introductory scholarly apparatus: “fare the well, poor devil of a Sub-Sub, whose commentator I am” (*Moby-Dick* 8).

<sup>14</sup> Edward Bellamy, “How I Came To Write Looking Backward,” *The Nationalist* 1, no. 1 (May 1889), 1.

reorganization”; like the future author of the text’s “Preface” (who describes the frame story as having “the form of a romance” [*Looking Backward* 94]) he decides that the “form of a romance [would be] retained,” precisely to convince readers of the “definite” practicality of his “scheme” (“How I Came to Write *Looking Backward*” 3). The possibility of literary creation is isomorphic with the actuality of the world it would imagine. Insofar as *Looking Backward* exists, it was “caused” by this practical reality of the world it speculates about. Not only is the utopia that we are able to imagine through literature immanent to the “inevitable” logic of industrial evolution which, according to the text, we already live; the very *capacity* (and thus, the need or desire) to “imagine,” to produce images of a world different from our own, is itself something “imagined” by this utopia, in which there is no possibility of a *real* difference between utopia and world, imagination and reality.

Thus we are not surprised to find that within the narrative world itself the aesthetic maintains an odd status.<sup>15</sup> It appears at once as an outmoded relic of a time (the nineteenth century) when a form was required for dramatizing individual difference and social and economic conflict (precisely the kind of non-teleological difference and conflict that was understood to define organic life as a model for the aesthetic), *and* as the form whose present meaning is that precisely *this* difference, the formal difference between then and “now,” is itself incoherent. When future West reads Dickens, he finds that the work of the nineteenth century chronicler of dystopian capitalism “intensifies, by force of contrast, my appreciation of the strangeness of my present environment” (189). But this “strangeness” comes not from his “present environment” (utopia) itself, but from

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<sup>15</sup> See Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* (London: Verso 2007), 182-7 for discussion of the uncanny status of aesthetics in the worlds imagined by literary utopias.

the *non*-utopian, from Dickens' aesthetic "power" to "carry...me back...to the standpoint of my former life," a standpoint – that of the aestheticizing, romantic man of leisure – from which utopia's contrasting, *unaesthetic* character can be, strangely, "appreciated" (189). Conversely, the most famous literary work of the future seems to West "impressive...not so much [on account of] what was in the book as what was left out of it." What this future book gives, somehow, is a powerful and "cohere[nt]...picture" of precisely the *absence* of the traditional elements of "romance": "all effects drawn from the contrasts of wealth and poverty...high and low...desire," etc. (204-5).

Aesthetic form, in the stereoscopic picture the text gives of the literature of the "past" and the "present," and from the doubled perspective of a "fictional" and strange nineteenth century and an actual and unremarkable twenty-first, does not represent anything new, does not open out onto a vision of a different world. Instead, it literally expresses the *absence* of this kind of difference: its vision is of a world where visions of the new are just identical with what actually is. The non-dialectical narrative *content* of *Looking Backward* – its ahistorical evolutionary teleology and its frictionless society – is identical with its non-dialectical aesthetic *form* – its imagined collapse of the difference imagination claims. The text's dialectical image of "the past and present, like contrasting pictures, side by side" (189-90; cf. 142), does not interrupt history, opening a view to its transcendence or collapse; it reimagines it as something that was itself imaginary, and therefore did not even have to be overcome. If West's society is harmonious, its harmony is not that of the nineteenth century romantic utopian aesthetic, but the "boring harmony"

of Fukuyama's end of history.<sup>16</sup> The *lethe*, the passport to the unconscious we are offered by West's mesmeric revelation, gives us access neither to a next, better world, nor to a radical alterity, but to ourselves.

The "Preface" excuses itself for a form that no doubt will seem "trite" to "the reader" on account of his being so familiar with the society that Dr. Leete pedantically explains, at the same time that it justifies the text as being "cast," through the mesmeric vision of its nineteenth century aesthete protagonist, "in the form of a romantic narrative" (94). The triteness is itself the romance of the text; Leete's technocratic discourse is *a-letheia* as *lethe*. Utopia can seem boring, inorganic, stylistically dead, only because we are already in it, are already inside its "inevitable" "logic": this itself is the claim, at once aesthetic-imaginative, scientific-predictive, and moral-normative, that the text makes. When Dr. Leete's daughter, after taking West on a tour of the dawning twenty-first century's model city, exclaims to West, "oh, how strange it must be to you!" he replies: "on the contrary...it does not seem strange; that is the strangest part of it." (233)

### **Aesthetics and Biopolitics**

Contemporary readers, too, have felt the shock of uncanny recognition. Catherine Tumber (in 1999) described the text as an containing an "eerie," prescient understanding of the contemporary post-industrial collapse of public and private, social and political, aesthetic and scientific, presentness and futurity (610-1).<sup>17</sup> This claim about Bellamy

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<sup>16</sup> This is Kathi Weeks' term, in *The Problem With Work* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011) for Fukuyama's anti-utopian theory of utopia. See Weeks 181. See also Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 31-2.

<sup>17</sup> See also Auerbach, "The Nation Organized," on the predictive quality of the text for late capital.

forms part of a consensus view of the relation between the turn-of-the-century U.S. imaginary and an emergent, contemporary social reality. From reform socialism to “eugenic feminism” to obscurantist spiritualism, recent critics have recognized in this past era’s speculative sciences and literary experiments the (perhaps incipient) actual forms that structure their present: the welfare state, where the technocratic management of life replaces political action; speculative “bioeconomics,” where sex and biology are engines of financial value creation; and a “creative” economy, whose basic unit is not commodities in an object-world but unquantifiable, quasi-spiritual “experiences” shared among subjects.<sup>18</sup> Most broadly, these transformations can be understood as the collapse of the distinction between publicity and privacy, between the *polis* and the *oikos*, into “the social” or the economic, or rather the socio-economic: the sphere at once of collective decision-making (social “policy”) and of the material life of humans. The common denominator is the notion of biopolitics, as developed by Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, and the Italian post-Marxism of Giorgio Agamben, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, and Maurizio Lazzarato, among others. Biopolitics is the form of communal human life in which life itself is the object of collective human action, rather than a medium for it: where the “health” of the polis is not a measure of its capacity to achieve its ends, but an end in itself. This is not a mere reversal; if the distinction between the human as bearer of the *logos* and as merely organically “alive” has been foundational for the West since the Greeks, as Arendt, Foucault, and Agamben emphasize, it is not that the organic life of the human was previously excluded from the

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<sup>18</sup> See Auerbach, “The Nation Organized” and Peyser, *Utopia and Cosmopolis*; Seitler, *Atavistic Tendencies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); and Michaels’ *Gold Standard* and *Shape of the Signifier*, respectively.

realm of political decision-making. The bare organic aliveness of the human, as Agamben argues, has always constituted a kind of internal resistance, an “included exclusion” in the polis, and it is the tension between this inarticulate organic life and the collective normative discourse of political life that animated the collective world of the human – neither angel nor animal but speaking or political creature (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 7). What has changed is that this internal resistance that animates the human into its properly political form has leaked out of its containment, its internal exclusion, to become *the* human form of life. “For millennia,” Foucault writes in a justly famous formulation, “man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question.”<sup>19</sup>

Much of the recent critical reception of turn-of-the-century U.S. writing, from naturalist and realist fiction to speculative and reform social science, has been an attempt to interpret and critique this politicization of “life itself.” In focusing above on Bellamy’s internal figuration of aesthetic form, I want to suggest a different approach to the biopolitical modernity it expresses. This would not be an aesthetic or formalist turn away from the historical or material, but, in part, an attempt to grasp how these last – insofar as they have traditionally been understood, like biological life itself, as forms of accident, as the contingent background against the grain of which the conceptual and normative comes into view – have themselves emerged as a normative, political force. If in politics, the properly human form of life, organic, bare “life itself” has persisted as an uncanny representative of that recalcitrant nature which, by being necessarily excluded or

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<sup>19</sup> Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1980), 143.

different, models the incompleteness or finitude that political life requires, literature – and exemplarily American literature – has metonymized this utopian, excluded incompleteness within social life. The “form” of aesthetic form is its precisely indefinable, unlocalizable internal resistance to the conceptual, denotative functionality of signs; literature inhabits language like bare life inhabits the polis.<sup>20</sup> But literature’s intersection with politics in the exemplary place of utopia, where it imaginatively represents a new world in the language of the old, becomes uncanny in biopolitical modernity.<sup>21</sup> In Bellamy, aesthetic form and utopian politics have identically and reciprocally ceased to be “strange,” to be excluded. There is no frame, no limitation, that sets the Americanist polis apart as utopian model. The aesthetic work no longer imagines, as in Richard Poirier’s formulation, a “world elsewhere,” no longer “enclose[s]” a “place of style” that would model a transformation of the world from which it sets out: neither because the utopian difference has simply been “achieved” nor because it has just failed, but because it no longer generates friction, no longer produces a spark that animates and illumines the whole.<sup>22</sup> And we thereby see the completion of a logic internal to the Americanist aesthetic from the start: if, in Goethe’s wager, “here or nowhere is America” – the Americanist way of immanent self-renewal is either exportable to all places, all conditions, *as such*, or it fails its own test by being a merely contingent relation to contingency – then it is also, to modify Schlegel’s

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<sup>20</sup> See Kant’s foundational critique of the Baumgartenian notion of “sensory perfection,” according to which aesthetic normativity is a separate kind of knowledge that bypasses signification altogether. Kant decisively shows that aesthetic normativity must be a formal purposiveness internal to the (human) use of (conceptual) language, and yet non-identical with it (*Critique of the Power of Judgment* 27-33). See Rancière *Mute Speech* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011) for a relevant historical analysis of what this means for the social and political function of “literature” as a special use of language.

<sup>21</sup> See Weeks 175-225, Jameson *Archeologies of the Future* and “Reification and Utopia”  
<sup>22</sup> *A World Elsewhere*, 3.

ironic reformulation, “everywhere and nowhere,” at once utopia and dystopia, formless possibility and fateful actuality.<sup>23</sup>

This has made turn-of-the-century U.S. writing a difficult object for criticism. The critical consensus about realism and naturalism – a bad marriage in which the first, in Sinclair Lewis’ phrase, displays the brittle moralism of “a pious old maid whose greatest delight is to have tea at the vicarage,” and the second, according to Lionel Trilling, aspires inauthentically to “the sad, lovable, honorable faults of reality itself, or of America itself: huge, inchoate, struggling toward expression” – expresses a telling frustration at such texts’ failure to articulate a tension (ethical and stylistic) with the actual world from which they imaginatively depart.<sup>24</sup> On the one hand, such texts rely on a notion of movement or change: nature’s incessant creative destruction, the never-ending moral progress of reform; on the other, they claim fully to *represent* this change or movement, to say and to show what it looks like, and what it looks like is simply the world of which it is at once a part and the whole. Both naturalism and realism, in this understanding, evince a kind of bad or inauthentic self-identity, a philosophical-scientific certainty that what the text represents is identical with *what is*, and that consequently makes the text impossible for criticism to inhabit productively. If the aesthetic is not an image of difference but just a recapitulation of the same, it not only dies, but kills the world it was supposed to animate. Without the constitutive tension between aesthetic and

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<sup>23</sup> Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, 264; Schlegel, “Dialogue on Poetry,” 97. For a canonical example of the affect of this thought, see Perry Miller’s preface to *Errand into the Wilderness*, where he describes his epiphanic realization, while unloading oil drums in “a jungle of central Africa,” of “the meaning of America,” in its “appalling power,” which he in then inspired to trace back to the Puritans. (vii-ix)

<sup>24</sup> Sinclair Lewis, “The American Fear of Literature,” in *The Man From Main Street: A Sinclair Lewis Reader*, ed. Harry Maule and Cane (New York: Random House, 1953), 15; Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, 18.

conceptual (or political and philosophical) form, the aesthetic and the political do no normative work. Then the “bad style” of this whole swath of writing, thinking, and culture appears as a kind of failure, a fundamental inauthenticity: not an art of negativity but bad art, just as fascism is not the realization of “the political” but its collapse.<sup>25</sup> Without an imaginative world elsewhere delimited by aesthetic form, literary criticism does not find a home for the cultivation of a new conceptual discourse; what it finds instead is a kind of wasteland, a formless demos: the nightmare America of Poe and Baudelaire and Kafka.

But perhaps this nightmare can wake us up. This is the wager of some of the most powerful recent Americanist criticism. If, in biopolitical modernity, the resistant, negative power of the “bare life” of aesthetic form has leaked out into the world, turning a nineteenth century utopian dream into the twentieth century’s actual nightmare, perhaps this world itself can now become the object of criticism. Walter Benn Michaels’ work displays this critical move most explicitly, and I want to discuss his claims briefly, both to acknowledge their force and to begin to suggest a different way of inhabiting their critical power. Michaels’ critique unveils what he calls “the logic of naturalism” at work equally in the canonical turn-of-the-century American literary texts he reads and in their (and his) historical worlds. The logic of naturalism is eminently a biopolitical one: it is “obsessed with manifestations of internal difference” (*Gold Standard* 22). Sister Carrie’s incessant attempts, not to satisfy any particular desire, but to become equal to desire itself finds a parallel in money’s infinite speculative growth, which does not merely capture or

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<sup>25</sup> See Michael Fried’s “Art and Objecthood” for this argument about art. See Arendt, *Human Condition*, 23 for the critique of the substitution of “the social” for politics, which also suggests a way of reading the links between Carl Schmitt’s hypostatization of “the political” and biopolitical modernity more broadly.

represent an ever-larger swath of valuable things in the object-world, but in endlessly producing more “signs” of value produces itself as its own object (57, 33-4). The important thing to notice, for Michaels, is the self-sustaining, organic nature of this process: desire is never satisfied, value is never adequately represented, because both have their being in the endless self-maintenance of their own incompleteness, their own “internal difference.”<sup>26</sup> And Michaels’ point is that *this* isomorphism – between the desire given form in a literary text and that produced by an economic and social system – is not merely a structural homology, a kind of analogy, but a constitutive identity, a totality. What “*Sister Carrie*...reminds us [is] not only that fictions may approve of capitalism” –

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<sup>26</sup> Here Michaels’ argument intersects with the theoretical-philosophical claims of Michael Fried, Ruth Leys, and, to an extent, Stanley Cavell, and if Michaels at times seems to efface his own normative or critical voice, this intersection is the clearest indication of his polemical goal. Michaels importantly describes naturalism as a “literalist” logic (*Gold Standard* 165), the polemical term Fried coins in his discussion of minimalist sculpture but which is meant to describe a broader, deeper para-logic that emerges with the self-reflexive subjectivity in the Enlightenment era and is the major threat to critique in the twentieth century. Literalist logic or “theatricality” is a kind of standing threat: if the subject’s constitutive incompleteness grounds the critical and transcendental notion of spontaneity (see discussion in my Introduction and chapter 2), the temptation is to reify this incompleteness as a kind of objective property, a concrete, material unknowability at the heart of subjectivity that the subject then repeatedly *stages* or theatricalizes, as if experimentally verifying his freedom as a phenomenal property. Subjectivity, in this logic, becomes a spectacle. The capitalist/naturalist logic of the “gold standard,” of orienting subjectivity toward “becoming gold,” would be, in Michaels’ argument, the ideological or social-political form of what in Fried and Cavell might sound like a question for the romantic individual. The value of Michaels’ argument is to make clear how this (fundamentally aesthetic, as I have tried to show) constitutive tension, which in romanticism is precisely a tension between privacy and publicity, becomes a question internal to and indeed isomorphic with the shape of the social, with a new publicity which, in Arendt’s terms (*Human Condition*) takes on the form of what has, in Western thought since the Greeks, been understood as the private.

For the critique of theatricality or literalism, see Cavell’s “Avoidance of Love,” Fried’s “Art and Objecthood,” and Leys, “The Turn To Affect: A Critique,” *Critical Inquiry*, 37.3 (2011). See also Michaels’ discussion of Fried in *The Shape of the Signifier* (12-14), not coincidentally his most polemical and politically explicit work.

that the literary imagination can ideologically affirm the historical-material worlds from which they claim to take flight – “but also that the difference between the physical and the fictional is not so irreducible after all and that the production of a fictional excess has been one of capitalism’s most successful strategies for transforming the economic reality its fictions claim only to represent” (58). Capitalism does not just account for the imagination: it *lives* in it. Aesthetic form’s imaginative non-self-identity is the essence, the *being*, of post-industrial capitalism’s historical-material reality.

This identity-in-difference will determine Michaels’ own practice. If the literary world elsewhere is, now, *here*, its critical inhabitation becomes decidedly uncanny. Michaels’ critique requires a simultaneous immanence to its object, since any distance would imply that the act of critique generates a difference that the object cannot contain; and the complete negativization of it, since any positive claim for the object’s ineluctable aesthetic/critical “value” would merely mystify the logic that the object precisely reveals. On Michaels’ account, if one has no choice but to speak the aesthetic and utopian logic of organic internal self-difference, since it has become the infinitely capacious language in which the (capitalist) world at once replicates and endlessly renews or overcomes itself, the critical act consists in letting the falseness, the artificiality, of this internal self-difference come to the fore. Rather than valorizing or rejecting aesthetic/capitalist internal self-difference, one *merely* repeats it; and this ostentatious mereness becomes the self-erasing gesture of critical thought. Dramatically withholding the *act* of valuing that such speech nevertheless immediately produces generates a silent dissonance (*Gold Standard* 178-80).<sup>27</sup> As Brook Thomas points out, Michaels began his public intellectual

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<sup>27</sup> Compare to Rancière’s genealogy of literature as “mute speech.”

life as an avowed post-structuralist, before going on to argue in *The Gold Standard* that post-structuralism itself (rooted in James' and Peirce's pragmatism), with its endless proliferation of textual internal self-difference, is the canonical intellectual expression of post-industrial capitalism.<sup>28</sup> Far from marking any inconsistency in Michaels' thought, this self-symptomization, about which he never worries,<sup>29</sup> is the core of his critical style. Criticism does not excavate redemptive, resistant objects that could transform the world that discovers them, but unveils and enacts a perilous identity. Aesthetic negativity, bleeding out into the world, reveals a pervasive, internal rottenness, the fascinating proliferation of a disease, a strangely animate deathliness – Michaels calls it capitalism – that is not a threat to the whole but its very being. The goal of this late-Marxist criticism is no longer to awaken the world to the reality of its aesthetic dream but to return the critical voice to the truth of its political nightmare.<sup>30</sup>

But in giving this description, a new space is enacted, or imagined: the critical space from which one can produce this delimited picture, a picture of non-delimitation. Though Michaels' critique refuses to claim a conceptual or critical difference from its bad object, it is precisely this refusal that constitutes his utopian claim, and it is this move that has made Michaels' critical (and political) style so paradigmatic.<sup>31</sup> The very claim

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<sup>28</sup> Brook Thomas, "Walter Benn Michaels and the New Historicism: Where's the Difference?," *boundary 2* 18, no. 1 (1991), 23-4. See, for example, Michaels' reading of Paul de Man in *Shape of the Signifier* 5-7.

<sup>29</sup> See Michaels' fascinatingly ambiguous footnote on p. 28 of *Gold Standard* where he acknowledges the influence of Derrida and deconstruction.

<sup>30</sup> Marx, "For a Ruthless Critique of Everything Existing," *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 15, and "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," 594.

<sup>31</sup> Jameson's reading of Michaels' theoretical rejection of theory in *Postmodernism* (187, 217) argues this convincingly. For Jameson this anti-theoretical or "immanent" theorizing exemplifies postmodern theory, and I mean to be suggesting a similar historical link

that one cannot escape a total identity with the bad object gestures towards and thus enacts a utopian aesthetic-theoretical remainder, producing, as Jameson puts it in the most exacting formulation of his utopianism, critical “knowledge” of “the fact that it [utopia] does not exist.”<sup>32</sup> By releasing the delimited, resistant negativity of the object into the total negativity of the scene of its reception, Michaels’ criticism imbues the historical world itself – as the scene at once of object and concept, actuality and possibility – with the unformed energy demanded by the utopian aesthetic.<sup>33</sup> If the only relation, in Michaels’ thought, that literature can have to capital is to be a part of it, such thinking draws a frame around the world that, in claiming to erase its own voice, produces its own image: a negative, non-secular one, the image of a redeemed world from which the different speech it imagines as an impossibility would be in reality possible. This is the logic of naturalist aesthetics, from Flaubert’s “Madame Bovary, c’est moi” to Dreiser’s rocking-chair dreams of *Carrie* to Michaels’ own fascinatingly ambiguous identification with Dreiser.<sup>34</sup> Precisely in identifying with the aesthetic or political failure of the object, the writer gestures towards the creation of a space of critical

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between the naturalist or biopolitical aesthetics that emerge at the turn of the century and the aesthetics of the contemporary.

<sup>32</sup> Fredric Jameson, “Cognitive Mapping,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 347.

<sup>33</sup> I want to note here a resonance with Tony Smith’s account of his “revealing experience” of driving on the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike as it is described and framed by Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood” 157-9. The aesthetics of Michaels’ critical style, I am trying to suggest, are exactly these.

<sup>34</sup> See F.O. Matthiessen, *Theodore Dreiser* (Scranton: William Sloane, 1951), 85 for Dreiser’s “own fondness for a rocking chair,” which is the final symbol in *Carrie* for its heroine’s longing. Interestingly, Michaels’ ambiguous affirmation of the text’s “power” (the power of collapsing critical power) is predicated on dividing Sister Carrie’s logic from that of the author of *Sister Carrie*. Michaels, *Gold Standard*, 32-3, 58.

difference that would give, as by a miracle, new life to the dead ideological content of its object.

I do not mean to deny the power of this style of critique. As *Looking Backward* confirms, this realism is its own romance. What I want to argue is that there is a way to read such texts, and to inhabit the world they open up, without the fantasy of their redemption. Michaels generates his power from the affective horror of the whole; but his critique directs this energy elsewhere, towards a mute, transcendent image, identical to our *grasp* of the totality's fascistic wrongness. Could we, instead, take the strangeness of the aesthetic – no longer confined to a “part” but forming, precisely, the shape of the whole – to model, not a utopian world elsewhere, but the possibility of a difference internal to the world in which we live? To do this would simply be to take such texts seriously, on the terms a critic like Michaels makes available: to imagine that they could be at once themselves and yet different than what they are.

I want to pursue this thought through the work of another utopian novelist and social reformer, but one whose relation to “negativity” is, compared to Bellamy, at once more troubling and more inspiring. If biopolitics saturates the social with a negativity that can be recognized as aesthetic, this does not mean such negativity is uniformly distributed.<sup>35</sup> Women and non-whites, at the American turn of century, bore the friction of social difference not only more heavily but also *differently*.<sup>36</sup> In choosing an example,

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<sup>35</sup> I draw here and throughout on recent reevaluations of the relation between aesthetics as a form of negativity and the political valence of social difference, including Jacques Rancière's *Disagreement* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), Ivy Wilson, *Specters of Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), and especially Fred Moten, *In the Break* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

<sup>36</sup> There is much too much work in this area to cite, but some of the recent scholarship on the relation between aesthetics, biopolitics, and race and gender most relevant to my

I want to model, partially, the way in which a writer exemplarily subject to the sociality of difference works at once to imagine, theorize and live that difference, without recourse to a negativity that lives outside of what can be thought; without, in other words, the satisfaction of either an identity with this world, or the image of another one.<sup>37</sup>

### **The Poetry or Prose of the Future**

“As certainly as new occasions bring new duties, new societies will bring new poets, and Socialists often indulge in speculation as to what form the poetry of the future will take.”<sup>38</sup> The *American Fabian* magazine, an organ of the Nationalist movement, opens its front-page review of the work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman with this line, and in many ways the latter’s work seems perfectly to exemplify the aspirations of Bellamyite Nationalism. Might Gilman be, now, this poet of the future society? This is the speculative wager of the *Fabian* review. But, like Bellamy, and inspired by his writing (she joined a Nationalist club and wrote for the *Fabian*),<sup>39</sup> Gilman defies easy classification; she wrote broadly within literary genres (poetry, short fiction, utopian novels, and an unpublished detective novel), as well as social science (sociology, economics, eugenics) and politics. The *Fabian* review’s hedging irony about its own

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argument are Moten’s *In the Break*, Wilson’s *Specters of Democracy*, Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), Nahum Chandler’s “Originary Displacement,” Alexander Weheliye, *Habeus Viscus* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), Kathi Weeks, *The Problem With Work*, Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (University of Chicago Press, 2005) Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (London: Routledge, 1991) and Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004).

<sup>37</sup> I draw also on Markell, *Bound by Recognition*.

<sup>38</sup> “Charlotte Perkins Stetson: A Daring Humorist of Reform,” *The American Fabian* 3, no. 1 (January 1897), 1–3.

<sup>39</sup> See Mark van Wienen, *American Socialist Triptych* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 5-10.

prediction resolves into an awkward evaluation of Gilman's work's form and its value: "if it is not poetry it is certainly not prose." (2) This is not a bad thing for the *Fabian* (it compares her favorably with Whitman, among others); the ambiguousness is perhaps itself her "new form."

Gilman herself, implicitly acknowledging the ambiguity of her writing, addresses the question of her work's literary status. In her autobiography (whose title, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, marks a telling emphasis on the imperfective and the impersonal as life's grammatical form)<sup>40</sup> she writes that her work "is not, in the artistic sense, 'literature.' I have never made any pretense of being literary. As far as I had any method in mind it was to express the idea with clearness and vivacity, so that it might be apprehended with ease and pleasure."<sup>41</sup> This does not express modesty about her literary talents but, in a way fundamental to her thought, emphatically redefines literature (without quotes) as a picture of the social good, one whose contents can be clearly stated and whose form is a sensory effect of the conceptual good that such ideational content expresses. In this sense her instrumentalization of the aesthetic might seem to deny any space for a properly aesthetic form, and with it, a space for any social difference not subsumable within the scientific "idea" of social good. Gilman's picture of literature seems to leave little room for the speculative ambiguity that the *Fabian* review admires in her. If her writing – social theory, poetry, supernatural tales, utopian fiction – is not exactly prose, it is certainly not poetry.

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<sup>40</sup> See Michael Thompson, *Life and Action* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 25-82 for a philosophical attempt to articulate the grammar of life. My readings throughout draw on Thompson's Wittgensteinian attempt to think through the concept of life as containing its own normativity, without assuming a prediscursive vital ground.

<sup>41</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 284-5.

But if we look at Gilman's social theory, the meaning of this seemingly ambiguous relation to ambiguity comes into much sharper focus. Gilman is the Dreiser to Bellamy's Howells: both more radically naturalizing and more scarily moralistic, she insists at once on the complete freedom of all life from any conceptual or moral regulation, and on the complete "wrongness" of anything that falls outside of the "natural laws" she describes.<sup>42</sup> If the purview of Gilman's work is, as she claims, the entire "social organism," her sense of this totality is deeply marked by the threat of the negative. In Bellamy's utopia "human nature" (and nineteenth-century gender and social hierarchy) has changed "not at all" (*Looking Backward* 130), but an honorable dotage is provided for those who lack in relation to it – "the lame, the blind, the sick, and the impotent," (179); in Gilman's, humans, like other animals, are free to "change their nature" ("Similar Cases"), indeed to choose it, and they do, radically;<sup>43</sup> yet those who do not fit in the picture she paints – "degenerates," "perverts," "crazies," and the syphilitic or otherwise "unclean" – are legally prevented from reproducing and thus gotten "rid" of once and for all.<sup>44</sup> If Bellamy thinks difference can be harmoniously included in the same, Gilman takes it as a fundamentally inassimilable negativity. Insofar as any part of the social is truly different from the whole, it is incommensurable.

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<sup>42</sup> Compare the seeming radical anti-determinism of "Similar Cases" (in *The Yellow Wall-Paper, Herland, and Selected Writings*, ed. Denise Knight. New York: Penguin, 2009) with the moral naturalism of *Women and Economics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 94. *Women and Economics* enacts this ambiguity internally as well.

<sup>43</sup> E.g. in *Herland* (New York: Pantheon, 1979) and "Human Nature," (in *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Nonfiction Reader*, ed. Larry Ceplair (Columbia University Press, 1991), 46-7.

<sup>44</sup> *Herland* 68, "Birth Control," (in *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Nonfiction Reader*), "A Suggestion on the Negro Problem," (in *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Nonfiction Reader*) and *The Crux* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

In this sense Gilman just sounds like a fascist – and she has been accused of as much, or rather as little, by many critics.<sup>45</sup> If difference is ever-present, this presence is unacceptable; it cannot be integrated into the whole and thus must be erased. But this picture of her work misses its uncanniness, and its strength. What is most striking about Gilman’s view of social negativity is that she includes herself among such undesirable. And she does so with neither the anxious pride nor the defensive shame of her critics;<sup>46</sup> as with Bellamy’s West, this calmness is the strangest part, and it is precisely her theme and her form. As a female human subject to what she describes as the “sexuo-economic relation,” she speaks as part of “that half of the race” which, arriving at its current form by the influence of “unnatural conditions,” (essentially, patriarchal private enterprise capitalism) has been “cut off” from the vital power of natural selection and thus “left behind, outside, below,” the specific form of life that is proper to “genus homo,” that is, “[the] social relation” (*Women and Economics*, 74, 62, 2, 74). Having been prevented from working for their own livelihood and forced to get their sustenance through the activity of others, women labor and live in an artificially delimited private sphere whose participants are only those of the household. They are cut off from their proper formative influence: the public, social sphere of communal human work. “Woman” does not fit in

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<sup>45</sup> See Seitler *Atavistic Tendencies* and Bender “Perils of Degeneration”, and see Jennifer Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity* (University of Chicago Press), 90-105 for a comprehensive critical review of these claims.

<sup>46</sup> Ann Lane’s *To Herland and Beyond* (New York: Pantheon, 1990) is the canonical example of a pervasive defensiveness in critical recuperations of Gilman. See Helen Horowitz, *Wild Unrest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) and Mark Van Wienen, *American Socialist Triptych* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011) for more recent examples, and Seitler and Bender for examples of the internal attempt to purify feminism of its bad traits in Gilman. See Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption* (Princeton University Press, 2013), 161-180 and Fleissner for more complex engagements with the political ambiguities of Gilman’s thought, which I pursue below.

the public; does not act as part of the economic supra-organism of human co-operative activity. Where “man is the human creature” – which is to say, a social and public actor, a worker in the world – woman, in Gilman’s present, is fundamentally “aborted,” an incomplete being, precisely because her formative influences have been restricted to the private, the sexual, rather than the public, the racial (75). Woman labors, but cannot act; her world is the household, the *oikos*, not yet the social, the “economic.” Whereas for a critic of biopolitics like Arendt, the human form of life consists in the overcoming of private, family, animal life in the realm of “unnatural” political “action,” Gilman accepts the biopolitical collapse of public and private, political and family life into the field of the social; according to Gilman, humans live and work in this one realm: the economy, the social.<sup>47</sup> But women are not allowed to inhabit it fully, or rightly: because their lives are restricted to “sex functions,” and their work merely to that of biological reproduction, untouched by “modern” scientific knowledge, they experience an “unnatural” reconstruction of this public/private distinction, *within* the social, and must live, publicly, their privacy. Woman, in Gilman’s picture, is akin to what Agamben calls *homo sacer*: that human life which is included in the life of the social whole by being excluded, a persistent, undead deathliness that animates the whole.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, 7. It is important to note the ambiguity of Arendt’s position on this biopolitical collapse of *oikos* and *demos*. Her thinking on this is at least as complex as Foucault’s and her critique of this modern politics is not identical with a claim for the reconstruction of the Greek division between public and private. See, against the polemicism of the above-referenced passages in *The Human Condition*, her “Socrates,” as well as Linda Zerilli, “The Practice of Judgment: Hannah Arendt’s Copernican Revolution,” in *Theory After “Theory,”* ed. Jane Elliott and Derek Attridge (Routledge, 2011), 120–32 and Patchen Markell, “Arendt’s Work,” *College Literature*, 38.1 (2011).

<sup>48</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 6-8.

So in conspicuous contrast to Bellamy, Gilman speaks from a position of being shut out of scientific, political, normative discourse; which means, on her terms, being shut out from life. But it is precisely this monstrous difference – which is counted (not only by her contemporary “society,” but, I want to emphasize, by her, by the I who speaks) as negative, is counted as that which does not count, a “privation” – that makes her speech powerful, normative. It is uniquely, but “naturally,” women who can feel and express the “healthful[ness],” the natural normativity, of the “*pain* of their position” Gilman claims.<sup>49</sup> Gilman’s fundamental sociological insight is that “sex-functions to [women] have become economic functions. Economic functions to [men] have become sex-functions.”<sup>50</sup> But if the privative, merely reproductive life of “sex-function” has become for women economic – become (unnaturally, monstrously) their *work*, their public, human function – the specificity of this privation has something to say. Her work is to speak this monstrousness, but from her pen it is simultaneously the purest discourse of science. If for Gilman, her aesthetic production is just another expression of this coincidence of life and work, publicity and privacy, in the realm called the social, we might attend to the ways in which aesthetic form – whose specificity is precisely that it is

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<sup>49</sup> *Women and Economics*, 138, emphasis added.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* 111. It is important to note that, despite intense scholarly debate about the political use-value of Gilman’s thought for feminism and anti-capitalism, her articulation of the link between the form of industrial capitalism and the form of gender is widely agreed to be a social-scientific insight. What I am interested in here, following Jennifer Fleissner’s methodological lead, is how this real scientific knowledge is coextensive with the negativity it works to dissolve.

Though this is not the focus of my reading, there are strong links between Gilman’s sociology and recent cultural Marxist and feminist Marxist reevaluations of the relation between sex and labor and gender and class. See Weeks *The Problem with Work*, Federici *Caliban and the Witch*, and and Federici. Maurizio Lazzarato, “Immaterial Labor,” in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, ed. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (Winter 1998).

nothing special – lives in a world that at once requires it and cannot quite affirm it.<sup>51</sup> And if, conversely, Gilman’s value as a writer and a feminist sits uncomfortably close to her quasi-fascist ideology of social purity,<sup>52</sup> I want, in focusing on her way of inhabiting and theorizing this negativity that she nevertheless rejects, to keep alive in her voice the pressure of a politics and an aesthetics whose negativity is not an identity, or an end.<sup>53</sup>

### **The Power Behind the Paper**

Gilman’s secure status in the contemporary literary canon depends on “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” a semi-autobiographical story she published in 1892 about a woman who, medically confined to her home for the treatment of “nervous troubles,” descends harrowingly into madness. The story has univocally been taken as her best work, and its republication in 1973 by CUNY’s Feminist Press as a “lost feminist classic” inaugurated a decade of celebratory scholarship affirming and publicizing the insights of this hidden relic, previously buried by a masculinist culture afraid of the text’s dangerous feminine insights.<sup>54</sup> The text’s account of madness as a seemingly inevitable result of women’s medico-patriarchal subordination formed the aesthetic core of a proleptically contemporary, resistant feminism that could be excavated in Gilman’s corpus.<sup>55</sup> Such apparently uncritical over-investment was followed by a much warier critique

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<sup>51</sup> Gilman, *Living*, 284-5, Michaels, *Gold Standard*, 4-7.

<sup>52</sup> See Weheliye, Stoler, and Rasmussen on this logic; see Bender, Seitler, and Ziegler for Gilman’s eugenicism.

<sup>53</sup> See Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History.”

<sup>54</sup> For a history of the text’s publication, reception, and canonization, see Julie Dock’s introduction to *Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-Paper” And the History of Its Publication and Reception - A Critical Edition and Documentary Casebook* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1998).

<sup>55</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 89-91; see also Dock, 12-14 for a review of these claims.

exemplified by Michaels, who opens his reading of naturalist logic with an interpretation of the story.<sup>56</sup> If for earlier criticism the story embodies Gilman's own (previously silenced) feminist resistance to the logic of a patriarchal turn-of-the-century capitalism, for Michaels, it shows that "writing" (both literary and literary-critical, whether "feminine" or "masculine"), precisely by obsessing over the internal production of resistant difference, is the canonical expression of just that capitalist ideology (*Gold Standard* 28). But interestingly, both interpretations agree that the story perfectly exemplifies this special power: the power of the imagination, the thinking of negativity, whether it be resistant or normalizing. As Jonathan Crewe notes, the text's "literary merit" has been recognized since its initial publication. Whether one finds a dangerous feminine resistance, or a perilous capitalist over-complicity, the text's history pays testament to the self-evident power of its "*stylistic* good form" to trouble, and thereby to enliven, the *social* form that its content represents (Crewe 273-5, emphasis added). Here, at least, Gilman can be seen as the *Fabian's* American "poet," though of what kind of future America it is still uncertain. Even its earliest readers, the male editors who initially refused to publish it, recognized this power, one apparently describing the story as "too terribly good to be printed."<sup>57</sup> The question has been what to do with it.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> See Jonathan Crewe's summary of the 1993 "Casebook" on the text in "Queering The Yellow Wallpaper? Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Politics of Form," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 14, no. 2 (1995), 273-4, which as Crewe shows is heavily influenced by Michaels-style and supposedly "Foucauldian" critiques.

<sup>57</sup> W. D. Howells qtd. in Dock, 11.

<sup>58</sup> One should note that, contrary to what Dock calls the "myth" of its rediscovery, the text has been reprinted two dozen times, at least once each decade, since its initial publication (Dock 4), and that its connection to questions of sexual politics was always apparent to readers (Dock 19). If the text's feminist message was not read in the same way as it is now, its power – at once evidently literary and in some sense dependant on its author's sex – attracted readers from the start.

But this question is also at stake in the story itself, and it is here that I think we can begin to pursue a different reading of the text. If critics have been unsure as to what kind of work Gilman's writing does, we might look at the way she herself – in her text – enacts a relation between “‘literature’ in the artistic sense” and its social effectivity, since this relation is at once the condition and rationale of her own literary production, as she asserts, and the subject of her story, as I will show. For it is not only Gilman, the text's author, who exhibits the uncanny power of aesthetic creation: it defines the text's first-person narrator, and by virtue of the story's form, its narrative content as well. We learn early on that the narrator is blessed, or cursed, with what her husband calls an “‘imaginative power,” a power that is also a “‘habit””: the habit of “‘story-making.”<sup>59</sup> The work of this power, habitual or not, is the interest of the story. The narrator's story of her confinement in an attic room on the orders of her husband, who is also her doctor, follows the arc of an increasingly strange, eventually supernatural encounter with a realm of being “‘behind” or “‘in” the wallpaper that marks the boundaries of her life, where resides a woman (eventually a series of women), with whom she makes contact. As in that other famous fin-de-siècle ghost story, Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (published six years after “‘The Yellow Wall-Paper,” in 1898), the text's interest not only turns on an uncertainty about what we are to take as real within the diegetic frame, it doubles this special kind of imaginative uncertainty back upon itself formally: the text we read is, supposedly, the narrator's diary, an authentic first-person document. The narrator's power of imagination is the source not only of the content of the story (the story is ‘about’ what seem to be acts of the narrator's imagination), but also its form (the

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<sup>59</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “‘The Yellow Wall-paper,” *The Yellow Wall-Paper, Herland, and Selected Writings* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 166, 170.

text itself, an object in the world that we behold, is ‘caused’ by her imagination). A constitutive inexplicability in the narrative world – the increasingly strange phenomenon of the wallpaper – animates the narrative; this inexplicability in turn is referred to the (over-) imaginative speaking I, the narrator, whose discourse we read. What the text (the “diary”) imagines is that its “author” is the one whose imagination is precisely at issue in the text itself; reversing *Looking Backward*’s conceit, the reality of “The Yellow Wallpaper” as a literary work lives in the imaginative content internal to it.<sup>60</sup>

*If Looking Backward*’s West moves from aesthete to regular citizen, the narrator of “The Yellow Wall-paper” moves in the opposite direction. She would seem to agree with her doctor-husband’s claim about her when she describes her life, in the story’s first two sentences, as sadly “ordinary” but her imagination as “reaching [toward] the height of romantic felicity” (“Yellow Wall-paper” 166). Insofar as she writes – insofar as her “habit of story-telling” finds expression in the text we read – she orients toward the imaginative, the romantic, the “queer” (166). And because of its diaristic conceit, the text itself expresses of this transformation. At the beginning of the story, the narrator’s intuition about the formal pattern that delimits her world is resolutely private – “there are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will” (174) – and indeed, only the narrator thinks anything out of the ordinary is going on with her, since even her husband “does not believe I am sick!” (166). But by the end, like the lone artistic genius, her patient aesthetic work has paid off in an interpretive-aesthetic animation of this pattern that at once reveals its structure to the world and transforms it. Finally she “discovers”

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<sup>60</sup> See Gilbert and Gubar, 14-20 for a broad analysis of the way in which the link between life or aliveness and literary creativity was bound up with questions of sex in the nineteenth century.

that the wall-paper's pattern, which seemed formless, is in fact a "mov[ing]" form (178); with this aesthetic discovery, she can now act, "peel[ing] off yards of that paper" (180) and "[getting] out at last," astonishing her previously skeptical husband, who faints at this demonstration (182). The narrator has seemingly exited her ordinary life, liberating herself from the confined attic into the world of writing, from the yellow wall-paper to "The Yellow Wall-paper." This exit would "explain" the diaristic conceit and the work of the text, demonstratively producing the imaginative transformation it represents, and enacting the imagination's ontological magic of transforming (bad) reality into a mere fancy and fantasy (liberation) into a newly real world.

And indeed, many readings of the text understand this aesthetic-practical transformation to be Gilman's herself. If, as Gilman later wrote, readers initially suggested that her story "ought not to [have been] written" for fear that it would seduce its readers into realizing the madness it merely represents ("Why I Wrote the Yellow Wall-paper?"), later feminist recuperations took this danger as the text's merit. Gilbert and Gubar's influential interpretation ironically quotes the doctor-husband's description of the narrator's "imaginative power" as the condition of her "inevitable" "revision" of the "oppressive structures of society in which she finds herself...like an inexplicable text" (Gilbert and Gubar 90). The narrator's power seamlessly pierces its own fictional veil by way of criticism's allegorical grasp of it as "not unlike" Gilman's act of leading a vanguard of "nineteenth-century women out of the texts defined by patriarchal poetics into the open spaces of their own authority" (Gilbert and Gubar 91). Its imaginative overcoming of social structure at once authorizes and enacts a *real* transformation of that

structure, animating a static and oppressive social structure into a vital and liberated space for life.

But a different reading, and a different Gilman, can also be found in the narrator's words. If the narrator seems to confirm, by way of falsifying, her empiricist doctor-husband's worst fears about her – that her imaginative power is so strong that it can turn something that has no reality, a “false and foolish fancy,” into something about which one can say that “there is nothing so dangerous, so fascinating” (“Yellow Wall-paper” 175) – she also, precisely in her imaginative “work,” models a method whose scientism, and the normalizing rigor to go with it, would put him to shame. According to the narrator, her work is not to create something new or imagine a counterfactual but to explain, and thus to tame, a disturbing reality. The diary is an account of her fundamental desire to get to the bottom of the “provoking,” “formless,” “contradictory” pattern of the paper. The paper is a phenomenon that wants an explanation, and the progress of the text is the progress of her knowledge about it. The text is guided by scientific language, from the paper's initial “irritat[ing] provo[cation of] study,” to the cataloging of its lack of fit with, indeed its “defiance” of, “any laws...or anything else that I ever heard of” that might explain it and the subsequent decision to investigate it (“I *will* follow that pointless pattern to some sort of conclusion”), to the patient production of preliminary “knowledge” of its content, “scientific hypotheses” about its effects, and finally a “discovery...at last” that reveals the animating principle which gives it its form (168, 175, 172, 174, 176, 178). So we might say that the narrator, far from a romantic who wants to immerse herself in the private “height[s] of fancy” (or depths of madness), is in fact a careful scientist who works to demystify a phenomenon that presents itself as

enchanted and whose power is aesthetic. We finally learn, at the end, that there is a woman “behind” the paper, and that the paper’s disturbing, unhealthy aliveness is due to her actions. A phenomenon whose formlessness provokes attention and contemplation is explained as a lawful form – one animated, in fact, by the observable actions of a “woman” “behind” it who “shakes” it. The constitutive uncertainty of this strangely animate paper’s form, moving “impertinently” and “expressively” but inexplicably (170), is scientifically explained as the expressive actions of a person who animates it. Her ferocious interpretive energy directs itself, Walter Benn Michaels-like, toward the complete ascription of the paper’s falsely seductive formlessness into the explicable intentions of a person “behind” it.

And if we consider the relation between the text’s content and form entailed by the diaristic conceit, it becomes clear that this self-understanding of the narrator is not tendentious (or crazy): it extends out into the form of the text itself. If the “woman” “behind” the paper is external to the logical world that the paper delimits, her insanity – her externality from the paper’s logic – is what the narrator has finally come to grasp, to understand. In understanding the paper, she understands what is behind it – which turns out to be her own self. Scientifically grasping this woman’s existence outside of her logical world, the narrator merges with her. As the story progresses, the narrator’s observations about the wallpaper (and the strange world outside her room that such insights open up) become more and more whimsical and outlandish; simultaneously, her language becomes more and more animated, indeed more expressive and persuasive, as she shakes off the prudery (“The color is repellent, almost revolting...unclean” [168]) and unconvincing impersonal restraint (“But what is one to do?” [166]) of Victorian

decorum for powerful, imagistic aesthetic description (“they connect diagonally, and the sprawling outlines run off in great slanting waves of optic horror” [172]) and triumphant narrative assertion (“‘I’ve got out at last’” [182]).<sup>61</sup> The more she imagines, the more aesthetic her language becomes; the easier, finally, it is for us to tell that she is crazy. As the text – her writing – gets more and more imaginative, more and more aesthetically convincing, it explains itself better and better. The retreat into a private, imaginary world that only the narrator can access is simultaneously the achievement of a public, scientific discourse that explains this privacy. As the narrator drifts farther and farther from her “ordinary” life, and her sanity, her discourse moves closer and closer to science, to explanation. “‘I’ve got out at last’”: The text concludes with this utterance that is at once the narrator’s last and in a sense her first, both the conclusive evidence of her break with logic, and the incontrovertible, self-grounding act of her publicity.

### **Getting Things Wong**

This identity of scientific understanding and aesthetic and narrative achievement presents a real problem. To the extent that the narrator’s imaginative power results in new insights – say, about the effects of patriarchal capitalism on women’s sanity – it does so in the voice of a scientific discourse that cannot affirm them. To say, with Gilbert and Gubar, that the text models a new, better world is to speak a social scientific language that grounds itself in a grasp of that text’s author as crazy (though thereby curable).<sup>62</sup> The medical knowledge *about* the woman cannot be the insights *of* the woman. Gilman herself would seem to confirm this view. “The story of the story,” as Gilman recounts it

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<sup>61</sup> See Crewe for an extended reading of the relation between bad aesthetic and bad social form.

<sup>62</sup> See Foucault’s discussion of a text of the French psychiatrist Louren in “Sexuality and Solitude,” *London Review of Books*, May 21, 1981.

in “Why I Wrote the Yellow Wall-paper?,” is that she herself, having suffered for years from “severe and continuous nervous breakdown tending toward melancholia – and beyond,” underwent the treatment described in the fictional text. “Obeying” the prescriptions of rest-cure inventor S. Weir Mitchell<sup>63</sup> – “live as domestic a life as possible...have but two hours intellectual life a day” – brought Gilman “so near the borderline of utter mental ruin that I could see over.” This vision of madness is the scene of her text: she subsequently “return[s] to work” and “[writes] the Yellow Wallpaper.” By “seeing over” into madness, Gilman can see madness, as such, and thus write it; her experience of madness, an experience of “the imagination,” authorizes her at once to produce the imaginative text and to define its reality, its normative medical work: “It was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked.”<sup>64</sup> The imaginative power of the text is its scientific normalization. The text overcomes itself; Gilman is the evidence.

To many recent critics, this has served as evidence that the text wields its power for evil, not good, by working to preserve the social order that Gilbert and Gubar would have it resist. If the latter saw the narrator as “literally locked away from creativity” (89-90), and the text as the story of the fictional narrator’s heroic escape from a nightmarish society grounded in the medical-moral control of women and into the new creative reality of Gilman’s free artistic production, Walter Benn Michaels claims that the narrator is “not so much locked away from creativity as locked into it,” and therefore Gilman, precisely insofar as she repeats, in the actual social world, the imaginative work of her

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<sup>63</sup> See Lane 108-132 for this relationship.

<sup>64</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “Why I Wrote The Yellow Wallpaper?,” *The Forerunner* 4, no. 10 (October 1913), 271.

character, “radicalize[s] rather than reject[s],” realizes rather than transforms, the oppressive reality of the patriarchal-capitalist “paper.”<sup>65</sup> From this perspective, we could say that Weir Mitchell’s cure worked beautifully, if occultly: the physician has healed himself, and his world, through the spiritual medium of his patient. Aesthetic negativity is a kind of immunological or homeopathic normativity.<sup>66</sup> The narrator’s, and Gilman’s, imaginative power is not a resistance but precisely a complicity; rather than producing new forms, it fits everything into an old one by expanding its reach. By suggesting that hysterical women really are “crazy,” and what’s needed is merely better science (one that understands its own, misogynistic, failings) with which to treat them, she reaffirms the same discursive and normative structure that produces and defines femininity based on a privation; the only difference is that she wants to fix, to cure that structure, by curing the women that sicken it. This is Gilman as a late-liberal technocrat, vigilantly seeking out phenomena that social science has missed and diligently tinkering with it to better capture them. And this is the logic of biopolitics: a normative realm that is not threatened or transformed by what resists or escapes it, but precisely predicts and produces this negativity, includes it proleptically as the difference that will, in sacrificing itself, give life to the whole. As Jennifer Fleissner shows, this has been a worry not just about “The Yellow Wall-paper,” but more generally about the naturalism and turn-of-the-century American (white, middle-class) reform feminism that Gilman is seen to exemplify. If

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<sup>65</sup> Michaels, *Gold Standard*, 4.

<sup>66</sup> Robert Esposito’s influential understanding, in his introduction to *Biopolitics: A Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013) describes “immunization” as biopolitics’ paradigmatic form: negativity or difference (of opinion, subject position, social identity) functions as a kind of healthful stimulus to the totality; the play of difference in contents homeopathically produces and stabilizes the organic form of the social-political whole. Note, too, the resonance with Sacvan Bercovitch’s account, in *The American Jeremiad*, of American political consensus-making.

Gilman, in *Women and Economics*, describes contemporary woman as a “fossilized” life form (24-6), her theory imagines life itself as inorganic; the “better world” it predicts, where “our hybrid natures” and crazy women have given way to free “mother[ing] of the race...the easy right of birth, ...and the calm, slow forces of social evolution” (*Women and Economics* 331, 340), conjures visions, for the critic, of a fascistic hell. The world of her “feminist utopian novel,” *Herland*, where an all-female society has erased conflict and unhappiness along with men, sexual desire, non-Anglos, “the unfit,” and non-instrumental nature, appears less as a lighthearted thought experiment in a new form of life than as a totally “alienated” reification, where “everything human [becomes] an artifact.”<sup>67</sup> On this view – that of Thomas Peyser, William Leach, T.J. Jackson Lears, and Ann Douglas – the claim of social “reform” (and the feminism of white middle-class reformers is here seen to be paradigmatic) to finally “get things right,” to have a vision of a perfect form and thus a clear technique for reform, is a dangerous ideological belief in a totalizing rational order, a rejection of contingency and a refusal of the incompleteness of history.<sup>68</sup> Such social reform, in “denying passion, conflict, and ‘evil’ their right to exist...d[oes] away with the dynamic element necessary for genuine organic growth.”<sup>69</sup> By taking the socially and aesthetically negative as merely instrumental to their own overcoming, writers like Gilman destroy the hope that they aimed to realize. For such critics, Gilman is just like her doctor Weir Mitchell, only worse: in trying to “cure” sick, patriarchal medical science, she has killed the social; her utopia, like Bellamy’s (or Pundita’s), is not just sick, but dead, not just oppressive, but horrific. Here the inevitable

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<sup>67</sup> Peyser, *Utopia and Cosmopolis*, 85.

<sup>68</sup> Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity*, 81-100.

<sup>69</sup> Leach qtd. in Fleissner, 97.

collapse of the imaginative form of “The Yellow Wall-Paper” into the biopolitically normativizing interpretation of “Why I Wrote The Yellow Wallpaper?,” rather than dialectically vitalizing society with the ever-resistant energy of aesthetics, in fact leads metonymically to the total, scientific closure of the world, a final and complete evacuation of negativity and difference.

But as Fleissner brilliantly shows, (and as my reading of Michaels has tried to anticipate), such readings repeat precisely the gesture they critique.<sup>70</sup> Their theoretical point is that orientation towards a perfect social form, and isomorphically the boring “unimaginative” or pseudo-scientific style of much of this writing, is not merely a regrettable error which better and more complete contemporary discourse can rectify (reform), but an ineradicable taint: precisely the taint of purification. Gilman cannot be forgiven the sin of trying to cleanse the world of sin; she is mad to think you can get rid of madness. Such critics – uncannily repeating the logic they abhor – want to purify discourse once and for all of this dangerous negativity: the danger of thinking you can get rid of negativity. In *absolutizing* writing like Gilman’s, criticism *negativizes* it, imagines it as a space from which *it* might speak, ‘negatively’ or critically, the negativity that the writing tries to deny.

If such critics worry that Gilman merely intensifies the normalizing logic of medical discourse, Fleissner’s critique suggests instead that this worry is closer to Mitchell than Gilman is, and in seeing this we might see them all differently. If critics are concerned with reform feminism’s evacuation of imaginative negativity, so to, in a way, is the medical discourse of a Weir Mitchell. Although the latter, and his fictional double

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<sup>70</sup>Fleissner, 76-7, 100.

the husband-doctor, prescribes a complete taboo on Gilman/the narrator's "work," i.e., on her imaginative activity, such a restriction in fact evinces a deep faith in the power of the imagination.

Gilman's power of "imagination" metonymizes, for Weir Mitchell and the narrator's doctor-husband, a kind of positivity or empiricity of privation that is proper to the feminine: a standing threat in relation to which the specifically feminine form of life is constituted. Unable to participate in the active, public life of the male social world, women negotiate lives in relation to a world elsewhere: a shadowy version of this one, in which the doomed desire for real activity produces imaginary compensation in the form of evanescent, seductive images and fantasies, which they must nevertheless ultimately resist, on pain of madness and the full loss of humanity. The castles in the air of feminine fantasies may be eternal, but they must never be inhabited. To be a healthy woman is to live in constant vigilance against the seductive pull of the imagination, to which it is her nature to be susceptible.<sup>71</sup> This "hystericization" of the imagination takes femininity as the nature preserve of enchantment, a perhaps necessary, perhaps felicitous reminder of the recalcitrance of mystery, darkness, non-knowledge against which the progressive formation of the world along scientific lines never-endingly strives.

So Weir Mitchell may say that the kind of work Gilman does must never be done by a woman. But he does not say that such work must not be done, or that it does not have to do with women. The prohibition is not only an affirmation, but also a kind of management, containment; in other words, a formation. As Foucault suggests, "the

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<sup>71</sup> One should note the links here to a certain Puritan image of the human as defined through this constant battle with its ineradicable femininity; Hawthorne's Dimmesdale is a good example. See Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy*.

hysteric was the perfect patient since she provided *material for knowledge*: she herself would retranscribe the effects of medical power into the forms that the physician could describe according to a scientifically acceptable discourse.”<sup>72</sup> The hysteric’s experience – sexual, privative, unreal, yet scientific, public, and pathological – “makes manifest the modes of being of order,” makes empirical, and thus discursively available, the transcendental presuppositions of medical discourse to itself.<sup>73</sup> And what this means is not that the hysteric has some truth or normativity that the physician cannot see or won’t acknowledge: precisely the opposite. The idea of a liberatory madness that gives the lie to normative medical science is just the idea of that science: that there is some power in the negativity of the empirical which must be made to speak, whose recalcitrant mystery animates the positive knowledge production of normative discourse. Foucault argues that “the whole of modern psychiatry is fundamentally pervaded by antipsychiatry”; psychiatric power runs on (the claim of) the negativity it aims to overcome.<sup>74</sup> What Gilman’s story suggests is that literary criticism has a similarly “sick,” fetishistic relation to its imaginative object, needing it to produce a mystical form of negativity to animate the speech that would overcome it, to say what it truly means, against itself. “The Yellow Wall-Paper” is understood to have (aesthetic) power precisely insofar as it requires the supplementary art of criticism to form or contain it, to interpret it in its occult, recalcitrant empiricity, against its own – i.e., Gilman’s – claims to interpret itself. It is the physician, the critic, who can finally perform this work of the imagination such that it orients in the right way.

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<sup>72</sup> Michel Foucault, “Psychiatric Power,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1998), 44.

<sup>73</sup> Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xxi.

<sup>74</sup> Foucault, “Psychiatric Power,” 45.

But Gilman already performs it. If for the technocratic liberal aesthetic, negativity animates the progressive historical conversation of bare life into social form, Gilman refuses the dialectic that would hold these two moments apart. Gilman will neither romanticize madness (the point of the story is to steer us away from it) nor reify health (Weir Mitchell's treatment itself needs a cure). The narrator is *at once* insane and insightful, imaginative and normalizing; the two terms are immediate, and there is no third term. Gilman is not herself the synthesis of these moments but rather their identical incommensurability. The bad and the good, the private and the public, cannot be balanced or harmonized towards a better or more complex whole: they leak into each other, infect each other. The story "works" by seducing the reader "over into" the insane imaginary of the narrator; this seduction, according to the text, does not lead to but *is* the transmission of the text's (progressive, social scientific) knowledge. It worked that way for Gilman too; that is how she wrote it. It is not that the narrator breaks free from the restrictive formal boundaries of the wallpaper; nor does the woman "behind" the paper break free into discourse. "I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled," and the paper is at once gone and complete, vanished from the story and produced in our hands (180).

If the aesthetic interest of Gilman's story for critics – like the interest of the feminine imaginative power for nineteenth-century medical science – has been its constitutive formlessness, a fundamental ambiguity about what it means, such interest always ends with the Americanist claim to discern in this ambiguity the promising form of a happiness to come, a better world whose as-yet-vague outlines scientific critique will help to bring into view. Critique publicizes and forms a model difference that is thereby constituted as private and anterior, unreal and unrealized; like social science, it is a

continuous and progressive historical conversation of the formless aesthetic energy of the socially negative into a new and better social actuality.

The virtue of Michaels' totalizing critique, like Benjamin's messianism, is to show that this act cannot occur over time, in history; the endless progressive formation of the whole is premised on precisely the cancellation of the aesthetic tension, the real difference or negativity, that energizes it. Insofar as such difference is converted and oriented by a science of the social, it was never a difference in the right way. But in Michaels' kind of critique, the negativity that it commemorates by way of denying has to be redeemed elsewhere. What the literature and the world of the turn of the century at once realizes and anticipates is that this negativity is already the form of our lives under biopolitical modernity, and it has its own temporality. Gilman calls it *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*: complete in the imperfect and predicatively undecidable, but its publication makes a difference. In Gilman's utopian novel *Herland*, the aesthetic pretext for the didactic account of the utopian society is the reverse of Bellamy's: the "modern, Western" male explorers, rather than taking down knowledge of the Herlanders' social form, record instead their own interrogation by the Herlanders about their (Western) world. It is the Herlanders who continuously express amazement about the "normal" world of the explorers, and uncertainty about the possibility of entering it. The desire is not to transcribe and realize the utopian image, but to connect the uncanny ordinariness of the utopian back with the world from which it has been cut off. To actualize the aesthetic would be to inhabit not utopia but the world that includes it as a difference.

In Gilman, I have tried to show, there are no secrets, and along with Bellamy her work can fairly be taken, as it has been, to be exemplary of the progressive naturalism of the turn of the century, with all the political unpleasantness and aesthetic disappointments such texts evince. But Gilman is willing to be at once crazy and normal, exciting and boring, sexed and bodiless, failed and successful; to read her literature and her theory is thus to enter into at once a strange incoherence, a dangerous forgetfulness, and a revelatory clarity whose coexistence opens her intention, her thought and her life onto something beyond themselves, a self-difference that is neither their future nor their past but their very essence.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### TRUE ROMANCE: THE END OF AMERICANIST AESTHETIC FORM IN RICHARD POWERS' *GAIN*

It is still a long way to a common life of mankind on earth, but the goal begins to be visible.

-Auerbach, "The Brown Stocking," *Mimesis*

(The time will come, though I stop here to-day and to-night).  
What is it then between us?

-Whitman, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"

Where does literature find itself in the present? Richard Powers' 1998 novel *Gain* gives a panoptic view of the contemporary American world, in which life resolves, more or less simply, into the twin challenges and rewards of corporate and domestic life. It narrates two histories: that of Laura Bodey, an upper-middle-class woman, and that of Clare Incorporated, a soap company turned multinational chemical corporation; both live in the fictional town of Lacewood, Illinois, a place where "folks made things."<sup>1</sup> Laura's story is one of domestic life interrupted; introduced as "the newest member of Next Millennium Realty's Million Dollar Movers Club," a woman with two adolescent children, an ex-husband, a married lover, and "no problem that five more years couldn't solve," she is soon diagnosed with ovarian cancer and, over the year of her life that remains, must try to improvise a way forward, for her and her family (6). Clare's is one of American innovation unleashed, the company reaching, in ever-more inventive ways over its 180-year rise, towards a world where "your life is chemistry. So is ours" (173).

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Powers, *Gain* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998), 1.

The two stories are told in two distinctive voices. In the sections charting Clare's rise, we get the Whiggish, broad, ironic discourse of a corporation that knows its own defiance of gravity is due only to the eternal earthliness of the human condition. Beginning from the humble human necessity for soap, Clare never forgets that its empire of "anti-fat," the universal solvent, "smoothing the way for the insoluble to be taken up into solution," is itself merely that fat in solution (45, 50). The descriptions of Clare's rise inhabit a tone somewhere between Coca-Cola and John Winthrop, laughing a bit at, and certainly enjoying, the uselessness of the grand human spectacle, while believing fervently all the while that this spectacle opens directly onto the highest purpose.<sup>2</sup> Relishing its exacting and erudite account of Clare's expansion, it winks constantly at Clare's success peddling "that most elusive quality, Quality" (48), yet it does so from the optimism of a timeless historicism, for which that transition between quality and Quality is indeed right around the corner, or before our eyes. "Like a maturing treasury bill, Adam's expiring curse called out for new capital targets to absorb it," and the steam-powered soap extruder is ready to fit the bill, a real live "automated crank [that] seemed capable of propelling the very engine of history" (75). The sections that follow Laura inhabit a tone at once more intimate and more expansive, curious, and wandering, taking on the shape of an exemplary middle-American consciousness familiar from John Ashbery or David Foster Wallace. It ranges from a worried domesticity ("[Tim's] been logging way too many on-line hours these days. Laura needs to start rationing him, force him outside, get him a bike or something equally archaic" [15]), to a disoriented

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<sup>2</sup> Constance Rourke's *American Humor* is the classic description of this ironism (for example, in the "tall tale"); Donald Pease's "*Moby-Dick* and the Cold War" links this convincingly to the persistent eschatological undercurrent of Americanist rhetoric.

chemotherapeutic haze (“She gives the day over to breathing. She needs all her powers of concentration...Nazis are loose in her blood’s lowlands” [127]) to American pastoral (she “looks up into the gathering May sky and wrinkles her nose. Yesterday’s *Post-Chronicle* predicted azure. But there’s no point in second-guessing yesterday, with today coming on like there’s no tomorrow” [6]). Throughout, the limitation of her field of concern presses insistently against a searching speculativeness within it.

Between the two is *Gain* itself, but here the text is silent. Contrasting Clare’s urbane cynicism almost exactly with Laura’s homely enchantment, *Gain* stereoscopically imagines an American world exhausted by its two poles. As its narrative unfolds, these two realms – one in which Clare grows infinitely into its “artificial personhood,” and the other in which Laura arrives rapidly at her organic end – dehisce radically. For the last hundred pages, Laura can barely stay afloat; meanwhile, Clare delivers ever-more-precise, ever more sophisticated “material solutions” around the globe. But in the yawning gap between them the sense of a deeper connection emerges: not as some new discourse that the text will speak, but precisely as the increasingly pressing absence of *Gain*’s own voice. The sense that the two trajectories may be correlated, that Clare’s spontaneous, seemingly endless capacity for self-actualization relies on a kind of occult vampirism of Laura’s natural personhood, her intimate, delimited bodily reality, that this is a kind of metaphor for capitalism or modernity more generally, and that, thereby, something has gone deeply wrong – resonates in the text’s silence, the mere, and increasingly jarring, juxtaposition of the two strands. Is Clare responsible for Laura’s illness? Does Laura’s cancer represent a kind of embodied knowledge of Clare’s hidden truth? These questions, exemplifying much vaster ones about the direction and costs of an

increasingly technically-organized world and the kind of knowledge able to grasp its compounding complexity, emerge in *Gain* as precisely the kind of thing that it cannot answer. The suggestion is made that Clare's factories may have polluted Lacewood, and that its ubiquitous household products, the backdrop of Laura's daily life, may be carcinogenic; the novel ends with hints of a class-action lawsuit that attempts to formalize this possibility into a "claim" that will redress it. But this formalization structures *Gain* only in its absence, described in a retrospective glance that contrasts with the present tense of the rest of the novel. Clare grows ever stronger, shifting into new markets and monetizing the very environmentalism that might challenge it (387-8); Laura, pointing at "herself, her wasted torso" rejects the idea that "this...", is a "claim" (324); and the world that together they exemplify continues on. When Laura's children receive money from the lawsuit, her daughter will spend it on failed in-vitro fertilization and get ovarian cancer, while her son will use it as seed money to incorporate his biogenetics startup (403-5).<sup>3</sup>

What then does *Gain* say? Nothing could be more obvious than what it is "about"; it wears its meaning on its sleeve, in the very form that constitutes its visibility as a novel. As the title of one Ralph Clare's reading of the novel argues, "Your Loss is Their Gain"; the novel manifestly presents the transfer of vitality from the "corporeal" to the

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<sup>3</sup>The son's startup focuses on cancer research, and the daughter's enhanced medical attention reveals her cancer earlier, "gaining her many years" (404); whether or not one sees these as significantly different trajectories from those described in *Gain*'s narrative present, the work of these projected futures is precisely to draw attention to their continuity with *Gain*'s. Powers' use of the word "gain" for the daughter's extra life is a good example of how the text's style itself both coincides with and takes exception from the narrative trajectory: the ring of techno-optimism coincides with the moral dissonance through which the narrator suggests that this is merely more of the same kind of "gain" that it cannot stop itself from narrating, indeed which it seems made only to narrate.

“corporate,” from Laura’s natural body to Clare’s artificial one.<sup>4</sup> And this transfer not only resists, but seems to evacuate the possibility of, critical interpretation, of the novel’s turning this energy, its narrative, toward a different purpose. The text allows space for its reader, its “you,” only in the increasingly cold silence that, linking these two voices, constitutes the “they” of the text’s form; if Laura’s loss is Clare’s gain, *Gain* itself feels like a loss for the reader, a vision of our own desire for literature to “say something” new about the world as itself generating the worldly helplessness for which we would have it compensate.

We could say that the novel speaks most urgently to its own impossibility, the absence of any space, in the exhausted world it depicts, for a discourse, let alone a way of life, outside of the increasingly pervasive, because increasingly correlated, forms that Clare and Laura exemplify. What we come increasingly to see, as the text progresses and the dissonance between the two strands intensifies, is that the two lives, Laura’s homely natural one and Clare’s world-historical artificial one, are not opposed, dissonant, unreconciled, but linked at their core: they share a discourse, a way of being in language, and this form is just the one that we, here, read. How can Laura turn Clare’s bad actions into a “claim” when those actions constitute the very form of intelligibility of her life, the conditions of her second nature? By way of this dilemma, the text poses one for the reader, and for itself: how can we hear anything new in literature when it finds its own voice only in a collapse into the world it depicts? Laura and Clare, reader and text: the relation over which *Gain* arcs seems, in reconciling worldly and narrative desire

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<sup>4</sup> Ralph Clare, “Your Loss Is Their Gain: The Corporate Body and the Corporeal Body in Richard Powers’s *Gain*,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 54, no. 1 (January 1, 2013).

absolutely, to dissolve them completely, collapsing the hope that inside the object lurks a better world, calling out for us to bring it to light. *Gain* is a story about what Edgar Allan Poe might have called the least poetical of all topics, the death of an ordinary woman, one that funds, all too smoothly, her lover's immortality in the artificial body of the text.<sup>5</sup>

Redoubling the Laura and Clare romance with its reader, *Gain* tells us that the form literature holds out is the one we, in the world, already have. What then do we as readers and critics see when, seeing this form, we find ourselves to have *wanted*, needed it? How could *Gain* tell us that we don't?

### **The Romance of the Contemporary**

*Gain*'s questions are far from unique. The sense that art, in the present, is defined by its powerlessness or silence – and strangely comes into view, is articulable, precisely *as* such silence, the urgent blankness of its own claim – is a hallmark of humanistic scholarship about the post-WWII era. For our purposes this can best be described using the rubric of “postmodernism,” a term designating both an aesthetic style and a historical moment – in Fredric Jameson's terms, a “cultural logic of late capitalism.”<sup>6</sup> This period,

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<sup>5</sup> Poe's claim, in his “Philosophy of Composition,” is that “the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world.”

<sup>6</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991). “Neoliberal aesthetics” has recently gained currency; this frames the question in a more explicitly political and historical register. The collapse of subject and object is there understood as the collapse of liberalism's constitutive distinction between formal-legal and natural personhood (in Foucault's terms the “empirico-transcendental doublet” that grounds the politics of possessive individualism and the episteme of the human sciences), and its outcome in the constructivist, neoliberal notion of “human capital,” personhood as an entrepreneurial-aesthetic project. Though this register obviously resonates with *Gain*'s terms (and I will discuss the notion of corporate personhood more explicitly later in this essay), the rubric of “postmodernism,” framing the question from the side of aesthetics, is more useful here for understanding what humanistic critique has wanted from aesthetics itself. See Foucault's *Order of Things* and *Birth of Biopolitics*. Pierro Dardot and Christian Laval's *The New Way of the*

and its art, is marked both by the collapse of a true discourse of art as such, autonomous art,<sup>7</sup> and what has broadly been described as the aestheticization of daily life, the seeping of aesthetic form into the world itself.<sup>8</sup> Art simultaneously becomes impossible to identify, and the singularly revealing symptom of a world in which the form that aesthetics has, since Kant and Schiller, held out as a regulative idea – the imaginary reconciliation of subject and object, self and world – has become uncannily constitutive: has actually occurred.

The concept of postmodernism emerges out of a tradition of Marxist cultural critique, and it marks the moment in which such a critique seems at once especially revealing of the world and singularly powerless to change it.<sup>9</sup> For Marx, in commodity capitalism the object is a “sensuous thing” that is “at the same time suprasensible”; reaching towards it, we grasp ourselves in the intangible (“social”) essence behind its veil, the invisible *I* that, by hiding, it shows.<sup>10</sup> This “objective” invisibility that points beyond itself to the human essence hidden within it Marx calls “form”; it is something like the synthetic *a priori* of capitalist modernity, a structure we intuit as the necessary condition of things appearing to us, the unrepresentable form of representation.<sup>11</sup> For the

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*World* (London: Verso, 2014) provides a helpful analysis of the notion of “human capital.”

<sup>7</sup> That is to say, the collapse of art as a living practice, an integral but distinct part of culture and history as such; which is concomitant with its institutionalization and professionalization as an academic or esoteric practice, less an object of “human science” than itself one. Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* is an early and complex reflection on this. The term “cultural logic of late capital” is from Jameson’s *Postmodernism*.

<sup>8</sup> See Jameson’s *Postmodernism* and Cavell’s “Avoidance of Love,” in *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 267–353.

<sup>9</sup> An early articulation of this sense from within “cultural” or “Western” Marxism is Baudrillard’s 1968 *The System of Objects* (London: Verso, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> *Capital* 165, 173.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

academic Marxism that emerged (primarily as German critical theory) along with modernism in the early twentieth century, and that became broadly influential in the U.S. humanistic academy around the time of postmodernism, this form provides the wedge by which both art and the world might be illuminated, and thereby reciprocally transformed. If art is a form of commodity fetish – the reification of value as such, a chrematistical purposiveness without purpose – then the fetishized commodity is, at the same time, a latent promise of autonomy or happiness, a visible sign of the hope, and need, for a truly sensuous freedom (in Marx’s early words, a world where “the senses become directly in their practice theoreticians”<sup>12</sup>), whose reified form in the object-world critique can reanimate and publicize.<sup>13</sup> But in postmodernism, critics worry, the distinction between the art object and the commodity collapses, and thereby the dualism internal to each no longer holds open a unique space for thinking.<sup>14</sup> If critique, as it emerges in the sense of a fundamentally modern practice of worldly transformation, is predicated on the hope of some further, human truth buried (by humans) deep inside the things of this world, a substance that the *I* exists to grasp, in postmodernism this projective “depth” emerges on the surface.<sup>15</sup> In Stanley Cavell’s terms, romanticism (or skepticism) has become generalized, an atmosphere; the metaphysical potency behind things leaks out of them,

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<sup>12</sup> Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 87.

<sup>13</sup> Influential versions of this utopianism include Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*, Benjamin’s “Surrealism” and “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility,” and Bloch’s *The Principle of Hope*.

<sup>14</sup> Adorno’s critical exchanges with Benjamin about his “Work of Art” essay are an early version of this worry.

<sup>15</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 11-2.

and thus out of us.<sup>16</sup> The subject does not imagine itself behind its objects, but finds itself on their surfaces. The “enigmatic character” of the object, its form itself, becomes spectacularly visible.<sup>17</sup> For high modernist Marxists like Fredric Jameson, this threatens the collapse of the imaginary itself – the sense that in the contemporary “there is no alternative.”<sup>18</sup> If there is anything wrong or missing, anything we *want*, postmodernism seems to suggest, we cannot find a way to imagine it other than as already actual. Where then could we find – or put – our desires and critiques, our aspirations and disappointments?

This question for critique becomes, in *Gain*, a question about life. How can the destruction of Laura’s life be reinterpreted, transformed into a claim for a better world? The need for it to do so is the very condition, for the reader, of the novel’s intelligibility, its form; the impossibility of that transformation is what it is about, its content. Laura’s passivity in the face of Clare, her failure to articulate a legal “claim,” is at one and the same time a figure for literature’s own inability to make a claim, and *thereby* a claim for the worldliness, and power, of figurality itself. For a critic like Michael Fried, the threat

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<sup>16</sup> Cavell, “Avoidance of Love” 118-20, see also *The World Viewed*. In “Art and Objecthood” Michael Fried describes postmodernism (in his terms literalism) as a kind of noxious atmosphere that “lies between the arts.”

<sup>17</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 164. See also Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1996), 15-6.

<sup>18</sup> Jameson’s discussion of postmodern style as “blank parody,” a stylistic self-consciousness devoid of a regulative norm (*Postmodernism* 17), and Fried’s discussion of “literalist” artwork in “Art and Objecthood” (discussed further below) are influential formulations of this claim. Both, however, hold out hope that a further artistic or critical framing of postmodernism can redeem it; see Fried’s “Art and Objecthood” and Jameson’s “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture.”

Conversely, Deleuze-influenced theories of the relation between aesthetics and late capitalism see this as presaging capitalism’s end rather than its historical sedimentation. See Mark Fisher’s *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009).

of postmodernism is of no longer being able to learn anything from the object except the impossibility of our making a claim on it. For Laura, her discovery that Clare has formed and “molded” her life “beyond imagining” does feel like a non-revelation, precisely foreclosing any desire to make a legal claim (364). It is not that she won’t do it: from the settlement the text shows her children receiving she will have, it seems, “joined the claim,” from the perspective of some unrepresentable textual afterlife. The point is rather that “joining the claim” will not redeem or compensate for her life; it “makes no difference whether this business gave her cancer. They have given her everything else” (364). Far from collapsing the imaginary, this recession from claim-making is just Laura’s access to that “beyond” it promises, allowing her “a weird dream of peace,” a dream of her own end, but also of the form of the novel itself (364). To see what criticism might learn from this, I want to begin with a scene in which the interplay of the novel’s two voices, its form, is at stake for Laura herself, and in which the inadequacy of a legal claim opens out onto the form of an imaginative one that offers, precisely, “no compensation” (325).

### **The Conversation of Remarriage**

After Laura’s diagnosis, her ex-husband Don comes back into her life, helping with her care, taking more responsibility for their children. Their renewed relation is less about recapturing a former intimacy than trying to salvage some stability from what they shared; though Clare has, in some sense, come between them, it also gives them a chance to come to terms with the failure of their marriage, acknowledging the ties that still link them and providing their children with the image of a way forward. Don is a caricature of what literary criticism describes as a paranoid reader, a man to whom “the world owed

[...] a perpetual explanation” and for whom life consists in an “eternal search for that missing bit of information” (181), and so his way of getting a handle on the situation is to game both etiology and treatment, cause and effect, looking for hidden possibilities in her illness (arguing that her “unaccountable” cancer must be “solid grounds for a lawsuit” [256, 114]) and in her medical care (“ ‘Are we asking the right questions?’ Don asks. ‘Is there anything we should ask you that we haven’t?’ ” [85]).<sup>19</sup> The class-action lawsuit against Clare represents the possibility of “knowledge” and “compensation” (325-6), for them and for their children; Don is thus mystified when Laura balks at joining it. He asks her:

“You going to do it?”

“Do . . . ?”

“Come on. Get in on the claim?”

“Don. It’s hard for me, hard to think of *this* . . . “ Her hands cup inward and sweep back over herself, her wasted torso. “As a claim.” (324)

For Don, “the claim” represents the possibility of transforming Laura’s cancer, this unnatural intrusion into her privacy, into something public, articulable; of finding, behind the seemingly natural waywardness of her bodily history, some human act, some desire – Clare’s – that, in being actualized, produced Laura’s cancer, made her life run away from her. The “claim” would reveal the truth about Clare’s goals, and thus demand that it make good on them. If Don here represents – both *in* his person, as his way of being, and *to* Laura, as a form of practical reason – a legalistic intensification of the Emersonian claim that “every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact...every appearance in nature

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<sup>19</sup> See Eve Sedgwick’s “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading” for an influential account of the “hermeneutics of suspicion.”

corresponds to some state of mind,”<sup>20</sup> Laura, directing her language inward, invokes the aesthetic obverse of this romantic thought, suggesting that her very bodiliness, her experience, registers an absence or failure of language – as if such a claim could never be adequate. Don wants to reveal – in language, as a claim – the intentionality behind their shared world; Laura suggests that her body, insofar as it is her, is something to which she can make such intimate reference, will never be captured by language, is infinitely more, or perhaps less, than a “claim.” And yet: this linguistic absence stands between them, occasions and organizes their conversation. What, then, is the “this . . .” to which she points?

For one, it goes without saying, it is an almost painfully demure reference to the culturally overcoded privacy of her sex, the unnamable, therefore not truly bearable, because essentially vital, capacity for reproduction with a difference; the kind of thing that reference hits obliquely. For another, it is “her” ovarian cancer: the monstrous transformation that this capacity has undergone in her (possible) exposure to Clare, or the possibility of Clare, an exposure that, constituting the text’s own form, it similarly fails to represent. In this sense what she might have otherwise called “*my* body,” and have owned in her language, has become both strangely alien, a “this,” and at the same time so intimately identified with her that just the fact of her speaking seems to express it, to indicate, as ellipsis, the pain that now *is* her life. Her “wasted torso” is the obscene, natural productivity of this culturally overcoded deictic ellipses, its fatal actualization on its own terms; cancer as runaway self-differentiation, a beyond of the pleasure principle with no regard for or look back on its origin. If for Don this transformation is something

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<sup>20</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature,” in *Essays and Lectures* (Library of America, 1983), 20.

like a betrayal, a cosmically unjust interruption of their attempt to build a shared form of life, Laura feels that this happening cannot be accounted for, traced back to any discernable occurrence: “she hasn’t exposed herself. She hasn’t, knowingly or otherwise, as far as she knows... Whatever she’s getting by chance or proximity is no more than anyone else in the known world is getting.” Far from there being something out of the ordinary, thus to be discovered and explained, her cancer is concomitant with experience, thus knowledge, itself; the “exposure” is merely her life being opened to the world: “the whole planet, a superfund site. Life causes cancer.” (323).

Don’s desire is to link the failure of this private world that they share, their marriage, to a failure of the world as a whole, a failure of the forms by which life is reproduced in common. If their world can no longer be maintained, affirmed – if, for example, the “this...” that linked them, intimately and legally, can no longer be stated, a subject of conversation – then Don wants to turn this failure, which Laura makes explicit, out onto a claim on the world. For Don this is a question of their children’s future. “You have to think of the kids . . . If there’s any kind of settlement. Anything at all . . .” (326). If Laura and Don can no longer imagine a future life together, if their own relation in the world cannot be redeemed, and thus cannot redeem it, maybe Laura can define this “claim” against Clare, turning a failure of romantic utopia into the grounds of a legal one. The failure of this intimate relation, the loss of their private representation, in marriage, of a good future, might fund a public one; the romantic modeling of an intentional, reciprocally constituted human community (what Cavell calls the “conversation of justice,”) gives way to a legal or jurisprudential claim (and thus perhaps, again on Cavell’s terms, to a utopian “city of words”), and moves from a vision of reciprocal

transformation by subjects and objects to a universal order of right.<sup>21</sup> It thereby, Don suggests, transmits and transforms what has been held between them into a condition of possibility for their children's future, a fund held in reserve for the possible, as-yet-undetermined actions beyond what they themselves can now accomplish. Don, the paranoid critic, wants to name what's between them Clare, legally or publicly; to identify it as an object of their claim (a defendant) and in giving it legal life return to him and Laura the image – in money – of a new one, their children's future.

But Laura doesn't think such a claim could make a difference. "There can be no compensation," she thinks; " 'A court is not going to tell me what I need to know.' " (325-6). Her argument is that, viewed as such, the "claim" would pin this public wrong, this shame, on two bodies – hers and Clare's – defined against it, their liabilities limited by it rather than united in it, and thus privatize them both. Filling desire with knowledge, it would turn what's missing inside out, flooding the world between them, the "this . . .," with the absence that the conversation meant to overcome. The claim, staying between

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<sup>21</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2005). Though both the romantic relation and that embodied in private law remain in what Michael Thompson calls the bipolar or dikaiological order, the shift from a relation between two human beings, two natural persons, and a relation between a human being and an "artificial person" dramatizes exactly what Thompson calls his "puzzle about justice," namely how this resolutely particularized claim gets "shifted" into a universal or deontological gear. ("What is it to Wrong Someone? A Puzzle About Justice," in *Reason and Value*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004. See for example Thompson's discussion of the Kantian explanation for bipolarity, where the problem is that, defined merely as a bearer of pure reason, the other party could equally well be "ExxonMobil," pp. 379-80). The point here is that the shift at issue is from an image of what is owed between two parties (something that is by definition private, expressive, unrepresentable) to what "ought" to be the case more generally (even if, for Don, this figures as what is owed "by Clare," the image behind it – precisely what *he* can't say – is a world in which everything is in its right place). I want to note here briefly the structural similarity between this puzzle and the puzzle about the form of aesthetic judgment, namely its simultaneous particularity and universality, or its non-conceptual normativity. See below for further discussion of the analogy between corporate personhood and aesthetic form.

the two of them, would say nothing, speak as if in private. Her response to Don does not argue that there is some “more” in her “this . . .” unaccounted for by the claim, as if Clare could never make amends for it, be adequate to it. Just the opposite: it is “hard for me, hard to think of *this . . .*” she says, and her words point not to some interior and unformalizable essence separate from Clare, but to a deep, and public, intimacy with it. What is “hard to think” is not just the “claim;” what she has learned is that her “me” is exactly as far from her deictic “this . . .” as is the “claim.” Don imagines that “this . . .” is identical with her first-personal “I,” and thus can serve as the grounds for her “claim,” the site at once of injustice and the claim to redress it; but Laura’s words have reference precisely because they do *not* live solely in her body; the “life” she has is formed and “molded in every way imaginable, plus six degrees beyond imagining” (364), an elliptical object that, between her “I” and the “claim,” is shared with Clare.

Her response, then, does not deny that wrong has been committed; nor does it contest the larger principle her ex-husband invokes, that human intentionality is the very form of the object-world, and that every experience thus is, or demands, an incipient claim. What she denies is that it is “she,” some substance previous to the “this . . .,” that bears, on its own, that experience, and that claim. But her words do not stop there (nor her actions, since she will, in the text’s afterlife, have joined the claim). Rather, the elliptical “this . . .” (like the earlier “do . . . ?” [324]) follows in the spirit of her conversation with Don, opening her words into a discourse she shares with Clare, and, thereby, with the text itself.

Don asks if, not identifying with the claim, she wants simply to leave Clare as it is,

“to just stand aside and let them profit, while everybody else picks up the tab?” She wants to say: *Whose tab?* Who ordered this meal? Who chose this life? Who invented these rules? Instead, she says, “Well, I doubt that my joining or not joining will have any bearing on the outcome at all.” (324-5). As Don and Laura’s intimate, intimately referential conversation breaks off, hits the limits of a shared expressability, its form is released into its generality. Though the words that follow are as if “inside” Laura, they redouble, as if in a public or political register, those intimate or domestic ones that were articulable on the basis of her life with Don. For Laura her conversation with Don is of a piece with the thoughts that they prompt; indeed, the latter in some sense complete the former, precisely because their unanswerability and open-endedness (“who chose this life?”) captures the kind of thing that she can’t say to him, that cannot be contained in the form of the “claim” on offer, and thereby *make* her claim on Clare.

These “internal” musings take the form of a language whose very structure is inimical to the one that governs their conversation. Don’s moral vision, in which agents are held responsible for actions governed by intentions, depends on an analogous vision of language, what Ann Banfield calls the “communication model,” in which the essence of a sentence is an act by which a speaker aims to inform or determine a hearer.<sup>22</sup> Don’s question wants to determine her in such a way that she will, in recognizing how Clare has acted on her, perform a reciprocal act on them: They did this (“this . . .”) to you; what will you do to them? If what is between Don and Laura is no longer just them, just their own, private world, he wants to turn it into an object for her, give her back some control over it by identifying the intrusive agent that caused it. Though in a sense her questions would challenge Don’s implicit assumption that Clare is a subject (i.e., a possible object

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<sup>22</sup> *Unspeakable Sentences* (Boston: Law Book Co. of Australasia, 1982 7-20

of private law<sup>23</sup>), capable of intention and self-actualization and thus capable of being a party to this “conversation of justice,” in another sense her words, unable to get Clare, or herself, into view as a possible object of such a claim, take Don’s assumption seriously in a way that he, trying to stand on the outside, cannot. Who chose this life, who invented these rules? Who would bear it, affirm them? She “wants” to say these things to Don; in a sense, she says them with Clare.

Like her deictic “this . . .,” the object of her words – the other party to this internal “conversation” – is neither identical to nor separate from the “I” that asks after it. She picks up on an ambiguity in Don’s language, one that grounds his claim but that cannot be thought by it: “profit” and “tab” are of orders (money and life, fungible quantity and qualitatively individuated spontaneous capacity) whose relation depends on an impossible, fantasmatic reconciliation. Clare could never pay for a life; a singular life could never account for the historical value embodied in corporate form. That impossibility, the sense of a value beyond value (“that most elusive quality, Quality” [48]) that cannot be computed, both in the human and in the object-world we make, is behind both terms. And yet both terms demand such an accounting; what Don’s claim wants, its romance, is that the subject of the “profit” and the “tab” should coincide: Clare and Laura together in a kingdom of true justice. The response is that “this life” is not an object between those two but *is* them, together. Who then could have chosen it – who could measure its “profit” and “tab”?

If Laura’s questions are “rhetorical,” in other words do not intend to discover an answer, it is because the subject that would fill them out – the “who” – is not a singular

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<sup>23</sup> Thompson, 344.

bearer of a “life,” the subject of “rules,” but that form itself. A “life” cannot be “chosen” or viewed as if as an object from the outside; its specificity, what makes it a “this,” is that it must choose itself, and therefore cannot know what has been chosen. She asks a question that cannot be answered, precisely because it must be asked of itself, *this* life, wrapped up in language “beyond imagining.” If Don wants her to make a claim on Clare, she finds such a claim already in her words; her non-performance of this speech says that such a claim “makes no difference”: is already actual, saturates the world it would transform.

### **Wanting to Say**

That world is *Gain*'s. In moving from a representation of conversation to one of Laura's singular, yet speculative discourse, *Gain* moves from a kind of speech that is possible – we can imagine the conversation actually occurring – to a use of words whose very form troubles the grounds by which language makes reference, thus makes a claim. But this form thereby solidifies, making *its* claim as a novel, on the reader: the novel moves from its strict fictionality – its representation of something that is by nature falsifiable (speech as an occurrence) and by convention false (the novelistic invention of persons and dialogue) – to a use of language that is the condition, and form, of its own actuality as literature.

Who is it that thinks that this is what Laura “wants to say”? The problem is not that, subject eternally to other-minds skepticism, we could never really know what Laura, were we to find her, “really thought,” really wanted, even if she *did* say it. Rather, the very structure of these sentences makes such empirical verification impossible, and thereby makes the identity of their bearer – the “I” who “wants to say,” and the one who

“chose this life” – irrelevant. If Laura cannot say those words to Don, they also cannot be explained by the “communication model” of language implicit in the moral theory that grounds his “claim.” Quoted speech like Laura and Don’s conversation implicitly represents an occurrence in the world; first- or third-person narration interprets such occurrences. In each case the words can be imagined (by the communication model) as grounded in the act of an “I,” the origin (internal to the diegesis or commenting on it) of the discourse. But as Ann Banfield argues, the grammatical form most commonly referred to as “free-indirect discourse,” characteristic of modern literature, makes such reference structurally impossible. This is the form into which *Gain* here shifts. To quote again:

She wants to say: *Whose tab?* Who ordered this meal? Who chose this life?

The introductory clause determines what follows it as a third-personal (or one could say objective) representation of Laura’s inner state, as what *she* wants to say; in other words, an interpretation of this state. Thus the words presumably refer to the “content” or the meaning of Laura’s inner state rather than her words themselves. But what follows contains markers of quoted speech, such as deictics that are coreferential with a speaker, which imply that the *words* themselves *are* the *thoughts* to which the third-personal representation refers. The voice that has reference to Laura objectively, that can make a (for the purposes of narrative, authoritative) claim on what she *means* (what she wants to say) from the outside, seems to be the one that can refer first-personally, from the inside, to “this life” – that can immediately express that life in words.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Consider, for contrast, two alternate constructions:

The words would seem to speak to themselves, to take their own subject (the one wrapped up in “this life”) as an object, a “she.” Who would be informed, determined by them? The sentence is, per the title of Banfield’s book on free-indirect discourse, strictly unspeakable; it *could not* count as a communicative act. There is no “I” that could say these words, could be “behind” the narration itself, and no “you” that could understand them, could “receive” this narration as a speech act; what the words “refer to” is the collapse of the subject-object structure of reference, and the collapse of the fantasy of some person who grounds them, whose *wanting* is what they *say*. The thing to notice is that this collapse is not “just” a question of grammar; not simply a feature of literary form that determines the content it represents. The collapse is precisely what Laura’s words mean: what they *want to say*. The thought at issue *is* that words are inadequate; the words that follow *mean* their own “wanting,” their non-existence, *not* their performance. Their power is enacted in their being “unclaimed.”<sup>25</sup> Her questions – “who chose this life?” – are rhetorical because the subject they seek is impossible, is defined by its inability to respond; but it is paradoxically, irrefutably, present in the act of narration itself: the

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-She wants to say: “*Whose tab? Who ordered this meal? Who chose this life?*”

-“She wants to ask whose tab it is, who ordered that/her meal, and who chose that/her life.”

The first (besides being odd) would be close to incoherent: by presenting unspoken thoughts in quotation marks, it would either imply that the narrator simultaneously is distinct from the speaker and can perform her speech for her, or it would make the quotation marks themselves meaningless, and thus render the entire scene (and in a sense narration itself) meaningless: the distinction between performance and non-performance of speech (what the scene is about) would be impossible. The second variation could be imagined to imply a narrator who interprets Laura’s thoughts, but the meaning of her questions would be lost, since what they *refer* to is precisely an ambiguity about the reference of their objects.

<sup>25</sup> In *Open Secrets*, Anne-Lise François describes free-indirect discourse as an instance of “unvoiced or unclaimed language” (13).

“wanting to say.” Like literature itself, such language – speculative, rhetorical, aesthetic – does not refer to or picture something outside of it; which, far from indicating its unreality, says just the opposite. Rather than raising the problem of reference, these words collapse it; they exist in a register where word and concept, signifier and signified, are *by nature* isomorphic. There is no distance across which they travel, no “you” sought by an “I” whose reception of the words would complete their performance.

If the collapse of Laura’s romance with Don, the critic, leads to the end of the conversation, a silence in the diegetic world they share, this is also her words’ collapse into and identity with the world that, together, they wanted. Giving up on the other behind the world, she finds herself in that world, no longer a fantasmatic representation but merely “this life.” And here her words find us. As a literary character, “Laura’s” essence is language; “wanting to say” is at once her meaning and her erasure, her end in the form of *Gain* itself, irrefutably present. Finding ourselves here, Laura’s questions become ours. Who then is it that wants to say *this*? What did we, in reading this text, want to find here? “Who chose this life?”

### **Speaking the Unspeakable**

Laura’s questions about Clare open directly onto the reader’s about *Gain*; Clare’s worldly exemplarity becomes, for the critic, literature’s. I want therefore to leave Laura and Clare for a moment to look more closely at the notions of form underlying both objects, literary and corporate, objective and expressive. Laura’s merge into the free-indirect lyricism that, pervading the text, links its two forms is precisely her recession from any “claim” about such a linkage, the sense that what is “wanting,” the desire that links her own intentionality to that of Clare, lives exactly in what she cannot say. Though

she says nothing, something happens, in the form of the text; the question for criticism then becomes what happens when we see this, what we learn in seeing, with Laura, our own desires – say, the ones that bring us to the novel itself – as already active in the world, desires that we thereby cannot own or claim.

Banfield's *Unspeakable Sentences*, the authoritative theoretical account of free-indirect discourse, tries to answer this question. Her explicit attempt at a "science" of "literary style" is revealing both of literary form and of what criticism has wanted from it. Free-indirect discourse – a technology for the representation of human subjectivity invented, like the corporation and the human sciences, in the mid-nineteenth century – has been a, if not the, signature of modern literary prose form for professional literary criticism in the twentieth century, especially in its comparativist or theoretical mode. One can, by way of this style, track rather starkly from modernism to postmodernism the trajectory of literary theory's understanding of its task. Erich Auerbach's field-defining 1946 work *Mimesis* ends with a highly ambivalent account of this form (which he argues is the voice of an emerging "common life of mankind" and the correlate of an "economic and cultural leveling process"); though such literature allows us to "surrender" to the "wealth of reality and depth of life in every moment," Auerbach (anticipating the critiques of postmodern aesthetics by Jameson and Fried) laments the corresponding loss of the possibility for heroic action, of the traversal of human difference in the act of interpretation.<sup>26</sup> Banfield's 1982 book provides a strong contrast with Auerbach's modernism: for her, this "common life" visible in free-indirect discourse is exactly what criticism must, in getting into view, affirm.

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<sup>26</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton University Press, 1953), 552.

The crucial point in Banfield is that literary style, the object of theory, is (contrary to what Auerbach holds and indeed to what is presupposed by much humanist critique) fundamentally an empirical one: critique's grasp of it is objective, universal knowledge. (She calls it an "objectivized knowledge of subjectivity" [Banfield 97]). When we grasp literary style, what we see is precisely *that* it is an object; in other words, that language itself is not fundamentally an "act," a communication. The point of Banfield's argument is, as she says, to "break the hold of the communicative intent over language" (17); and what allows this break to occur is precisely the fact that the object, free-indirect literary style, reveals this, makes the point *itself*.<sup>27</sup>

We can see more clearly how this works in a canonical example of free-indirect discourse, quoted by Banfield from another text about a woman's deathly romance with the world of objects.

"Ah! If only, in the freshness of her beauty, before the defilement of marriage and the disillusionment of adultery, she could have set down her life upon some great, solid heart, then virtue, tenderness, desire, and duty would all have joined together, and she never would have descended from such lofty felicity. But that

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<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, Banfield nowhere mentions Derrida; but the explicit and essential empiricism of her argument is, I think, particularly revealing of what is wanted in collapsing what she calls the "dominance of speech over writing," and of philosophy over literature. (17) Neither she nor Derrida, I think, can really account for their own desire to enact, in theory, this collapse. My sense here draws on Cavell's suggestive, if slightly hasty, critique of Derrida in *In Quest of The Ordinary* (130-6). Cavell's point is not that such claims are false but that they disclaim responsibility for themselves, as if "theory's" capacity to discover these things "on its own" thereby relieves the critic of her own implication in it (135). What I mean to argue is that *Gain's* way of implicating the reader, by *giving* that implication in the text itself, allows her to let go of the aesthetic object, to find, perhaps, what Cavell calls the "responsibility for meaning one's words" owed less to literature than to the world into which it collapses.

happiness, no doubt, was a lie imagined in despair of all desire. She knew, now, the paltriness of the passions that art exaggerated.”<sup>28</sup>

In this passage from *Madame Bovary* (1856), the eponymous heroine reflects on her life while watching, enraptured, a performance of *Lucie de Lammermoor*. The passage displays grammatical features – such as exclamation, present-time deictics, and coreferentiality of parenthetical and propositional clauses – that count as an expression of a subjective state: here, a self-reflective analysis of Emma’s own past hopes in which she simultaneously experiences and analyzes, affirms and rejects them. Yet it also has third-person reference to that subjective state, as if it is an object interpreted from outside. Thus the hope, sparked by the romantic novels she avidly consumed, for a better life beyond the petty-bourgeois provincial one she shared with her husband, a hope for a lofty felicity, a perfect coincidence of desire and duty – a hope that has paradoxically led Emma to adultery, debt, and the abject “disillusionment” of the present – is reanimated by her experience of art; in this moment she lives again in the hope she had felt before. But this same aesthetic experience is also the collapse of such a hope, its revelation as a “lie”; indeed, a lie in the very form of art itself, the form that had, in her reading, inspired Emma’s desires in the first place. Her *experience of art* takes the form of art itself, an

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<sup>28</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Lydia Davis (New York: Viking, 2010), translation modified. “Ah, si, dans la fraîcheur de sa beauté, avant les souillures du mariage et la désillusion de l’adultère, elle avait pu placer sa vie sur quelque grand coeur solide, alors la vertu, la tendresse, les voluptés et le devoir se confondant, jamais elle ne serait descendue d’une félicité si haute. Mais ce bonheur-là, sans doute, était un mensonge imaginé pour le désespoir de tout désir. Elle connaissait à présent la petitesse des passions que l’art exagérait.” Banfield does not include the last two sentences in her quotation.

“exaggeration” of life whose power is just that it *knows* it is an illusion, *intends* or means its own unreality.<sup>29</sup>

“She knew, now, the paltriness [*petitesse*] of the passions that art exaggerated”: though this insight about life and art is represented as something that Emma thinks, as *her* consciousness, the space in which the insight *occurs*, as an act, is the “now” of narration. The *reference* of Emma’s experience, a disenchantment granted in the very throes of enchantment, is not to some historical “I,” the bearer of a proper name (in which case the text would have to use the preterite or the present; “she knew, then” or “she knows, now”); its very form, the absolute simultaneity of its reference (the past hopes for a better life) and the judgment (the now in which those desires can be reflexively comprehended) is only possible in *these* words, this unspeakable sentence that *is* the reader’s experience, *and* her judgment.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> One might want to add that there is a further level of disillusionment, namely an ironism manifest especially in the “no doubt” but extending into the “now” and reminding us that Emma’s dramatic cynicism is itself a bit cheap or inauthentic. This is surely present, and is harder to imagine as available to Emma, but what I am trying to show is that such “unmasking” is not an act that comes after the illusionistic experience and decisively interprets it, but is rather exactly identical to it; this is precisely what Emma “herself” grasps. These ironic parantheticals are exactly the grammatical features that mark the discourse as expressive or first-personal. Flaubert’s ironism is not best seen as a triumph over his heroine’s pettiness, as if mastering the feminine weakness that he is compelled to imagine, but rather as his own passionate identification with it, an enactment of exactly the experience he depicts.

<sup>30</sup> I want to note briefly here that this simultaneity is the core of Kant’s insight about aesthetic judgment, namely that the aesthetic judgment must be identical with the “pleasure” of aesthetic experience. Instead of two separate acts, one in which the subject experiences the object and a second in which the subject then judges the pleasure of that experience to have been disinterested, the judgment is precisely *that* the judgment is identical with the pleasure, and does not have reference to it as an object; this is what gives such judgment the distinctive shape of being subjective and yet universal. See Hannah Ginsborg’s account of this in *The Role of Taste in Kant’s Theory of Cognition* (New York: Garland, 1990), 6-20. It is important to the historicist account of the aesthetic

Like Laura with Clare, Emma's *grand coeur solide*, her fantasy of some other on the other side of art's romance that would make it real, collapses into the experience of art itself. But it is worth noting that part of what is "revealed" here is that art is no different from the commodities that she had used as a substitute, in her disappointing life with her husband, for the happiness that her romantic novels had seemed to promise. Art is cheap, like life: this is the realization that moves Emma, that gives her an experience of "that elusive quality, Quality." It is not that the worldly passions failed to live up to the powerful image in which art modeled them. The present experience of art, which constitutes her disillusionment, is exactly the experience of those "petite" passions; the exaggeration is not something "added" by art, but rather is the at once *petite* and *grande*, disappointing and excessive, form that, shared between them, embodies both.

What does literature here teach? Banfield's claim is that it shows us subjectivity, the expressive power embodied in speech, as an object itself, present in the world. But what *Gain* shows (and what Emma realizes – though Banfield does not quote these last two sentences) is that we already *know* this; indeed, that this knowledge is the condition of our experience. If Banfield thinks literature somehow *tells* us this – *is* the special object, the magic words that "break the impasse" of our reliance on a spooky, humanist notion of subjectivity as expressive and thus unformalizable (Banfield 8-20) – what becomes spooky in her own theory is why we would need literature at all – indeed, how we could *recognize* it, in theory, as such. Or rather: if it is already an "objectification of subjectivity" – is already the self-actualization that speech and indeed, according to

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to disarticulate these into two acts, the second being the decisive moment in which the subject steps outside of itself, mastering its self, or its sensuous experiences (its pleasure), as an object by grasping that sensuousness as already disinterested, conceptual. Such a disarticulation is the signature of, for example, Michael Fried's modernism.

Banfield, “philosophy” desire as their goal (Banfield 97) – how could *it* need *us*, to recognize it? Unlocking the mystery of literary form seems to dissolve, less the pleasure that is supposed to attend to the infinite work of interpreting human expression, than the very capacity to experience, survive that pleasure itself. The collapse into the literary object, like Laura’s “weird dream of peace,” seems to threaten us with our own disappearance.

But, of course, it is not just literature that threatens this; the corporation itself has since its origins generated a similar worry. The Supreme Court’s influential 1819 decision *Dartmouth v. Woodward* defined the corporation as “an artificial being, invisible, intangible, and existing only in contemplation of law. Being the mere creature of law, it possesses only those properties which the charter of its creation confers upon it.”<sup>31</sup> Defined thus, it seems perfectly innocent, a machine for realizing only and exactly what we want from it. Yet as the history of scary stories about corporations demonstrates, and recent debates on restrictions on “corporate speech” in the wake of the 2010 *Citizens United* decision remind us, this artificiality is exactly what is so threatening.<sup>32</sup>

Critics of *Citizens United*, which removed restrictions on campaign spending by corporations, have followed a long tradition of literary representations of corporations as monstrously active beings which, if unchecked, threaten to destroy the humans that

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<sup>31</sup> Justice Stevens, *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (Opinion of Stevens, J.), U.S. (U.S. Supreme Court 2010). Though the corporate form had played an important role even in mercantilist and colonial eras, in the nineteenth century the corporation was freed of the necessity for a government charter, giving it the shape of a private entity rather than one guaranteed by sovereign power.

<sup>32</sup> Walter Benn Michaels’ 1986 essay “Corporate Fiction” in *The Gold Standard and The Logic of Naturalism* is a helpful overview of this sense of threat in American literary depictions of the corporation, and a good analysis of its implication in the desire that literature expresses.

created them. (Wendy Brown's 2015 *Undoing the Demos* argues that the very possibility of democratic politics itself is at risk of disappearing.) The justification for restrictions is that, as mere artificial beings, corporations do not deserve First Amendment protections; they are not "natural" persons and therefore cannot be imagined to have any inner capacity to generate spontaneous "desires" or "intentions," representations whose value require publication or expression to be judged and thus are contingent on a delimited public sphere in which this expressive act, speech, can occur. Whatever projects they have are *de facto* actualized, not speculative, and whatever rights they have are *de jure* revocable, not God-given.<sup>33</sup>

This is certainly true, but it misses the point. If corporations are mere objects, fully transparent representations of human projects, why would we need to *restrict* their "speech?" How could they speak at all – how could we *hear*, be persuaded or formed by it? What such critiques cannot explain, any better than neoliberal economists themselves, is how such an artificial creature could get out of *our* hands, and into its own: could be something from which we need protection any more than something that we could protect. If neoliberal economists like Hayek have trouble explaining how market forms could be at one and the same time fully artificial, beyond human intention (the product of

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<sup>33</sup> See for example Justice Stevens' dissent in *Citizens United*. As Stevens describes it, corporate speech sounds quite a bit like free-indirect discourse does on Banfield's account: "It is an interesting question 'who' is even speaking when a business corporation places an advertisement that endorses or attacks a particular candidate... Some individuals associated with the corporation must make the decision to place the ad, but the idea that these individuals are thereby fostering their self-expression or cultivating their critical faculties is fanciful. It is entirely possible that the corporation's electoral message will *conflict* with their personal convictions." The point for Stevens is that this "speech" does not have a speaker; what makes it dangerous is that it may indeed represent a desire that no individual can be said to hold.

“human action but not of human design”<sup>34</sup>), and dependent on the legal prohibition from human meddling in its fundamental mechanism (how could we design to know, in advance, where to refrain from acting?), the converse problem is equally difficult: how a mere product of human design, this *fiction*, could threaten the existence of the human that designs it. Corporate speech – in other words, money – threatens, and promises, the way literature does: by freeing meaning or value from any reference to a “natural person,” an occluded other behind speech and action whose desire grounds, thus must make good on, the project represented. Like the rhetorical power of language in literature (or, indeed, in politics), the chrematistical power of money threatens to seduce individuals into a pure discursivity, a purposiveness without purpose, a simulacral representation for which no concept can be found and from which no human good can result.<sup>3536</sup> What the corporation seems to show us is not that the dignity of personhood is threatened by the venality of desire, or in its weakness requires the external supplement of a transcendent invisible hand, but that personhood’s very essence is this desire for an

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<sup>34</sup> This is the title of an essay by Friedrich Hayek, one of the clearest examples of the (uncannily unselfconscious) affinities of neoliberal economic theory with transcendental aesthetic theory (witness his lament about the lack of a “third term” by which philosophy could understand that which lies between the phenomena of nature and those of human intentionality, a gap which his theory is intended to fill. *The Market and Other Orders* (University of Chicago Press, 2014), 294.

<sup>35</sup> That is to say, critiques of corporate influence in politics may trace the desire to the interests (“greed”) of those who stand to gain from political influence – CEOs, large shareholders – but the ultimate claim is that these people themselves have somehow been lead away from their true (moral) interest by the corporate form, that they have come to model their own good on that of the corporation, namely, as infinite self-expansion of wealth for its own sake, of value with no purpose. The analogy in literature would be, say, Michael Fried’s picture of the “literalist” or postmodernist who desires in the aesthetic encounter merely an infinite extension of the experience itself. I draw here on Arendt’s critique of philosophy’s fear of politics, and hence of what she calls the human necessity for appearance; see for example her essay “The Promise of Politics.”

<sup>36</sup> Brown, *Undoing The Demos*, 151-74. See Marx’s remarks on capital as an “automatic subject” in *Capital*, 253-5.

inassimilable outside, the productivity of an other, “beyond imagining.” As Walter Benn Michaels argues, the corporation is less a figurative extension of the idea of liberal personhood than the “embodiment of figurality that makes personhood possible[; ...] corporations must be persons even if persons aren’t.”<sup>37</sup>

We could perhaps reformulate Banfield’s (affirmative) claim for literature along similar lines: literature must have subjectivity, even if subjects do not. Much recent criticism concerned with contemporary life takes the analogy between literary form and the corporation to suggest that literature thus offers a unique window onto the truth of the historical present, as if rendering that subjectivity – precisely insofar as it gets away from us – into an object that can be critiqued.<sup>38</sup> It should not be surprising that Michaels himself makes this argument, seemingly contrary to his earlier critique of capitalism’s figurality, in his recent *Beauty of a Social Problem*; the hope that animates both liberal critiques of corporate figurality like those of Wendy Brown, and literary critiques of liberal personhood like Banfield’s, is that the human desire for figuration, for a secret animating power just on the other side of the concept, of the human understanding, might be recognized, and thereby turned into an “objectivized knowledge” of our current collective subjectivity. Grasping this figurative or chrematistical (or in Cavell’s terms skeptical) desire, representing it conceptually, in theory, criticism would tame it, direct its power towards what it thereby illuminates as our own (as the true) ends, and *thereby* make it real.

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<sup>37</sup> *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*, 205.

<sup>38</sup> Among others, Lisa Siraganian’s “Theorizing Corporate Intentionality in Contemporary American Fiction,” *Law & Literature*, 27.1, (2015) makes this argument explicitly about *Gain*.

Laura's relation to Clare reveals, to the reader, something different. Her grasp of Clare – her sense that Clare has determined her life as such, not merely in its conditions but in its spontaneity, “beyond imagining” – is precisely her loss of an object for her “claim.” Her romance with Clare is complete when she realizes that Clare, too, asks – indeed, lives for – her question: “who chose this life?” If literature “has” subjectivity, even if subjects do not, are there subjects? Well: if aesthetic form is just the form of the corporation, or liberalism in its late, intensified, or contemporary form, who could represent this analogy – for whom would its figure be an object? Who would want to say this? Grasping this desire for something outside does not finally return us to ourselves, in our sanity and self-sufficiency. What Laura sees and what *Gain* shows is that to grasp this figurative desire is to understand that it is *already* real: that it already says, and does, exactly what we “want.” That we can continue to find this surprising – that we can grasp this capacity for spontaneity, in the world and in literature, as something new, to be celebrated or criticized but either way to be publicized, proclaimed – shows us just that we still want it, and yet have it; that we do not have to wait to find ourselves as objects, as real in the world. The knowledge that Clare has “molded her life” is the recognition that Laura wanted that formation; our identification of her free-indirect thought with the text itself is the recognition, in our reading, that such knowledge is not enough – is itself just what we wanted, and therefore not in a position to overcome and complete our own desire.

Laura's decision to “join the claim” happens outside the frame of the text's reference. *Gain*'s final passages, describing how the settlement money is used to pay for her daughter's in-vitro fertilization and ovarian cancer treatment and to fund her son's

biogenetics company, are in the past tense, in contrast with the rest of the text's present; as if this "outcome" of the claim (which, Laura predicted, her joining would not affect) is where it began; as if the text's own claim, which like Laura it cannot make, is just where we were when we came to it. The crucial moment seems to be when Laura learns that an herbicide she used on her beloved garden plot (gardening being her "one good thing" [361], the place where we find her when the story begins) has been named in the lawsuit:

"Also, a very common herbicide called Atra- . . ."  
Her plot of earth. Her flowers.  
Sue them, she thinks. (364)

But the text cannot finish naming this special chemical (is it Atrazine, the subject of actual lawsuits? Is *this* where we finally see the novel's link to our history?); it drifts off, seemingly into Laura's own thoughts (she hasn't said anything to interrupt Don). The occult, elliptical object leaks out of the text's narrative, into its free-indirect, and thus into its own outside, the space where the claim will be made, and thus the world that *Gain* narrates reproduced, apparently without difference, merely its own "outcome." This is also the moment ("in the next blink") when Laura feels a "weird dream of peace," deciding that it "makes no difference" whether Clare gave her cancer. The outcome is just the reproduction of the world, the leaking of her garden, her fantasy, into her life and out into the future. The "dream of peace" is something like what Kant in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* describes as the confidence that aesthetic experience gives us in the purposiveness of nature beyond our capacity to understand it (and thus, in the "beyond" of our imagining)<sup>39</sup>: not because we thereby have an empirical guarantee of a Godlike intentionality behind the world – or, in a Hegelian sense, of our own collective identity as such a power – but because we recognize in the world our *desire* for such a

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<sup>39</sup> *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 271-9.

sign beyond signification, and thus recognize the activity of our own intentions beyond themselves as exactly *what*, in such a sign, we *want*. The recognition of our desire as active in the world, which is what in aesthetic experience is *given*, is neither our disappearance nor our redemption, but just our condition. In joining the claim against Clare, and thus letting go of her own hold on her language, her “this . . .,” Laura’s confidence is in her own words’ power in the world, beyond whatever “difference” she might have wanted from them; here and no further – but no further away – is where the text leaves the reader. I want to end this essay with a reading of a moment in which *Gain* models, all too romantically, its own hopes for literature’s work in the world, to suggest how it might teach us – if we want – to leave it, and the world it represents, behind.

### **True Romance**

In a passage that immediately follows the one describing her diagnosis, Laura sits down with her son Tim to help him with his English homework. The scene is deeply overdetermined: it is the first attempt to imagine, after the discovery of Laura’s own impending end, a way forward for her family; the future hangs heavily on what can’t be said, in a conversation about Whitman.

Tim sits at a corner of the cluttered table, cursing the year’s last homework. Laura can’t tell him what’s going on. She does not know, herself. All she can do is fall back on pretense. Life as usual.

“What’s the matter, sweetheart? What’cha working on?”

He slams the book shut and tosses it, knocking over a stack of back mail she hasn’t answered. He starts to cry, his face a twisted mask, denying its fat tears.

“Fucking poem.” (95)

The pretense of normalcy, the image of a world – “life as usual,” a phrase her doctor had casually suggested as an inspirational maxim, “the best thing for you” (93) – is hard to

bear not only within the frame, for Tim and Laura, but in *Gain*'s depiction of it, for us. Tim's obscenity makes us cringe not only for him but for Powers; his performance of resistance to authority, cathected onto the poem itself, solicits his mother's acknowledgement no more obviously than Powers' own picture, drawn in the broadest of strokes, solicits the reader's acknowledgment of this scene's exemplarity, of life and of literature's capacity to frame it, to *pre-tend* or organize it. What has become difficult, both within the diegesis and as the text – either way, organized by *this* scene of reading – is normalcy itself, now something that must be imagined, whether in Tim's forced casualness or the novel's rather ungainly realism. If Tim's "fucking poem" is mainly about the *desire* for this moment to break out of the normal, and thereby return to it by way of the poem's domestication, Powers' clichéd representation of such a desire neither repeats its "childishness" nor overcomes it, but shows us that this "pretense," the need for a fantasmatic resistance to experience that simultaneously organizes it (in "homework" or in leisure time, for the professional as well as the amateur), is his, and ours, too; is what brings us, like Tim and Laura, together at the scene of this text.

The poem is a figure for the normalcy they can no longer imagine as real. In interpreting it – Tim is "supposed to say what it's fucking about" (96) – they want to articulate a way forward, some common ground on which Tim could stand, from which he could start off, when Laura is no longer around. And yet the irony – here, much too obvious and thus disappointing, oppressive – is that this literary practice, this "homework" that is supposed to prepare him (as a kind of game) for the real world, has become, precisely when it cannot be taken seriously on its own (imaginary) terms, all too real; exactly because it means something other than what they take it for, it has become

overburdened on its own terms. Her cancer, Tim's future: the "real world" that homework is supposed to suspend, and for which neither of them are ready, is exactly what hangs so thickly in the air between them.

The poem is Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry."

She tries to negotiate with the monster at her son's gates[...] *Others will see the shipping of Manhattan north and west . . . Fifty years hence*, she reads. She has to take the poet's word for it. *It avails not, time nor place – distance avails not*. She hasn't the first clue. (96-7)

Whitman's words ring empty in Laura's head: where are they pointing? Trying to imaginatively inhabit his claim to a shared future ("others will see") places her right back in herself, taking, in the newly present reality of her bodily and temporal horizon, only his "word," not able to see herself in these others whose future his words, as they move through her, renew.

"On and on, the numbing catalogs": the poem proceeds, "a commodity stretching across the page," its words like the endless objects that she now sees as her life ("The standing, routine pileup of diversions. How disorienting: here, now, all these weird familiars. Nobody sees, so regular is life" [94-5]), both newly pointless and strangely charged. Such reflections circulate in the novel's free-indirect as she tries to perform, for Tim, the guidance that he solicits:

"He seems...He's trying to talk with everyone who is ever going to be taking this boat. The boat he's taking. People fifty years later." A hundred. Or ever so many hundreds of years from now.

"Well? What's up with that?" Who the fuck takes boats anywhere?

"This ferry in New York, in eighteen fifty-something. Six. He's trying to imagine...all these lives. All these different times. All occupying the same place."

"Why?"

Why? She flips back through the poem. Her end-of-term exam. Surely the answer must be in here, somewhere.

*I...Saw how the glistening yellow lit up parts of their bodies and left the rest in strong shadow...Look'd on the haze...on the vapor...The white wake left by the passage...The flags of all nations...I alone come back to tell you.*

“Because...” she stalls. “Because he...” (98)

Laura’s attempt to give a meaning for the poem ends in this ellipsis, but something has happened. As her speech is blocked, a free-indirect lyricism is released:

Because this day’s rush stands still and means nothing. Because we are all crossing from nowhere to nowhere. Each fluke life packed on this deck, lost, like every other. *These and all else were to me the same as they are to you...What is it then...the count of the scores or hundred of years between us?*

She asks him hoarsely, “She wants you to say what it *means*?”

*That I was I knew was of my body, and what I should be I knew I should be of my body.* His teacher cannot possibly know what the poem means. Not unless his teacher is already sick. Unless she, too, already has the aerial view. Her own tumor.

Something like insight is occurring here: into the meaning at once of Whitman’s poem and of “life,” the “real things” that poetry cannot teach. These thoughts, both in their content and their expression, court the sentimental – as do many of the more lyrically ambitious moments in this text – but they do so in a way that recalls Whitman’s own urgent innocence, his homely cosmicism, and that thus open out onto the meaning that Whitman himself could only express in a kind of intimacy with the banal. What Whitman is trying to get at – why he’s trying to “talk with” all these people – is curiously defined by the impossibility of its being articulated, *communicated*, and at the same time by the fullness of its presence in the mere words with which he gestures towards it. “I am with you,” he repeats: The “I” and the “you” are in the same place; “whatever it is” between us – these objects, and “all else,” and the years in which they occur – they are “the same to

me as they are to you”; they are the very stuff of the life that “me” and “you” share, and they “avail not,” are valued at nothing. The Whitmanian sentence stands still, crosses “from nowhere to nowhere,” predicates nothing: from Whitman to Laura, living, in this shared imaginary, through an image of the world’s presentness in their own absence.

Whitman’s poem comes alive when Laura finds herself in its voice, her thoughts merging with and extending the capacious subjectivity that Whitman imagines, his “I” opening out into a stream of thought that becomes, in her, a “we.” What she finds is that whatever the poem means, whatever it wanted to say, she already knew, was already “with” her. Her incredulity – “what it *means?*” – typographically links her sense of the poem’s meaning – that there is precisely nothing to say – with the plaintive, expressive tone of the lyric, both appearing in the text as an italicized emphasis denoting the passionate, illocutionary force that, like an epigraph or a stage direction, one precisely cannot “say,” as if her words, rhetorically performing the blockage to discursive communication that the poem, here, enacts, *thereby* join with them.<sup>40</sup> It is as if what Laura sees in the poem is that every word, crossing between an I and a you, brings the world between them into being; but in *seeing* this, sees (with Whitman), their mutual absorption into, their non-difference from, the world that they reached across. Joining with Whitman’s “I” – achieving, through interpretation, the capacious self he imagined – the “I” itself becomes a “you,” and the “you” an “I,” each seeing their own absence from the worldly presence of the words that called them forth.

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<sup>40</sup> One might compare Flaubert’s use of italics to ironize words in *Madame Bovary*; though traditionally understood as a distantiating technique, it might rather be seen, as here, as a gesture of free-indirect affirmation, an acknowledgment that the incompleteness one wants to mark is already registered precisely in the incomplete thing; that the word’s power is already there, in its inadequacy.

Finding the reference of Whitman's deictics, his "I" and "you" and "now," these wildly universal particulars that he is trying to "imagine" and "speak with," in herself, Laura finds that self dissolved into the world. One could say that her reading resolves into the image of what Kant, describing the fantasy of idealist aesthetics, calls an intellectual intuition, a thinking identical with perception, a desire identical with what is.<sup>41</sup> (The bearer, Kant says, of an intellectual intuition would be a "Newton...of a blade of grass"; it would be absurd, he argues, to hope that such a human being could ever exist).<sup>42</sup> Perhaps this is the fantasy, or the reality, of a language that, like the one described by Banfield (and Wittgenstein), cannot be spoken or even imagined, that cannot *express* anything; that shrinks down to the metaphysical vanishing point of expressibility itself, picturing nothing, the fantasmatic "fact of form," "meaningfulness as such."<sup>43</sup> But one could say equally that it expands into an image of the world itself, as richly particular and deeply historical as language can be. These are not, this scene of interpretation suggests, opposed. To realize Whitman's ecstatic universality is to be given a very particular loss, a privation; Laura understands Whitman's poem from the point of view of the part of her that cannot fund his expression, the silence living inside her. "Her own tumor," the excess of life that is her own end or limit, is not just her but "*the* aerial view," a transparent eyeball, that point precisely out of sight: the invisible point of vision that sees itself, "know[s]" or contains what the poem "means" or wants – which is "nothing," and "everything" (99). Susan Sontag writes that cancer is not a metaphor, but what she argues it does not express is, exactly, "the failure of expressiveness," the body's silent revenge

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<sup>41</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 27-33, 268-279.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 271.

<sup>43</sup> Michaels, *Beauty of A Social Problem*, 97; Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 162.

upon an “I” that could not adequate itself to its unconscious potential.<sup>44</sup> What Sontag means is that we imagine cancer as a kind of reified repression because we require some internal, inexhaustible power – expressiveness – to exist inside of us, *giving* meaning to the things outside of it; when the “I” fails to trope its own givenness, its material existence in the world, toward meaning – when the body’s own organic processes lead it toward death – this occurrence must itself be revealed to mean something, *mean* its own failure. Like the commodity, cancer’s monstrousness must be interpretable as some further purpose hiding inside it; your failure to conquer it simply an indication, a sign for others of how to achieve the infinite self-adequation that you have missed. What Laura sees, in seeing her life, and its end, in Whitman’s poem, is that *poetry*, metaphoricity itself, is not a metaphor, or not in Sontag’s sense: not some mystical thing that explains or determines what goes beyond it – or *fails* to. Seeing the meaning of the poem in “her own tumor” is to see that the poem is not an objective correlative for life, not some special *part* of the world – here, sitting between her and her son – that engenders meaning and that, made visible (explicit), will imbue the world they share with the sense of structure, the orientation, that they require. The poem, like her tumor, is inside of her not as her truth, but as that point where the *I*’s potentiality, its form, goes beyond itself: and thus knows just that it cannot “know what’s blossoming inside” (95).

What, then, is learned? Gaining an understanding of Whitman’s poem (“the aerial view”), Laura brings into view a picture of life (“what it *means*?”). The desire for knowledge, and compensation, that the novel has both tracked and itself invoked is staged doubly in this scene of interpretation, both in it and as it, depicted and irrefutably

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<sup>44</sup> Susan Sontag, *Illness As Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), 48.

enacted. Whitman, the nineteenth century poet of the enchanted American world, is the evidence that, *like* Laura's tumor – or (*if* we want it) the novel itself – interprets the self that grasps it, becoming the aerial view. “*We use you, you objects, and do not cast you aside – we plant you permanently within us, We fathom you not – we love you*” (99). In his poem, Whitman imagines himself immortal, expanding into the shape of a poem, an object that persists, “*than which none else is more lasting,*” (99) planted in “us” and growing into the world, the uncut hair of graves. As these words finally find Laura, they pull her out of herself, finding her life itself as an object, something she can see, with an end. Yet it is just her ability to see this end, in the poem and her tumor, that ends her ability to interpret it, to give it some further meaning. What Laura sees is something like her worldly condition. Her capacity for reflection - for discovering a meaning, and saying (thus *giving*) it – is also her concrete determination, her being given *by* this capacity: Clare's having molded her life, “beyond imagining.” The intentional power embodied in objects – Clare's as much as Whitman's – leaks out of them, unfathomably. One could, following critics like Bruno Latour, Timothy Morton, and Jane Bennett, describe this as a materialist insight made available in the anthropocene: that all objects are aesthetic, that the world hums with the unpredictable poetry thrown off by things and assured by our own inevitable materiality (“*that I was I knew was of my body*”). But as Sandra Macpherson points out, one could equally describe this kind of insight as a formalist one, secured only in the encounter with a work of art, an object we recognize by its manifestation of the human capacity for self-limitation, thus self-transcendence.<sup>45</sup>

Though the contemporary critical insight is, as I have argued throughout this dissertation,

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<sup>45</sup> Sandra Macpherson, “A Little Formalism,” 398.

illuminated by the romantic one, what the romantic imaginary illuminates, now, is precisely itself, its presentness; what it makes thinkable is at once our own inhabitation of that imaginary, and – in a way unaccounted for either by the materialist or the idealist, the present or the past – the incompleteness of our determination by it. What each understands is that what we wanted from the object is just its capacity to go beyond us; to embody, in the world, an imaginary. And what each cannot quite say is that this imaginary is its (“our”) own: that Whitman’s “us,” or Clare’s, is the *sensus communis* that we plant inside, from which “we” – as such – want to speak.

In this scene, one overdetermined by the desire for pedagogy, to learn is not to find a model difference; not, finally, to discover form. Laura’s and Whitman’s voices merge into one, the free-indirect shape of this literary text, language that shows itself as the failure to form the world. Using Whitman to project her son, beyond her self, into the future, Laura’s insight is that to see her affinity with the objects that have formed her is not finally to master her present and form the future. To learn, in turn, from the text – from “Laura,” insofar as she dissolves into it, into the free-indirect that Whitman, and his reader, imagined – is to see that we wanted its guidance, *and* that to see *this* is still not enough: that the “exit from our self-imposed tutelage” is not itself our end. If American romanticism has oriented postwar scholarly discourse on American culture, serving as the past’s open promise of an undetermined future, to discover our present in that image is to find literature’s promise both released into the world and thereby unfulfilled. Whitman’s capacity to project himself into the future, the sign of a nineteenth-century aesthetics, returns to his reader as a present formed in Whitman’s image; to see the world in that light is both to find and to leave it.

In *Gain*, this moment marks the end of interpretation, and the return to the real world that it had held in suspension. Tim says “Forget it,[...]I’ll take the F. Let the bitch kick me out of school on my ass.” Fuck the poem; there are more things in this American heaven and earth, and Tim is anxious to get to them. “So be it,” Laura muses. “What does it matter, the future? Nothing. Everything” (99). If this mysterious object’s resistance, between them, can be the matter of, can motivate his own creative drive, that is enough, Laura thinks. She plays Tim’s game, teasing, “Fucking auto mechanic?,” and his response is that he is “starting my own company” (99). If Laura’s gentle, ironic point is that his obscenity is itself a recognizable performance, a rebelliousness without rebellion that heads, thereby, right back into the fold, it solicits a response from Tim that opens into *Gain*’s own trajectory, in which the “outcome” of an extraordinary, unworldly object’s interpretation – Laura’s cancer, Whitman’s poem – is just its own identity with the ordinary, “our” world. The outcome of Laura’s lyric merge with Whitman is at once the inability to articulate any special insight, any “meaning,” and the deeper, unspoken reassurance, the Whitmanian confidence in her son’s life – I am with you, student or mechanic, thinker or technician; failure or success, they matter not – that is precisely too obvious in the ease with which she does not have to give such assurance explicitly. If the scene is thereby flooded with a harsher irony – that such an open-ended confidence leads, like and *as* the endless parade of fascinating objects, only back to itself, to more of the kind of “gain” that collapsed their lives in the first place – the outcome, for us, is an uncanny thing. *Gain* cannot say it, but this curious mixture of wonder and disappointment, warmth and indifference, certainty and dispossession, literary pleasure and theoretical disillusion, is what the literary critic finds, as *Gain*’s form, already “with”

her. Literature cannot now accomplish what we want, cannot redeem the world of reified desires, because, insofar as we want it, it forms part of that world. Laura's insight, amateur and yet pedagogical, that her words are already "with" her son, and with Clare, leaves everything the same in her world; this is next to nothing, but enough to let her, like and with Whitman, leave that world behind.

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